

INTERRELIGIOUS COLLABORATION AND MISSION

- Topic: Crossing Boundaries, Across Generations: To and from the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions
- Convener: Reid B. Locklin, Saint Michael's College, University of Toronto
- Moderator: Michael T. McLaughlin, Saint Leo University
- Panelists: Jeannine Hill Fletcher, Fordham University
Reid B. Locklin, Saint Michael's College, University of Toronto
- Respondent: Cara L. Anthony, University of St. Thomas

Jeannine Hill Fletcher and Reid Locklin adopted a somewhat non-traditional, collaborative presentation format for this session. First, both together offered a brief portrait of the World's Parliament of Religions, an assembly of religious leaders from throughout the globe held in conjunction with the 1893 World's Fair. Though many Asian religions were represented at the Parliament, they were widely expected to confirm a liberal Protestant myth of Christian progress. Androcentric sources celebrating the 'brotherhood of man' at the World's Parliament of Religions also rhetorically erased the presence of women. Delegates from both marginalized groups did challenge the dominant myth of Christian superiority at the Parliament, however, revealing patterns of interreligious engagement and generational transformation that can be traced backward into earlier history and forward into the contemporary period.

In a second part of the presentation, Locklin focused on Swami Vivekananda, one of several Asian delegates who reversed the liberal universalism of the Parliament in terms specific to their own traditions. Shortly after the event, Vivekananda founded the Vedanta Society and Ramakrishna Mission to advance what he described as a "conquest of the world by the whole Hindu race." Though this initiative arose from many different factors, including the history of Western colonialism, interpreters often overlook the decisive influence of Vivekananda's own Hindu tradition of Advaita Vedanta. Close examination of the sectarian features of the eighth-century treatise *A Thousand Teachings* by Adi Shankaracharya and the hagiographical portraits of Shankara beginning in the fourteenth century, for example, reveals at least two different precedents for the missionary movement that followed from Swami Vivekananda's participation in the 1893 Parliament. From this example, and others like it, it becomes possible to imagine a richer interreligious conversation about the topic of mission, deeply informed by the historical particularities of each tradition as well as by shared, pressing concerns in the present.

In the third part of the presentation, Hill Fletcher traced several generations of interreligious feminists forward from the Parliament, beginning with the addresses of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Julia Ward Howe. A feminist pattern of engagement is evidenced by the fact that these women proceed not the mode of comparing which religion is 'right' or 'best', but in a feminist mode of pursuing analyses for social transformation which brings *all* religions under critique. Their distinctive elements of feminist interreligious engagement include the following

characteristics: (1) concern for women's representation and participation in religion, (2) the wider concern for the well-being of *all* the marginalized and disenfranchised, (3) a willingness to read sacred texts politically and (4) evidence of the 'hybridity' of subject-positions as women engaged in interreligious exchange not as 'religious' only but bringing with them the distinctiveness and multiplicity of their subject positions. This pattern of engagement carries on in the legacy of feminists across the generations, with evidence in the secular women's movement of the 1970s as one which crossed religious boundaries as well as in the interreligious engagement of third wave feminist theologians.

Cara Anthony responded, observing that Locklin's presentation executed a move similar to Swami Vivekananda's own, of reversing expectations that may exist implicitly in the minds of Christians today, thereby illuminating a genealogical line from the triumphalist Christian ideology of the 1893 World Parliament of Religions to ourselves. She also noted that Hill Fletcher's sketch of emerging feminist interreligious methodology shows how first-wave feminists avoided some of the triumphalism of their male Christian counterparts, which enabled them to "de-center" their own tradition enough to enter more quickly into the "richer interreligious conversation" that we still value in their example. Finally, Anthony raised questions about how racial ideologies evident at the 1893 World's Fair and at the World's Parliament of Religions affected Vivekananda, Ward Howe and Cady Stanton in their "hybridity of subject-positions." How did the American "original sin" of racism reverberate down generations of interreligious dialogue and feminist discourse?

The subsequent discussion took up several points of Anthony's response, particularly Stanton's evolving position on race and the ambivalent character of hybridity in relation to questions of race, class and caste privilege. One participant drew attention to Vivekananda's strategic decision to de-personalize and rationalize his tradition in order to appeal to a Western Protestant audience. Several participants reflected on the distinctive mode that interreligious engagement assumes when it is motivated by political dynamics of oppression and striving for social justice. The session concluded with more general reflections on the relevance of interreligious study for the broader theological community.

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