

The Literary Bearing of Chicago's 1893 World's Parliament of Religions

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THE RENEWED SCHOLARLY and theological interest in the 1893 Chicago World's Parliament of Religions, an interest that has been reflected in a slew of studies and conferences done on the subject over the past decade and a half, promises to reach its climax this autumn with a number of planned centenary celebrations of the event in Chicago and other places. As an unprecedented meeting of representatives of the world's major religions, the parliament allowed certain Eastern faiths to be presented for the first time in America by spokesmen of their own, and is justifiably remembered for having stimulated Western sympathy and curiosity in Eastern spirituality, encouraged the study of comparative religion in American universities, and for having helped foster the "dialogue" between East and West. However, amidst all the retrospective attention the parliament has received, one of its most interesting legacies has gone unnoticed: its bearing on subsequent Western literature.

That literary scholars have completely ignored the religion parliament as a topic pertinent to their subject is consistent with the modern Western habit of construing religion and literature as separate spheres. This tendency explains why the Congress Auxiliary of Chicago's 1893 Columbian Exposition, the great world's fair under whose auspices the parliament was held (during September 11-27), also sponsored a Congress on Literature two months earlier (July 10-15), but made no effort to establish any formal link between the two meetings. Such compartmentalization was highly ironic, since the idea which inspired the religion parliament had deep roots in the Western literary tradition. As Max Müller would observe the following year (in an article in *The Arena*, vol. 11) with regard to comparisons made between the 1893

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parliament and the religious councils summoned by the legendary Asian emperors Aśoka (at Pāṭaliputra in 242 B.C.E.) and Akbar (at Delhi in the sixteenth century), "If the Religious Parliament was not an entirely new idea, it was certainly the first realization of an idea which has lived silently in the hearts of prophets, or has been uttered now and then by poets only, who are free to dream dreams and to see visions."

In failing to explore Müller's suggestion, students of the religion parliament after him have either overlooked or ignored a distinct theme in Western literature that helped inspire the parliament's conception. Foreshadowing the speculations on religious pluralism of such twentieth-century thinkers as Frithjof Schuon, William Ernest Hocking, and John Hick, this theme envisions a reconciliation or underlying unity of the world's religions, and became both a catalyst to and a symptom of the gradual opening up of Western consciousness toward "Oriental" cultures and religions during the nineteenth century. The theme first emerges in the ancient tale of the three rings as it is retold in the Italian *Novellino* (late-thirteenth or early-fourteenth century; tale 73); in Boccaccio's *Decamerone* (mid-fourteenth century; day 1, tale 3); and in Lessing's *Nathan der Weise* (1779): a dying man has two duplicates made of his precious ring, and then bequeaths one each to his three sons, who in turn are unable to determine which of the three rings (representing Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) is the authentic one. This tale's message of religious harmony and tolerance approaches the titular notion of William Blake's earliest illuminated engraving, "All Religions Are One" (1789). And variations of Blake's idea recur in several classic poetic works of the mid-nineteenth century—most notably the fifth stanza of the opening section of Alfred Tennyson's *In Memoriam A.H.H.* (written 1833–1850) and the nineteenth section of part 1 of Robert Browning's *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* (1850)—before culminating in Tennyson's poem "Akbar's Dream," composed the year of the poet's death: 1892, a year prior to the Parliament of Religions. "I dream'd," proclaims Tennyson's Akbar near the end of the poem, relating his vision of a religious reverence that would transcend all sectarian bounds,

That stone by stone I rear'd a sacred fane,
A temple, neither Pagod, Mosque, nor Church,
But loftier, simpler, always open-door'd

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To every breath from heaven, and Truth and Peace
And Love and Justice came and dwelt therein.

