

Atonement of Columbian Crime

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The 113th anniversary (1893-2006) of the World Congress of Religion falls in September. The World Congress of Religion was a part of the "World Fair" (Sept. 11-27, 1893) on religion, science, art, law and human rights, held at the "Hall of Columbus", Michigan Avenue, Chicago, USA, to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's (1451 - 1506) so-called discovery of "the New World" (October 12, 1492). In fact, it was an unholy event of glorification of the curse and cruelty perpetrated by Columbus and his cronies to the indigenous people of the Americas. Probably, the World Congress of Religion was added to the celebration as an attempt to condone or wash the crimes of Columbus - the crimes not only against "the real Americans" but against the whole humanity and human conscience (1). The Congress was, in fact, an act of atonement of Columbian crimes against humanity.

It was a Congress, the first of its kind to be held in recorded history. Representatives of 50 nations participated in the Congress. Swami Vivekananda (1863 - 1902) addressed the Congress on September 19, 1893. He was introduced to the audience by Prof Wright, professor of Greek in the University of Harvard. The Congress was inaugurated by Cardinal Gibson. In the USA Vivekananda was called the "Cyclonic Hindu". His speeches in the Parliament of Religions electrified the audience. His message of human oneness ("Sisters and Brothers" of America) caught the imagination of people and made people think about themselves and about their role in society.

His message to the American people stole their heart; it spoke the language of their lips; it sang the song of their soul; and it played the music of their mind. He spent over a year in the USA.

Now, why is this reference to the Columbian enterprise of criminality? Is this irrelevant? NO. Though the World Fair, 1893, was held to glorify an ugly episode of history, the ultimate outcome of the Congress and the Fair was quite beneficial. In retrospect today, the presence of the Saint from the East could be considered as an event of extending spiritual pardon to the lunatic legacy of that inhuman Columbian enterprise. Of course, the crimes committed during and after the Columbian adventure against the real people of "the New world" can neither be forgiven nor forgotten. At least, for us in posterity, Vivekananda's presence at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 gave a silver lining of atonement to the occasion. This author is not sure whether Vivekananda knew about the extent of these crimes at that time.

He was impressed by the spirit of equality of American people, and wrote to a friend in India: "America is the best field in the world to carry on any idea." People were charmed, not only by his presence, but by what he said and how he said it. That was his intrinsic strength to impress people.

But he was not impressed by the manifestations of religion in the West and, after travelling extensively in the West (USA, Europe), Egypt and in the East (China, Japan), his faith in the Indian philosophical and spiritual background became firmer. He believed that monism (*The Brahma*) of the *Advaita* philosophy of the Vedanta could be the future religion of thinking humanity.

EPILOGUE

It is of significance that during the quincentenary (500th) anniversary of the discovery of America, the name of the gold-craving junkey from Genoa of Italy-(Columbus) was totally omitted from all celebrations due to stiff opposition from right-thinking people of Americas. However, it could be cynically and jokingly said that “the Cyclonic Hindu” saint from the East (Vivekananda) poured sacred water on the whole atonement ceremony (World Congress of Religion) through his flamboyant participation in it. But crimes are crimes—unforgivable and unforgettable. William Shakespeare (1564 -1616) said it all for us through Mark Antony [while he was preparing to bury Gaius Julius Caesar (100-44 BC)]:

“The Evil that men do lives after them—The Good is oft interred with their bones.”

(Julius Caesar, Act III, Scene 2: 1599)

Reference :

1. Majumdar Sisir K. : Curse and Cruelty—Columbian Quincentenary, *Frontier*, 24 : 7-10, July 25, 1992.