

The Forgotten September 11 and the Clasp of Civilizations

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An event in the 1890s has been called “the dawn of religious pluralism.” It was also an early sign of a change in the relations among civilizations after centuries of Western expansionism. A look at processes set in motion 108 years before 9/11 suggests a new equilibrium of the world-system as a possible outcome of the present evolutionary crisis.

1 The Parliament of Religions

On September 11, 1893, a large public meeting of representatives of religions from around the world opened in Chicago. Called the Parliament of Religions, it was the first gathering of its kind. It was held as part of the World’s Columbian Exposition, a grand celebration of the four-hundredth anniversary of Columbus’s voyage across the Atlantic in 1492 (delayed from 1892 to 1893 due to the elaborate preparations). The Parliament lasted for seventeen days and was attended by thousands.

The pageantry of the inaugural ceremony began at ten o’clock in the morning as ten strokes of the New Liberty Bell, several miles from the venue of the Parliament, pealed in honor of the ten religions represented: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Taoism, Confucianism, Shintoism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Meanwhile the crowd in the Hall of Columbus at the Art Institute watched as dozens of religious leaders from all over the globe, their dress reflecting the variety of their cultures, entered the back of the auditorium, proceeded down the center aisle and ascended the platform.¹

The proposal to hold the Parliament had been made by Charles Bonney, a lawyer inspired by the vision of the eighteenth-century scientist and mystic Emanuel Swedenborg. In his words of welcome on the opening day, he spoke of his dream that it would be a step toward human unity:

The importance of this event, its influence on the future relations of the various races of men, cannot be too highly esteemed.

If this Congress shall faithfully execute the duties with which it has been charged, it will ... stand in human history ... marking the actual beginning of a new epoch of brotherhood and peace.

For when the religious faiths of the world recognize each other as brothers, ... then, and not till then, will the nations of the earth yield to the spirit of concord and learn war no more.²

Bonney went on to lay down the principles of dialogue that were to be observed by all participants. With these words he proclaimed, in effect, the spirit of the interfaith movement that was initiated on that day:

We come together in mutual confidence and respect, without the least surrender or compromise of anything which we respectively believe to be truth or duty, with the hope that mutual acquaintance and a free and sincere interchange of views on the great questions of eternal life and human conduct will be mutually beneficial.

Bonney's remarks were followed by those of John Henry Barrows, one of Chicago's prominent clergymen (later the president of Oberlin College) and chairman of the committee that organized the meeting. He told the delegates of his joy that

at this hour, which promises to be a great moment in history ... from the farthest isles of Asia; from India, mother of religions; from Europe, the great teacher of civilization; ... and from all parts of this republic, which we love to contemplate as the land of earth's brightest future, you have come here at our invitation in the expectation that the world's first Parliament of Religions must prove an event of race-wide and perpetual significance.

After further welcoming speeches, the responses of the delegates began. The audience was enthusiastic and would continue to be so throughout the Parliament. "Over and over again," it was said, "the throng burst into tumultuous applause."³

But the high point came unexpectedly, late in the day, when an unknown young man from India, in "gorgeous red apparel, his bronze face surmounted with a turban of yellow,"⁴ rose to speak. Regarding his impromptu speech and the reaction to it, Swami Vivekananda himself wrote to a friend:

They were all prepared and came with ready-made speeches. I was a fool and had none.... I addressed the assembly as "Sisters and Brothers of America", a deafening applause of two minutes followed, and then I proceeded; and when it was finished, I sat down almost exhausted with emotion.⁵

In his short speech, Vivekananda spoke of belonging to a religion that acknowledges all paths to God. Thanking the audience "in the name of millions and millions of Hindu people," he declared: "We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true." He ended with an impassioned appeal for peace, harmony and mutual understanding among religions:

Sectarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendant, fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful earth. They have filled the earth with violence.... I fervently hope that the bell that tolled this morning in honor of this convention may be the death-knell of all fanaticism, of all persecutions with the sword or with the pen, and of all uncharitable feelings between persons wending their way to the same goal.⁶

What happened in Chicago in September 1893 can be described, in Vivekananda's words, as a first breaking down of "the barriers of this little world of ours."⁷ In its unprecedented — if largely symbolic — representation of human diversity and the conspicuous part played by the non-Western delegates, however few in number, it signalled an impending change in the interactions not only of religions, but of civilizations. Though the Parliament did not usher in the era of peace and brotherhood that

Charles Bonney had hoped for, it heralded and contributed to the beginning of a transformation in the “relations of the various races of men” whose magnitude we can only now begin to grasp.