Significantly, this passage and the pertinent lines from *In Memoriam* are cited in the introduction to the parliament's two-volume, sixteen-hundred page proceedings by its chairman, the Rev. John Henry Barrows. He remarks that Tennyson, "who regarded the proposal of a Parliament of Religions at Chicago as a noble idea, brooded much, in his last days, over the oneness of human need and spiritual aspiration after God."¹ Likewise Muller, to illustrate his own point about the parliament's poetic bearing, quotes the pertinent passage from the aforementioned poem by Browning to show how it prefigured the parliament's "vision" of the unity of religions.

Of course, what is expressible in poetry and tales is not necessarily realizable in life. This truism is borne out by the fate which the ideal of a rapprochement of religions met at the 1893 religion parliament. There, as Joseph M. Kitagawa and others have observed, the hopes expressed by a number of speakers for achieving a unity of religions disintegrated as some of the parliament's Christian promoters, including Barrows, attempted to present their own faith as the "fulfillment" of all others. This missionary ploy was foiled by several brilliant young religious reformers from Asia who, realizing what was being done, promptly adapted the Christians' tactic for themselves, reversed its Christian claim, and formulated fulfillment theories for their own religions. These three reformers, about whom much has been written, were Anagārika Dharmapāla, or David Hewavitarane (1864-1933) of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), general secretary of the Mahā-Bodhi Society of Calcutta; Swami Vivekānanda (1863-1902) of India, a disciple of the mystic Sri Ramakrishna; and Shaku Sōyen (1859-1919) of Japan, the abbot of the Zen Temple of Engakuji.

What has been the parliament's bearing on subsequent Western literature? It is this question that I shall address, focusing on, first, an illuminating poem by a forgotten American poet who visited the parlia-

¹ 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*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Parliament Publishing Co., 1893), 1:11. See also 1:4.

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ment and recorded her impression of Dharmapāla and Vivekānanda; second, the far-reaching, indirect impact of Shaku Sōyen and, especially, Vivekānanda on twentieth-century Western literature; and third, the dissipation of the theme of "Akbar's Dream," or the unity of religions, and the reappearance of the Babel theme in that literature.

II.

The noted Hispanicist Américo Castro once observed: "As soon as a form of art is launched with genius by its creator, the atmosphere becomes impregnated with its properties, and the effective reflection of a theme or procedure appears where it is least expected."² Although Castro was speaking on a different subject, his statement is applicable to the literary effects of the Parliament of Religions, whose cultural impact has been likened to that of a rock dropped in a pond: after the initial splash, the ripples caused on the water's surface continue spreading outward indefinitely. If, as the theologian David Tracy maintains, any classic event will prove as open to varying interpretations as a classic literary text, it should come as no surprise to find that, stemming from the parliament, there should be discernible in Western literature certain lines of conceptual reverberation analogous to the sort of thematic or formal traditions whose developments literary historians are used to tracing from seminal texts.

What I have in mind is *not* some lineage of literary works that take the Parliament of Religions as their subject or theme. To my knowledge, no such tradition exists, despite the fact that the parliament coincided with the period of Chicago's rise as America's preeminent literary center. Indeed, were we to confine our consideration of the parliament's literary bearing to such a criterion, we would limit our scope to but a single poem, which appeared in the Chicago journal *The Open Court* on October 12, 1893, several weeks after the parliament's close: "Aunt Hannah on the Parliament of Religions," by one Minnie Andrews Snell. Its amusing quaintness aside, this poem should interest any historian of religions concerned with the parliament's immediate

¹ Américo Castro, "Cervantes and Pirandello," *An Idea of History*, trans. Stephen Gilman and Edmund L. King (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1977), pp. 15-22; here 17.

