

CHICAGO 1893

An Altruist Hero

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The year 2012 is the 119th anniversary (1893-2012) of the World Congress of Religions, Chicago. The World Congress of Religions was 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” on Oct 12, 1492. It was a Congress-first of its kind to be held in recorded history. Representatives of 50 nations participated in the Congress. The Congress was inaugurated by Cardinal Gibson.

Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) was introduced to the audience in the Congress by Prof Wright, Professor of Greek in the University of Harvard. Apart from the inaugural session of the World Parliament of Religions on Sept 11, 1893, Vivekananda had delivered five lectures on September 15, 19, 20, 26 and 27, 1893. He spent over a year travelling in the USA.

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 the society.

Swamiji said at the inaugural session on Sept 11, 1893 : *“Sectarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendent fanaticism have long possessed this beautiful earth. They have filled the earth with violence, drenched it often and often with human blood, destroyed civilisation and sent whole nations to despair. Had it not for these horrible demons, human society would far more advanced than it is now.”*

His words, according to the French Philosopher Romian Rolland (1866-1944), Nobel Laureate in Literature, 1915, “were great music” and had immediately touched the hearts of the audience. The Irish theosophist—Anne Besant (1847-1933), First Woman President of Indian National Congress (Est. 1885) in 1917 who met Swamiji at the conference later wrote : *“... a striking figure, clad in yellow and orange, shining like the Sun of India in the midst of the heavy atmosphere of Chicago, a lion head, piercing eyes, mobile lips, movement swift and abrupt—such was my first impression of Swami Vivekananda, as I met him in one of the rooms set apart for the use of the delegates of the Parliament of Religions.”*

What Swamiji had said in his inaugural address at the Parliament of Religions is more relevant in today’s context as more and more people all over the world are becoming cruel and jealous. Intra-religion (Shia-Sunni), inter-religion between different religions and religious sects (Protestant-Roman Catholic) etc. bloodshed has become the order of the day.

His first written speech was “The Paper on Hinduism” delivered on September 19, 1893. Swamiji believed that only universal religion can save the world by removing hatred and jealousy. It must be one “Which will have no location in place or time ; which will be infinite like the God it will preach, and whose sun will shine upon the followers of Krishna and of Christ, on saints and sinners alike ; which will not be Brahminic or Buddhistic, Christian or Mohemmedan, but the sum total of all these and still have infinite space for development.” He was the cultural ambassador of Neo-Hinduism based exclusively on VEDANTA.

Vivekananda had deep respect and love for the poor of his country and in the speech delivered on 20 September on “Religion : Not the Crying need of India”, he said— “*They have religion enough*”—but it is bread that the suffering millions of burning India cry out for with parched throats. It is an insult to a starving man to teach him metaphysics.”

He was impressed by the spirit of equality of American (USA) 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 manifestation 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 VEDANTA could be the future religion of thinking humanity. Rabindra-nath Tagore (1861-1941), Nobel Laureate in Literature in 1913 and the First Asian and also non-white Nobel Laureate, told the French philosopher Romain Rolland (1866-1944), Nobel Literature Laurate 1915 : “*If you want to know India, read Vivekananda. There is nothing negative in him. Everything positive and affirmative.*” Recently, Government of India has created “Vivekananda Chair” in the prestigious University of Chicago for the study of Indian History and Culture including Propagation of the Universal Humanistic Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda.

Vivekananda visited the West during the industrial revolution and the rise of modern science. He also noticed the total absence of conflict between science and religion during the European Renaissance (1500-1700 AD). He always advocated a spirit of harmonisation and not hatred, co-operation and conciliation and not conflict and confrontation between science and religion.

For people, his words always spoke the lyric and language of their lips, sang the song of their souls, echoed the rythm of their hearts and played the music of their minds.

Secondly, he was a spiritually and culturally conscious Indian ; he was the first cultural ambassador of India to the West. What Plato (427-347 BC) did for his teacher and mentor—the Greek Philosopher Socrates (469-399 BC), Vivekananda did for his *Guru* (Master)—Ramakrishna Paramhansadev (1836-1886) who did not put his ideas in writing. Socrates always talked his students disciples and never put any of his ideas in writing, Plato did it for him for the posterity.

The German philosopher and orientalist Max Muller (1823-1900) coined Ramakrishna : “... *a wonderful mixture of God and Man.*” The French philosopher Romain Rolland (1866-1944), thought Ramakrishna was “...*a consummation of two thousand years of the spiritual life of three hundred million people fruit of a new autumn, a new message of the soul, the symphony of India bearing the name of Ramakrishna.*” Like Socrates, Rama-krishna never wrote anything ; Vivekananda propagated worldwide what Ramakrishna preached to his disciples. Vivekananda could be called the “Plato of India”. □□□