Religion has all too often been a source of conflict rather than harmony. Yet the historic meeting of representatives of Western and Eastern cultures that took place in Chicago was held in the name of religion. The coming together of religions that occurred in 1893 was the starting-point of a dialogue that is still gaining momentum today. The spontaneous, enthusiastic response of a predominantly Christian gathering to an array of Hindu, Buddhist and other speakers was perhaps a sign of the potential of religion to overcome its divisiveness and contribute to the unity of the human race at the deepest level.

2 From Columbus to Vivekananda

As far back as the end of the nineteenth century, as we have seen, a Swami from India spoke of our “little world” as he addressed an audience in America on behalf of millions of people on the other side of the globe. Neither the Parliament itself nor the notion of “this little world” would have been conceivable when Christopher Columbus set out on the voyage that was to be celebrated four centuries later at the exposition in Chicago. But the shrinking of the earth that made the Parliament of Religions possible proceeded rapidly in the hundred years that followed it. By the late twentieth century, as a result, the issues raised in 1893 were becoming more urgent than ever.

In 1993 a Parliament of the World’s Religions was convened again in Chicago. In the meantime hundreds of meetings, big and small, had taken place for interfaith dialogue. The revival of the original name reflected a recognition of the significance of the event that started it all. A Council for a Parliament of the World’s Religions was set up to organize gatherings on a similar scale in different parts of the world every few years. Religious diversity is represented and honored at these meetings to a degree that could hardly have been imagined a century ago. Far from detracting from the value of the earlier Parliament, where Christian speakers predominated, the contrast between then and now suggests how much has been achieved by the process that began in 1893.

Dialogue has been conducive to a wider outlook, counteracting religion’s paradoxical tendency to sanctify narrowness while mediating between the human soul and the Infinite. In the nineteenth century, the Archbishop of Canterbury declined to attend the Parliament in Chicago on the grounds that “the Christian religion is the one religion.” He added: “I do not understand how that religion can be regarded as a member of a Parliament of Religions without assuming the equality of the other intended members and the parity of their positions and claims.”⁸ No doubt a certain kind of equality was deliberately implied by the choice of the word “parliament” with its democratic connotations. The organizers of the Parliament were religious liberals, by the standards of the time, who had moved beyond the insularity of old-fashioned exclusivism to a more tolerant and inclusive view of other faiths. In the next century, partly thanks to the dialogue inaugurated in Chicago, such inclusivism and the begin-

nings of genuine pluralism would become more and more prevalent Christian attitudes.⁹

But formal interreligious dialogue is only the most obvious legacy of the first Parliament of Religions. Some of the exponents of Asian traditions who came to Chicago, finding in the United States a receptive audience for their teachings, stayed on afterwards. They toured the country, and sometimes Europe as well, and established organizations to carry on their work. A long-term interaction was thus set in motion. On an intellectual level it had already begun with the influence of Eastern philosophies on Emerson, Thoreau and others earlier in the nineteenth century. Now it took a more visible form through the introduction of Westerners to Buddhist and Hindu psycho-spiritual disciplines as taught by living masters.

A few decades later, the trickle of spiritual teachers from Asia that had begun in the 1890s swelled into a flood. Admittedly this flood has had some turbid currents in contrast to the pure stream of the earliest arrivals. Those who came for the Parliament included such illustrious figures as Anagarika Dharmapala, whose role in the history of what is now Sri Lanka and in the revival of South Asian Buddhism was comparable to Vivekananda's role in the awakening of India and the rediscovery of Vedanta. The recent influx of gurus of all kinds has not always brought such exceptional individuals from the East. Nevertheless, it is part of a cultural phenomenon that is far from exhausting itself and may yet contribute to a profound change in the materialistic society of the modern West.

What is often overlooked in discussing the claim of the 1893 Parliament to a place in history is that the effects of the East-West interaction initiated by it went both ways. This gave it a global scope unparalleled in its time. The news of America's open-armed reception of Swami Vivekananda, especially, sent a thrill through the impoverished masses in India. The first stirrings of a national resurgence were felt in what is today the world's largest democracy, but was then a vast population deprived of self-respect by subjection to foreign rule. It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that when Vivekananda appeared on the platform in Chicago, India strode onto the stage of the modern world. Soon "the awakening of the torpid Colossus began,"¹⁰ as Romain Rolland wrote with reference to the impact of Vivekananda's speeches on the huge crowds that greeted him when he, who had left his country as an unknown Sannyasi, returned to it as a national hero.