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effect on the way some “average” Americans perceived non-Western religions, especially Hinduism and Buddhism. Composed in rustic dialect, the poem’s eight four-line stanzas furnish a series of impressions from the perspective of an initially wary Christian woman (Hannah) who, after being discouraged by her minister, attends the parliament, and is gradually won over by the arguments of several of the Asian speakers there:

- [1] Wall—I’m glad enough I’m hum agin—kin rest my weary brain,
For I’ve seen an’ heered so much, *too* much, I guess I’ve heered in
vain.
I thought th’ Fair was mixin’ an’ th’ Midway made me crawl,
But th’ Parl’ment of Religions was th’ mixin’est of all!
- [2] I seen th’ Turks agoing round th’ Midway in th’ Fair,
But our minister reproved me when he seen me peep in thair.
“Defilin’ place” he called it, an’ th’ Turk “a child of sin”;
But th’ Parl’ment of Religions took all them heathen in.
- [3] It made me squirm a little, to see some heathen’s air,
As he told us Christians ’bout our faults an’ laid ’em out so bare,
But thair flowin’ robes was tellin’ an’ th’air mighty takin’ folk,
So th’ Parl’ment of Religions clapped to every word they spoke.
- [4] I listened to th’ Buddhist, in his robes of shinin’ white,
As he told how like to Christ’s thair lives, while ours was not—a
mite,
‘Tel I felt, to lead a Christian life, a Buddhist I must be,
An’ th’ Parl’ment of Religions brought religious doubt to me.
- [5] Then I heered th’ han’some Hindu monk, drest up in orange
dress,
Who sed that all humanity was part of God—no less,
An’ he sed we was *not* sinners, so I comfort took, once more,
While th’ Parl’ment of Religions roared with approving roar.
- [6] Then a Cath’lic man got up an’ spoke, about Christ an’ th’ cross;
But th’ Christians of th’ other creeds, they giv’ thair heds a toss.
When th’ Babtist spoke, th’ Presbyterians seemed to be fightin’
mad,
‘Tel th’ Parl’ment of Religions made my pore old soul feel sad.

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- [7] I've harkened to th' Buddhist, to th' Hindu an' th' Turk;
I've tried to find th' truth that in our different sects may lurk,
'Tel my pore old brain it buzzes, like its goin' religious mad—
For th' Parl'ment of Religions nigh put out th' light I had.
- [8] Must I leave all this sarchin' 'tel I reach th' other side?
I'll treat all men as brothers while on this airth I bide,
An' let "Love" be my motto, 'tel I enter in th' door.
Of that great Religious Parl'ment, where creeds don't count no
more.

In the course of the poem, Hannah's response to the parliament progresses through three stages that summarize well what must have been the experience of many Americans who attended it out of curiosity. Upon her arrival at the parliament, she feels *xenophobia and prejudice regarding non-Christian foreigners* (stanzas 1-3). Her initial betrayal of these feelings ("It made me squirm a little, to see some heathen's air") is understandable, given that her first exposure to foreign cultures came through her recent visit to the exposition's Midway Plaisance (the site of her minister's reproof of her). The Midway featured a Bazaar of Nations that consisted of a series of ethnological displays arranged in accordance with the anthropological theory of evolution to depict—in Robert Rydell's words—"the sliding scale of humanity": the further one strolled from the White City, the further one descended from more "advanced" races to more "savage" ones, passing from the displays of Teutonic and Celtic culture nearest the White City, through the worlds of Islam and West and East Asia depicted in the Midway's center, to the African and Native American cultures which had their place at the opposite end. At the parliament, however, Hannah begins to feel *approval of the universalist messages of several Eastern spokesmen, and sadness and doubt about the sectarian divisiveness among the Protestant Christian representatives* (stanzas 4-6). As is made clear by her descriptions of their appearance, and by her summaries of what they said ("how like to Christ's lives thair lives, while ours was not—a mite," and "all humanity was part of God"), the Buddhist and the Hindu by whom Hannah is so deeply impressed are none other than Dharmapāla and Vivekānanda. The contrast between the religious universalism preached by those two Eastern reformers, and the credal squabbles between the Baptist and Presbyterian

speakers, would surely reinforce Hannah's inchoate suspicion that "to lead a Christian life, a Buddhist I must be." Finally, her parliament experience leads her to develop *a new open-mindedness toward religious diversity* (stanzas 7-8). Although Hannah does not make clear whether she will now convert to Buddhism or Hinduism, as indeed some Christians who attended the parliament did on the basis of what they heard there, her new attempt "to find th' truth . . . in our different sects," and her resignation to "treat all men as brothers" while awaiting that parliament in heaven "where creeds don't count no more," show the extent to which she has been spiritually transformed by the parliament.

