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Editorial

An uncharacteristically large amount of editorial real estate in this month's issue has been bequeathed to the September Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago. We agonized, then set aside other articles for the nonce, convinced from being there that the Parliament had proved itself historically and spiritually significant enough to merit five full pages of words and images.

Hindus, of course, have a special fascination with the event. It marked our coming of age one-hundred years ago, when Swami Vivekananda-then a nameless and youthful monk-strode lion-like upon the broader world stage. That very moment was for India's millions an awakening, a sudden revelation that their old, about-to-

be-forgotten religious heritage could stand tall beside all the other spiritual cultures of the earth. "My goodness," was the unspoken thought of the day, "if a precocious swami can make such a stir in the West, what might happen if our seasoned satgurus spoke out?"

In our own love of the 1893 Parliament, we forget that it meant as much to others. Buddhists from Sri Lanka have a kindred fond memory. They had sent their own 30-year-old monk, Anagarika Dharmapala [1864-1933], founder of the prestigious Maha Bodhi Society. Like Vivekananda, he was immersed in the upliftment of his people and the regeneration of a culture under Colonial attack. Dharmapala was the quintessential representative of the mindful, contemplative Buddhist path, gentle, amiable and loved by all who met him. His message of universality struck a deep chord, drawing praise from the press: "The Buddhist representative has created quite a furor in Chicago...has a hypnotic influence over crowds and astounds his listeners with his frank criticism." It is only due to the curiously uncontrollable course of history that Dharmapala is not remembered as vividly as our Vivekananda.

The 1993 Parliament was important to others, too. To the Native American Indians, it was their first-100 years ago they had just finished the last major battle with the white man, and were not invited by their conquerors. To the Muslims it was a sign of progress-only one American convert to Islam attended 100 years ago while hundreds came this year. To the Jains it was a leap from a single monk, Virchand Gandhi-who had to circumvent Jain travel restrictions in 1893-to 70,000 Jains now living in the US. Parallel experiences were reported by Zoroastrians (with a surpassingly strong presence this year), Neo-Pagans, Bahais (whose US temple is in Illinois), Brahma Kumaris (who insist they are a separate religion from Hinduism) and Sikhs. Even the humanists were there.

But perhaps the Parliament experience was most important for those who felt the least inclined toward it-the fundamentalists and triumphalists, the latter being those who regard theirs as the only true and God-inspired path and seek, ultimately, to triumph over all others. For them the Chicago event must have seemed an unbenign foreboding of spirituality gone awry, for in its many expressions of faith it was wild. Wonderfully wild. Yet, the one-wayers could not have missed the point of it all, that humankind follows a plurality of paths, nothing approaching singularity, and that the present generation likes it that way. The most articulate triumphalistic intonations in Chicago were met with silent displeasure, while any humble homily about unity in diversity was cheered. This was not a happy place to be if you did not like to see spiritual strengths other than your own. Most of us in Chicago celebrated the diversity with the thankfulness a plant geneticist feels for nature's many strains of corn-having one kind of corn, or one kind of religion, is clearly a less abundant option.

It is nothing new that religion continues to be the source of human suffering, conflicts, broken families, dispossessed peoples and even wars. It is one of the greatest ironies of history, one of the greatest shames we bear. What is new is that among a growing minority of thoughtful and even powerful people, such intolerance is no longer tolerable. More and more members of our race, the human race, are weary and wary of the notion that God has chosen one religion above others, that He condones force and violence in His name, that religious leaders use the fears among their flocks to divide and to devastate, to harm instead of heal.

It was a privilege to share this week with such lofty souls, powerful days never to be forgotten. We can only hope that the trustees will keep the vision alive when they meet on October 30th to determine the future of this compelling enterprise. We especially urge them to involve the twenty-five presidents of the religions-fully, not meekly-for the real power and our best chance for spiritual harmony and

understanding rests with those few women and men.

Thumbs up for Native American Indians, represented by 38 tribes, who spoke of their dispossession with courage and quiet nobility, asking the Vatican to revoke a 1492 Papal Bull that still calls for them to be subjugated to the Christian Empire.

Thumbs down for organizers who permitted interminable talk from the podium during the all-important three afternoons of private Assembly sessions, when the real need of the hour was to let the 250 spiritual leaders of the world speak among themselves.

Thumbs up for the wisdom of the Hindus to select as their presidents three truly spiritual souls, avoiding the temptation to bring more political clout into the assembly. And to the Hindu Host Committee for years of tireless leadership. They made it all happen.

Thumbs up for the courage of Parliament organizers to allow a venturesome diversity of faiths to assemble alongside the orthodox, and to permit wiccans and pagans to dance openly in the Chicago moonlight in celebration of their ancient ways.

[Thumbs down] As hard as it is to assure equitable representation on a global scale, it is still unacceptable that Shinto, Taoism and Confucianism were hardly there, that African presence and traditions were conspicuously absent and that South Americans were hardly there.

[Thumb sideways]The Global Ethic gets a mixed assessment. Cheers for the noble effort, mostly achieved, of synthesizing the human dilemma and cheers for hearing the Buddhists' voice and not using the word God anywhere. But jeers for being dogmatic and imperious.