

At the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions

Summary: The 1893 World's Parliament of Religions, held at that year's Chicago World's Fair, gave Buddhists from Sri Lanka and Japan the chance to describe their own traditions to an audience of curious Americans. Some stressed the universal characteristics of Buddhism, and others criticized anti-Japanese sentiment in America.

The 1893 World's Parliament of Religions included a number of Buddhist delegates, among them Zen Master Soyen Shaku, the Japanese layman Hirai Kinzo, and the Sri Lankan Buddhist reformer Anagarika Dharmapala. The Parliament was organized by a wide spectrum of Protestant and Unitarian leaders, many of whom sought to demonstrate that the world's religions affirmed the unity of humankind and that Christianity, ultimately, had the unique capacity to embrace this unity.

The Buddhists present were eager not only to participate, but to challenge the Western Christian tradition in a debate over what the true characteristics of a "world religion" might be. For example, Soyen Shaku's major speech sharply contrasted Buddhist notions of karma as the principle of causation with Christian notions of God as "prime mover." With arguments he purposely constructed to appear "rational" and "nontheistic" to his Western audience, he suggested that Buddhist principles of karma were completely compatible with modern science. Although Shaku himself insisted that he did not intend to antagonize Christians with his speech, both its content and style challenged many Christians' ideas about what constitutes "religion."

Buddhist reformer Anagarika Dharmapala also challenged the organizers' understanding of Christianity as the great "universal religion" by pointing to the "universal" teachings of the Buddha, who taught long before the time of Christ. Dharmapala emphasized the Buddhist ideals of tolerance and gentleness as crucial for the world's religions in modern times. Many in the audience were apparently very impressed with Dharmapala. Several days after the Parliament, at a meeting of the Theosophical Society of Chicago, he presided over the initiation of the first person to become a Buddhist on American soil, Charles T. Strauss, a New York businessman.

Finally, the Parliament elicited some sharp criticism from Japanese Buddhists such as Hirai Kinzo, who pointed explicitly to anti-Japanese feeling in America. He deplored the signs he had encountered in

California that read “No Japanese is allowed to enter here” and said, “If such be the Christian ethics—well, we are perfectly satisfied to be heathen.” The Japanese were not so concerned with whether someone is called a Buddhist, a Shintōist, or a Christian. Instead, Kinzo explained, “the consistency of doctrine and conduct is the point on which we put the greatest importance.”