Beyond Snell's poem, any assessment of the parliament's effect on literature becomes difficult because of the lack of explicit evidence, even in some places where one might expect to find some. For example, the famous American poet Julia Ward Howe says nothing about the parliament in her *Reminiscences* (1899), despite the fact that she spoke there, and that she later participated with Vivekānanda in the noted "Cambridge Conferences" sponsored by Mrs. Ole Bull in Boston, and had him deliver a lecture to her own Woman's Club in that city. Aside from Howe, the only well-known American literary figure who seems to have attended the parliament was the Chicago poet Harriet Monroe, whose *Columbian Ode* had been read at the exposition's dedication ceremony, and who would later achieve repute for founding the journal *Poetry* in 1912. In her autobiography, *A Poet's Life* (1938), she characterizes the parliament as "a triumph for all concerned," which "seemed a great moment in human history, prophetic of the promised new era of tolerance and peace." While she was dazzled by the whole array of foreign religious speakers assembled on the stage in their colorful, exotic garb, Monroe—like many other witnesses—attests that "It was . . . Swami Vivekānanda the magnificent, who stole the whole show and captured the town." Other foreign representatives, including Dharmapāla, spoke well.

But the handsome monk in the orange robe [i.e., Vivekānanda] gave us in perfect English a masterpiece. His personality, dominant, magnetic; his voice, rich as a bronze bell; the controlled fervor of his feeling; the beauty of his message to the Western world he was facing for the first time—these com-

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bined to give us a rare and perfect moment of supreme emotion. It was human eloquence at its highest pitch.

While it is true that Monroe, like Howe, later became personally acquainted with Vivekānanda and was moved by his effort to unite East and West through his doctrine (derived from Ramakrishna) of a "universal religion," only a limited understanding of the religion parliament's literary pertinence may be reached by simply tracing such lines of acquaintanceship. The most important albeit subtle influence the parliament had on American and European literature came not through any direct, personal contact between Western authors or poets and Eastern representatives there, but rather, through the parliament's effectual discouragement of pursuing the idea of the oneness of all religions as a literary theme, and through its having provided the stage for the Western debuts of Shaku Sōyen and Vivekānanda, whose impact at the parliament may be seen to mark the beginning of two distinct Easternizing trends in Western literature.

III.

The important influence of Zen Buddhism on the imaginations of certain twentieth-century Western poets and writers owes itself largely to the fact that Shaku Sōyen came to the parliament as the first Zen master to venture beyond the horizons of the Asian world. It was there that Soyen, as one of the five Meiji "champions of Buddhism" to address the parliament, met and formed a lasting friendship with Dr. Paul Carus, industrialist-philosopher, author of books on religion and science, editor of *The Monist* and Open Court Press, and advocate of Buddhism. (Carus, who also befriended Dharmapāla at the parliament, was inspired by his own experience there to write his first work on Buddhism, *The Gospel of the Buddha* [1894].) Through his friendship with Carus, Sōyen was later instrumental in bringing to America his own young lay disciple Daisetz Teitarō Suzuki, who, from his arrival in 1897 to his death in 1966, became the foremost interpreter of Zen to the Western world.

Suzuki influenced many important Western personalities, especially through the popular reception of his three-volume *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (1927–1934). Together with such luminaries as the composer

John Cage, the psychoanalysts C. G. Jung and Erich Fromm, and the religious thinker Thomas Merton, a number of prominent literary figures must be included in the list. Evidence of appropriation of Suzuki's ideas, particularly on *satori*, has been shown (by Gerald Doherty) to crop up in the poetry of William Butler Yeats, who greatly admired Suzuki's *Essays*. Also, Suzuki found a disciple in the British poet Reginald Horace Blyth, whose study of *Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics* (1942) and four-volume collection of *haiku* exemplify the cross-fertilization of Eastern religions and Western literature. And, as Rick Fields has shown in his history of Buddhism in America, *How the Swans Came to the Lake* (1981), Suzuki's writings on Zen figured crucially in the development of such leaders of the American "Beat" generation of the 1950s as the poets Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, and the novelist Jack Kerouac.

