

The Founding Females of Interreligious Leadership, Scholarship, and Service

Celebrating the role of women in the 1893 Parliament, pioneers of the interfaith movement, is the passion of scholar Rev. Allison Stokes, Ph.D. Ambassador for the Parliament of World Religions and Founding Director of the Women's Interfaith Institute of the Finger Lakes. An accomplished professor and historian, Dr. Stokes is pursuing publishing a book on the prominent women's voices in the history of interfaith. Dr. Stokes will be speaking on this research at the Living Out The Vision program and dinner benefit of the 20th/120th anniversaries of the Parliament of the World's Religions, November 16, in Chicago, IL. This article is an excerpt of this body of work and the second installation of the Parliament Anniversary Series.

Looking Back to 1848 and 1893: Feminist Pioneers in Inter-Religious Leadership, Scholarship and Service

When Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott created the Declaration of Sentiments, a document that 68 women and 32 men signed at the first women's rights convention in 1848 in Seneca Falls, NY, they had specific things to say about "the usurpations on the part of man toward woman" when it came to the subject of religion.

Among their grievances: "*He closes against her all the avenues to wealth and distinction, which he considers most honorable to himself. As a teacher of theology, medicine, or law, she is not known....*"

Furthermore, "*He allows her in Church, as well as State, but a subordinate position, claiming Apostolic authority for her exclusion from the ministry, and, with some exceptions, from any public participation in the affairs of the Church...*"

And finally, "*He has usurped the prerogative of Jehovah himself, claiming it as his right to assign for her a sphere of action, when that belongs to her conscience and her God.*"^[i]

Forty-five years later, at the time of the World's Columbian Exposition (more commonly known as the Chicago World's Fair), the situation was different. Progress had been made.

When the Rev. Anna Howard Shaw, MD, gave a sermon at the closing event of the World's Congress of Representative Women held during the opening month of the fair in 1893, on the platform with her were 18 ordained clergywomen from 13 different Christian denominations. Shaw opened her message in a manner that was extraordinary. She began, as expected, with a text from the New Testament, but immediately followed it with readings from the religion of Zoroaster, Buddhism, the "Mohammedan scriptures," and Confucius.^[ii] Throughout her message Shaw demonstrated a global feminism and inclusive vision that viewed in retrospect was a preview to the first World's Parliament of Religions that would be held at the fair four months later.

Although Elizabeth Cady Stanton did not attend the first world's Parliament of Religions in September 1893, she wrote a paper for the occasion that was delivered by

Susan B. Anthony—“The Worship of God in Man.” This was just one of 19 speeches delivered by women in the massive building (with halls that seated 5,000 people) that is now the Art Institute of Chicago. Feminist scholars of religion owe a debt of gratitude to Professor Ursula King for her article, “Rediscovering Women’s Voices at the World’s Parliament of Religions.”^[iii] Here Dr. King points out that ten percent of the addresses given at the Parliament were given by women. This proportion is stunning considering that at the time it was considered improper for women to speak in public, and many were ostracized for doing so. Feminist scholars also owe a debt of gratitude to the Rev. Dr. John Henry Barrows for publishing before year’s end in 1893 the papers of the World’s Parliament, and so preserving a record of women’s contributions.^[iv] At the conclusion of the Parliament Barrows observed, “The Congress was a notable event... for woman, for then she secured the largest recognition of her intellectual rights ever granted.”^[v] Unfortunately, not much at all has been made of this fact in histories of Women in Religion. Inspired and surprised by the achievements of our foremothers, I have been doing research on Women’s Voices at the 1893 World’s Parliament. In December 2009 I presented a PowerPoint lecture on the topic at the 5th Parliament of World’s Religions in Melbourne, Australia. People were amazed: “*Why* don’t we know about this?” Indeed.

Recovering the stories of women who were earliest pioneers in the interfaith movement is an ongoing project of mine. I look forward to sharing some of what I have learned in Chicago on November 16th at the anniversary celebration of the first Parliament 120 years ago and the second Parliament a century later—20 years ago.



Julia Ward Howe
“What is, and What is Not,
Religion?”



Fannie Barrier Williams
“The Religious Mission of the
Colored Race”



Celia Parker Woolley
“The World’s Religious Debt to
America”

^[i]www.nps.gov/archive/wori/declaration.htm

^[ii] Sewall, May Wright, ed. **The World’s Congress of Representative Women**. Chicago, IL: Rand McNally, 1894, pp. 857-858. See my article, “Global Feminism and Inclusion in Anna Howard Shaw’s 1893 Sermon,” in **Postscripts**, vol 5, no 2 (2009). <http://www.equinoxpub.com/index.php/POST/article/view/10245>

^[iii] See **A Museum of Faiths, Histories and Legacies of the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions**, Eric J. Ziolkowski, ed. Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1993, pp. 325-343.

^[iv] **The World’s Parliament of Religions, Volumes I and II**. Chicago: The Parliament Publishing Company, 1893.

^[v] Barrows, vol. II, pp. 1569-1570.