

## Women Provide Prophetic Voices in 1893 - Part 2

Marcus Braybrooke – *The Interfaith Observer* - 15 January 2013

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### ON THESE SHOULDERS – 1893 WORLD PARLIAMENT OF RELIGIONS

Swami Vivekanda's famous greeting at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions, "Sisters and Brothers of America," brought 7,000 women and men to their feet, clapping "for more than three minutes" before he could resume. But on the platform of speakers, women were a small minority, offering a little more than ten percent of the 200 presentations.

Even ten percent was groundbreaking, however. **Rev. Augusta Chapin** (1836-1905), the first woman to be a Doctor of Divinity, spoke at the opening and closing ceremonies. "A single generation ago," she reminded the men, "one-half of the religious world could not have been directly represented.



Laura Ormiston Chant

On the last day Henry Barrow read a poem by **Laura Ormiston Chant** (1848-1923). Each verse begins "The New World's call hath summoned men to prayer," then welcomes, in turn, people "from the East, from Europe, Negro brothers" – all of whom come to worship "at the great white throne of God, the Father of us all." However archaic that image sounds today, she was an inclusivist.

Laura had run away from home at fifteen and become a nurse and then a writer and social reformer. She was clearly bored by papers on the science of religion by "marvellous intellectual jugglers," as she called the male theologians. Instead she hoped her paper on "Real Religion of To-day" would "be a little light relief." The Parliament, she said, should help Americans recognise that God answered the prayers of all people whatever their religion and in whatever language the prayers were spoken. Instead of claiming for one's own religion a monopoly of truth, "God," she said, "had made religious truth like the facets of a diamond, one facet reflecting one colour and another facet another colour."



**Elizabeth Caddy Stanton**

**Elizabeth Caddy Stanton** (1815 -1902) was an abolitionist whose Declaration of Sentiments at the first women's rights convention, in 1848, in Seneca Falls, New York, is often credited with initiating the first organized American women's rights and suffrage movements. She insisted at the Parliament that God, who is "no respecter of persons," had made "of one blood all the nations of the earth." "Equal rights for all," she declared, "is the lesson of the hour."

**Ida Hultin** (1858-1938), a prominent Unitarian minister, gave an even more critical view of organized religion. "Try to evade the truth if you will," she warned her listeners, "You must face it at last. No creedal church and no form of ecclesiasticism has ever lent itself to the emancipation of the woman-half of humanity. She has suffered, and still suffers, because of the results of dogmatic beliefs and theological traditions." Rev. Hultin was also sharply critical of ministers who claimed that slavery was divinely ordained. She complained, "the church has never freed the slave of any land" nor looked after the world's hungry, sick, and destitute, claiming these churches instead "legalized cruelty." She praised "men and women belonging to all countries and all races who perhaps have not had time to formulate their beliefs about humanity, [but] are busy working for it; who have never known how to define God, [and yet] are finding him in their daily lives."

Another campaigner for personal, social, and political rights, **Mrs Lydia Fuller Dickenson** (1828-1904), was influenced by the Utopian French philosopher François Marie Charles Fourier (1772-1837) who originated the word *feminism*. Her address was on the need for mutual co-operation in marriage.



Henrietta Szold

**Henrietta Szold** (1860-1945), the daughter of a rabbi, spoke about the position of women in Judaism. She stressed that Judaism taught “Not sameness in function, but equality in position” for men and women – although in practice this had not always been the case.

Szold live a remarkable life. In 1896, one month before Theodor Herzl published his magnum opus, *Der Judenstaat*, Henrietta Szold described her vision of a Jewish state in Palestine as a place to ingather Diaspora Jewry and revive Jewish culture. Her commitment to Zionism was heightened by a trip to Palestine in 1909 where she discovered her life’s mission: to work for the health, education and welfare of the Yishuv (the pre-state Jewish community of Palestine). Szold and six other women founded Hadassah for Jewish women – now one of the largest international Jewish organizations. She believed in Arab-Jewish unity and a bi-national solution. In 1942, she was one of the co-founders of the Ihud party. Later a picture of her was to appear on an Israeli postage stamp. Other women spoke on more specialised subjects. **Alice Cunningham Fletcher** (1838-1923), an ethnologist who studied American Indian culture, offered a description of North American Native religions. **Eliza Jane Read Sunderland** (1839-1910), gave a long scholarly paper on the, then, new comparative study of religions.



Alice Cunningham Fletcher

One African American spoke at the Parliament: **Fannie Barrier Williams** (1855-1944), an educator and political and women’s rights activist, who became known for getting “blacks” officially represented on the Exposition’s Board of Control. At the Parliament she called upon churches, particularly in the South, to open their doors to all people, regardless of race.



Fannie Barrier Williams

Fannie was one of some 150 women who gave papers at the Congress **Fannie Barrier Williams** of Women, which was also part of the World Columbian Exposition's program. Women also spoke at many of the 40 'Denominational Congresses,' which were more closely linked to the Parliament. Jewish and Congregational women, not welcomed by their male colleagues, arranged their own events.

Henry Barrows, the Parliament's chief organiser, was not the only person to discover that the women's presentations "in point of thought and literary treatment fully equalled those of the men."