While Shaku Sōyen's impact on the Western literature came indirectly through his introduction of Suzuki to America in the wake of the religion parliament, Vivekānanda's came directly through his espousal of the concept of the divinity of the human soul, both at the parliament and in his subsequent lectures across the country. Derived from the Vedic and Upanishadic identification of the self or soul (*Atman*) with ultimate reality (*Brahman*), this Vedāntic axiom was not new to late nineteenth-century America: Ralph Waldo Emerson had expressed something very similar in his notorious address of 1838 to the Harvard Divinity School, where he proclaimed, "That which shows God in me, fortifies me"; Walt Whitman, in the seventh stanza of his poem "Starting from Paumanok," had noted, "None has begun to think how divine he himself is"; and this idea in its original form could have been encountered by any American reader who, like Emerson and the Transcendentalists, and later, the followers of Theosophy, had read the available English translations of such basic Hindu scriptures as the *Bhagavad-Gita* and the *Upanishads*. What was new to Americans during the twilight of the Victorian era, however, was the experience of having this idea preached to them on their own soil by a highly charismatic Indian Swami. (The question of the actual degree of Vivekānanda's fidelity to the Advaitist tradition which he claimed to represent is much debated.)

The extraordinary success of Vivekānanda's Western mission during and after the religion parliament indicated that his message had a

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liberating effect on many Americans who encountered him. We might recall here the "comfort" Minnie Andrews Snell's "Hannah" took in the Swami's assertion "that all humanity was part of God—not less," and that "we was *not* sinners." What must not be overlooked, however, is how threatening this concept would have appeared from a conventional Western Christian perspective; as Vivekānanda's biographer Sailendra Nath Dhar has pointed out in reference to the condemnation of Vivekānanda in 1897 by a group of Christian missionaries in India, "The denial of sin disposes of the Redeemer, as conceived by the missionaries, whose vocation is to bring sinners to the Saviour."

As contradictory as it may seem to the general Judeo-Christian conception of the human being's fallen nature, and particularly to the anti-Pelagian, Augustinian notion, the impression made by Vivekānanda's teaching did not disappear from Western consciousness following his death in 1902. Nor were his lasting effects in the West limited to the ongoing development of the Vedānta Society which he had founded in New York in 1895, and which later opened chapters in other major American and European cities. Whether legitimately or not, Vivekānanda's disciples tended to believe that he exerted an influence over the pragmatic philosophy of William James, whom he had met in Boston under the auspices of Mrs. Ole Bull. Romain Rolland even suggested that Vivekānanda "contributed indirectly" to the genesis of James's Gifford Lectures of 1901-1902 on "The Varieties of Religious Experience," which first appeared as a book under that title the year the Swami died (1902). Of the several passages from Vivekānanda which James quotes in that book, the last, which he includes in his conclusion to illustrate Vedāntic monism, states: "I wish that every one of us had come to such a state that even when we see the vilest of human beings we can see the God within."

In furnishing such a striking alternative to the doctrine of human fallenness, Vivekānanda's concept of "the God within" proved singularly appealing to several twentieth-century Western novelists known for their reaction against Western religion: Romain Rolland of France, and Aldous Huxley and Christopher Isherwood of England, both of whom came in the early 1940s to live in California. It was perhaps through Vivekānanda's influence on these three authors that the Parliament of Religions had its most crucial, albeit indirect, impact on Western literature.