3 A Parliament of Civilizations

The Parliament of Religions deserves to be looked at, then, not only from the point of view of its well-recognized standing in the interfaith movement, but in a larger historical perspective. It was not essentially a political event, yet its organizers hoped it would influence the behavior of "the nations of the earth" and it had repercussions in distant lands with implications for the fate of empires.

The Parliament occurred when a major change in the relations of civilizations was about to begin: the transition from the world of the past few centuries, dominated by

the West, to one with greater equality among the peoples of the earth. Even more than for its direct historical consequences, it is as a symbolic landmark prefiguring this transformation in cross-cultural relations that it is worth remembering.

As part of the centennial celebration of the Parliament of Religions, a selection of the original speeches was made available again to the general public in *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism*. In the foreword to this book, Diana Eck pointed out the relevance of these speeches a hundred years later:

The speeches of those delegates a century ago give us an opportunity to reflect both on how different is the fast-paced world of the 1990s and yet how persistent are the issues of interreligious relations. The understanding and interpretation of religious diversity, with all its cultural concomitants, is even more the pressing issue of our times than it was one hundred years ago. . . . All over the world, the politics of religious, ethnic, cultural, and racial identity has led to a new period of turbulence.¹¹

The last sentence could almost have been quoted from a much better-known publication of the same year. It was in 1993 that Samuel Huntington published his article entitled “The Clash of Civilizations?” in the influential American journal, *Foreign Affairs*. The article was the genesis of his controversial book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. The provocative phrase “clash of civilizations” — which Huntington acknowledged having borrowed from Bernard Lewis¹² — has acquired a life of its own, frequently connected with Huntington’s name but often with little relation to his ideas. This has distracted attention from his positive concept of “the remaking of world order.”

It is well known that Huntington emphasized the role of religious identity in present-day conflicts in many parts of the world. However, the fact that he made a compelling argument for dialogue among religions — and, more broadly, civilizations — has gone largely unnoticed. After dwelling in most of his book on our immediate situation at the end of the Cold War, in the final pages he took a glance further into the future. Having repeatedly pointed out the religious factor in the kind of strife that is tending to replace the ideological struggles of the preceding few decades, he concluded that

whatever the degree to which they divided humankind, the world’s major religions — Western Christianity, Orthodoxy, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Confucianism, Taoism, Judaism — also share key values in common. If humans are ever to develop a universal civilization, it will emerge gradually through the exploration and expansion of these commonalities.

The search for values common to the world’s religions corresponds to the last point in Huntington’s three-part prescription for minimizing conflicts in a world of diverse but increasingly interdependent cultures:

In a multicivilizational world, the constructive course is to renounce universalism, accept diversity, and seek commonalities.¹³

The movement of interfaith dialogue that started in Chicago in 1893 has been a conscious and persistent effort to carry out a program of action that could be stated in these very terms. Long before the need for such an attempt had become glaringly obvious, at the height of the period when “civilization” was widely understood to be

synonymous with European civilization and before the concept of a multicivilizational world was born, people from the East and the West assembled for a mutually respectful discussion of questions that had often in the past been argued with the sword. Much progress has been made since then and much more remains to be done. But at the first Parliament of Religions a momentous beginning was made.

4 Civilizations in a Converging World

The human world has been “multicivilizational” in a certain sense since the dawn of civilization. Yet this term brings out an aspect of our own time that distinguishes it from any other age. Today, not only do different civilizations coexist as they always did, but they are having to take cognizance of each other’s existence in a way they have never done before. Their interaction is becoming a more and more inescapable feature of our collective life.

Civilizations, the largest cultural groupings of humankind, evolved under conditions quite unlike those of the twenty-first century. Until recently, the geographical barriers separating the earth’s peoples limited the contact between them so much that distant populations could be unaware of each other’s existence. At times there were intensive encounters between neighboring civilizations. But a wider diffusion of ideas, if it occurred at all, typically took centuries.

Under these conditions, each civilization was free to develop its own distinctive culture with a minimum of external influences. People outside its boundaries, if they were not too far away to take notice of, tended to be regarded as barbarians from a cultural point of view, or heathen from the standpoint of religion. For it was during this phase of history, when each civilization was almost a self-contained universe and had little need to relate itself to the rest of the world, that the major religions came into being. Circumstances were favorable for the growth of exclusive outlooks reinforcing spatial divisions.