Rolland, the famed author of *Jean-Christophe* (1906–1912) and recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1916 (for 1915), turned to Eastern religions out of disillusionment with the West, and eventually wrote his *Essai sur la mystique et l'action de l'Inde* (1929–1930, 3 parts in 2 vols.), known in English as *Ramakrishna the Man-God and the Universal Gospel of Vivekananda* (Calcutta, 1979). In contrast to Jung, who would remark in a letter of 1947 to G.H. Mees that “the basic coincidence of most of the Indian teaching is so overwhelmingly great that it means little whether the author is called Ramakrishna or Vivekānanda or Shri Aurobindo, etc.,” Rolland clearly esteemed Vivekānanda as a heroic “genius” of that elite sort that he had already examined in his studies of Beethoven (1903), Michelangelo (1908), and Tolstoy (1911). He especially admired Vivekānanda's unique flair as an orator, whom he credits with having taken up “the spiritual heritage of Ramakrishna and disseminate[d] the grains of his thought throughout the world,” and whose speech at the religion parliament he compares to “a tongue of flame.” Of all of Vivekānanda's sayings, the one that particularly captivates Rolland is the following, which he quotes twice: “Never forget the glory of human nature! We are the greatest God. . . . Christs and Buddhas are but waves on the boundless Ocean which I AM.” Elsewhere, Rolland exclaims in reference to Vivekānanda's articulation of the idea of Brahman's presence in every being:

The great thought is there in all its nakedness. Like the setting sun it breaks forth from the clouds before disappearing in resplendent glory: the Equality of all men, all sons of the same God, all bearing the same God. And there is no other God.

A decade later the same teaching inspired Huxley, who, with his friend Gerald Heard, founded a monastic retreat, Trabuco College, in Trabuco Canyon southeast of Los Angeles, under the sponsorship of the Vedānta Society of Southern California. It was there that the author of *Brave New World* (1932) wrote *The Perennial Philosophy* (1945), which tries to prove the Vedāntic principle that all religions are one. It was also there that Isherwood, after being introduced to Swami Prabhavananda of the Ramakrishna Order (founded by Vivekānanda in 1897) by Huxley and Heard, converted to that religion and embarked on his “Vedānta period,” during which he translated the

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Bhagavad-Gita (1944) with Prabhavananda; edited *Vedanta for Modern Man* (1945); contributed the titular essay to the symposium edited by John Yale, *What Vedanta Means to Me* (1960); wrote his study *Ramakrishna and His Disciples* (1965); and composed a series of novels in whose portrayal of characters some critics have noted a distinct inward turning. A homosexual who felt utter disgust for his own repressive Puritanical upbringing, Isherwood was delighted to find in Vivekānanda's Vedāntism a view that does not condemn homosexuality but acknowledges it—as Isherwood put it in a 1976 interview with Carolyn Heilbrun—as “merely another form of attachment, neither worse nor better” than heterosexuality. In his essay “What Vedanta Means to Me” (1960) he wrote:

Here, at last, was a man [Vivekānanda] who believed in God and yet dared to condemn the indecent grovelings of the sin-obsessed Puritans I had so much despised in my youth. I loved him at once, for his bracing self-reliance, his humor, and his courage. He appealed to me as the perfect anti-Puritan hero: the enemy of Sunday religion, the destroyer of Sunday gloom, the shocker of prudes, the breaker of traditions, the outrager of conventions, the comedian who taught the deepest truths in idiotic jokes and frightful puns.

If there is any truth to Georg Lukács's famous theory of the modern Western novel as the epic of a world “abandoned by God” which tells of “the adventure of interiority,” it seems strangely appropriate that several prominent European novelists in our century should have been drawn to a religious doctrine that places God literally “within” the individual. The natural affinity between that doctrine and the often-remarked “inward turn” of modern narrative is illuminated by the examples of Rolland, the novelist obsessed with heroic genius, and Isherwood, the introspective homosexual novelist. Moreover, the “God within” theme recurs in twentieth-century American popular literature, where it crops up in the most successful science fiction novel ever published. In Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961), which relentlessly lampoons traditional world religions in general and Western monotheism in particular, the author has his affectionate, Martian-raised human hero, Valentine Michael Smith, initiate a new religion in the futuristic northeastern United States, around the credal

motto "Thou art God" which he habitually utters to his human "water brothers."

Thou art God: I am God. When couched in Western terms and considered in the context of Western monotheism, this Brahmanic notion becomes pregnant with implications which Vivekânanda probably did not have in mind when he mainlined it into veins of late-nineteenth-century American consciousness. Not only does the idea of the "God within" seem to restore to human interiority the quality of divinity which Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx and their countless epigones saw as having been projected outwards upon the otherwise empty screen of the infinite called "God." The same idea comes dangerously close to repeating the "blasphemous" claim of mystical identification or union with God that sent the Sûfî al-Hallâj to the scaffold in 922 and led numerous other Jewish, Christian, and Muslim mystics over the centuries to be regarded with suspicion and hostility by more orthodox members of their monotheistic traditions. Indeed, the notion of the "God within" accomplishes conceptually what, according to biblical-Hebraic myth, the builders of Babel's tower failed to do architecturally, and what, according to Homeric-Hellenic myth, the Aloidae failed to achieve by piling mountains to the sky: the elevation of the human to the level of the divine.

IV.

In contrast to his teaching of the "God within," Vivekânanda's other main doctrine, that of a universal religion, has all but disappeared as a Western literary theme in our century. The irony of this last point cannot be overemphasized in the light of the religion parliament. In summing up the parliament's accomplishments, Barrows and other Christians likened the event to the Pentecost recorded in the second chapter of Acts, the descent of the Holy Spirit. That descent, as countless Christian exegetes have pointed out, typologically reverses the dispersive effect of the Babel calamity (recorded in Genesis) by allowing the devout Jews of different races, nations and languages gathered in Jerusalem to understand each other's speech. But this reversal gives pause for reflection. If the religion parliament may be viewed as a "reconvening of Babel," as James Ketelaar calls it, the attempts by certain speakers there—including Barrows—to prove the suprem-

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acy of their own faith over others would seem only to affirm, not negate, the theme of Babel (connoting dispersion, disorder, and disunity) that pervades modern Western literature.

Notwithstanding Huxley's philosophical yearning for a universal religion, no major Western poet or novelist in our century has been so optimistic or bold as to develop that theme in literary form (though Heinlein's Mike Smith does try in vain to comprehend or "grok" how humans could conceive a plurality of religions that make different claims to truth). On the contrary, the dissipation of Akbar's dream of religious unity has been matched by the return of the language myth of Babel.

Michael Edwards has observed that at least since Mallarmé, who blamed the imperfection of languages on the fact of their multiplicity, Babel has emerged as "the fundamental myth in modern literature," finding its classic polyglot expression in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), Ezra Pound's *Cantos* (1917-1970), and the quadrilingual poem composed by three Europeans of different nationalities and a Mexican, *Renga* (1971). To this list might be added the novels of Joyce. Having found itself reflected in hermeneutics and literary theory from Bakhtin's discussions of polyglossia and polyphony, through the lucubrations of reader-response theorists on the indeterminacy of textual meaning, to the deconstructionists' denial of a link between word and referent, the Babel image is even found by one scholar (Ingeborg Hoesterey) to symbolize the *Zeitgeist* of "postmodernity." And it is surely no mere coincidence that what the literary critic E. D. Hirsch characterized as "the Babel of interpretations" several decades ago has now come to a head in a time when theologians and philosophers of religion are preoccupied with the problems of "interfaith dialogue" that are rooted in the vying truth-claims of different faiths.

Nowhere in recent literature is the irreconcilability of such quandaries more effectively insinuated than in the best-selling Serbo-Croatian narrative by Milorad Pavić, *Hazaraki rečnik* (1985), known in English as *Dictionary of the Khazars* (1988). A direct literary descendant of Judah ha Levi's *Kitab al Khazari* (twelfth century; known also as the *Kuzari*), this surrealist, encyclopedic, polyphonic "Lexicon Novel in 100,000 Words," purporting to be a translation of Hebrew, Greek, and Arabic sources, is structured around the legendary ninth-century debate between a rabbinic sage, a Christian scholastic, and a

doctor of Islam, aimed at winning over the king of the Khazars. As in ha Levi's classic, in which the king converts to Judaism after being persuaded by the arguments of the rabbi, the kaghan in Pavić's version does convert to one of their faiths. But unlike that original *Kuzari*, Pavić's work leaves the reader uncertain as to which one of those faiths the kaghan converted to.

If the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions signified an effort to reverse the dispersive aftermath of the Babel disaster, its failure to do so is attested not only by subsequent world history, but also by subsequent Western literature. "Falling towers," proclaimed *The Waste Land* in the aftermath of World War I, possibly recalling the destruction of the *Ur*-tower at Babel: "Jerusalem Athens Alexandria / Vienna London / Unreal" (pt. 5, lines 374-377). Ironically, that poem, which is generally deemed one of our century's defining texts, ends by appealing to the same ancient body of wisdom from which Vivekānanda drew the sustenance of his vision of a universal religion. Over the multilingual babel of Eliot's fifth and final section the sound of thunder—"DA"—resounds three times (lines 401, 411, 418), an echo from the Brihad-Aranyaka Upanishad (5:1), before the poem resolves with the formal upanishadic notes of closure: "Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata. / Shantih shantih shantih" (433-434). Perhaps *The Waste Land's* "DA" forebodes the infamous, fateful "ou-boum" of the Marabar cave in E. M. Forster's novel *A Passage to India*, which appeared two years later (1924). This novel's discouraging exchange between Adela Quested and Dr. Aziz would stand as a fitting epitaph for that lofty universalist ideal which the Parliament of Religions could not confront without blinking:

"But wasn't Akbar's new religion very fine? It was to embrace the whole of India."

"Miss Quested, fine but foolish. You keep your religion, I mine. That is the best. Nothing embraces the whole of India, nothing, nothing, and that was Akbar's mistake."

THE LITERARY BEARING

Addendum

After this essay was in press I came across an obscure, book-length poem, *Sequel to the Parliament of Religions* (Chicago, 1894), by a Mrs. Eliza Madelina (Wilbur) Souvielle, who published it under the pseudonym Eben Malcolm Sutcliffe. (The poet's real name does not appear on the cover or title-page, but is disclosed in the entry on this book in *The National Union Catalog Pre-1956*.) This discovery obviously requires me to rescind my suggestion that Snell's "Aunt Hannah on the Parliament of Religions" was the only literary work that took the Parliament of Religions as its theme.

Composed in rhymed couplets of iambic pentameter, Souvielle's poem of over three thousand lines consists mainly of an imaginary dialogue between "Three striking figures, each of Eastern race" on a ship crossing the Atlantic Ocean, first on their way to, and then on their way back from the 1893 Parliament of Religions: a Turkish Muslim; a mandarin Confucianist; and a South Asian Buddhist. These three characters discuss and debate the different doctrines and histories of their respective faiths, and, on their return trip, are joined in this discussion by a (presumably Western) Christian "witness" who, as it turns out, was also at the Parliament, and who—undoubtedly reflecting the poet's own beliefs—ends up having the final word. Having already described the religion parliament as the "second Pentecost day," this Christian concludes that the way is now paved for the achievement of what Christ "announced," namely, the "universal brotherhood" of mankind: "The Parliament has this inaugurated, / And prophecy's fulfillment initiated." This conclusion thus accords with the elaborate schema on the book's frontispiece which details the poet's conception of the "Genealogy of Religions." According to this schema, the 1893 parliament "renews and acknowledges the bond of blood and brotherhood" of all humanity, which it purports to trace back through the various religious traditions of the world to "Noe, tenth from Adam," and which will be "realized" in God's coming "Kingdom."