It might have seemed that things could go on indefinitely in this way. Without intruding violently upon the harmony of nature, human life flowed on from generation to generation in the streams of its great traditions with occasional concentrated outbursts of creative activity. Incompatibilities among the world’s dispersed cultures sometimes broke out in conflict, but in general were handled by the simple expedient of ignoring each other.

Then, starting around 1500 a.d., this whole arrangement was disrupted. The young civilization of Europe began to expand in all directions. For about four hundred years, as Huntington says, “Western nations . . . conquered, colonized, or decisively influenced every other civilization.”¹⁴ During the same period, the West itself underwent a dramatic development leading to what we now call modernization, which it proceeded to impose on the world. In a short time compared with the preceding millenniums, everything changed.

The relations among civilizations, according to Huntington, “have evolved through two phases and are now in a third.” The first phase was that in which independent civiliza-

tions, each with its own set of cultural characteristics holding together its internal diversity, existed side by side with relatively little interaction. This was the situation throughout most of history. Midway through the second millennium, a drastic change began to occur. Its overall effect is graphically depicted by Huntington:

Intermittent or limited multidirectional encounters among civilizations gave way to the sustained, overpowering, unidirectional impact of the West on all other civilizations.... For four hundred years intercivilizational relations consisted of the subordination of other societies to Western civilization.¹⁵

Conquest was nothing new, but never before had it encompassed the earth in its violent embrace. Driven by greed, justifying its exploitation of non-Europeans by a mixture of racism and bigotry, and owing its success to technology that enabled it to inflict death and destruction on all who opposed it, the period of European domination might well be called the rape of civilizations. Its methods and many of its results were deplorable enough. Yet despite all that, its net outcome has been to overcome the centrifugal forces that had kept humanity fragmented through the ages. A process of convergence was set in motion, whose course is no longer under the control of any one group of nations.

Early in the last century it started to become apparent that Western imperialism was faltering. Exhausting themselves in two gigantic conflicts, the countries of Europe lost the will and the capacity to maintain their empires. By the middle of the century, decolonization was in full swing. But the principal effects of the phase of European expansion and modernization were irreversible. Writing in the 1990s, Huntington distinguished a third phase in intercivilizational relations, superseding that of Western supremacy:

In the twentieth century the relations among civilizations have thus moved from a phase dominated by the unidirectional impact of one civilization on all others to one of intense, sustained, and multidirectional interactions among all civilizations.... Intercivilizational relations in this third phase are far more frequent and intense than they were in the first phase and far more equal and reciprocal than they were in the second phase.¹⁶

5 The Might of Europe and the Light of Asia

Coming back to the Parliament of Religions with this outline of history in mind, we are struck by how an event that occurred near the culmination of the second phase — the phase of Western expansion and “unidirectional impact” — gave a foretaste of the next phase. The “more equal and reciprocal” relations among civilizations that define Huntington’s third phase would not become a political reality until well into the twentieth century. Yet such relations were foreshadowed by the interactions of people from all over the world who met in Chicago. Never before had representatives of the Occident and the Orient been invited to “come together in mutual confidence and respect,” as Charles Bonney insisted, for “a free and sincere interchange of views.” Though there was a numerical preponderance of Western Christians, this was compensated by the extraordinary response of the audience to some of the oriental delegates.

The Parliament in 1893 was the first important public event to bring people from far-flung cultures together for this type of interchange. However, taking place as it did when Western pre-eminence was at its zenith, some amount of Christian triumphalism was inevitable. The authors of *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, introducing their selections from the closing session, point out that “for all that had been said and done over the course of the Parliament’s seventeen days, there is little question that in the minds of its main promoters the assembly was meant to mark a global triumph for Christianity.”¹⁷ This triumphalist mentality unconsciously drew much of its strength from the imbalances of power in an age of imperialism. It was under these unpromising circumstances that a historic breakthrough was made in attitudes toward religious and cultural diversity.

During the planning stage of the Parliament of Religions, an American bishop had voiced a feeling that was shared by many of its supporters and some members of the organizing committee when he wrote:

One result will be to show that the Christian faith was never more widely or more intelligently believed in, or Jesus Christ more adoringly followed. Civilization, which is making the whole world one, is preparing the way for the reunion of all the World’s religions in their true center — Jesus Christ.¹⁸

Many Christians who attended or approved of the Parliament had this kind of inclusive attitude, in contrast to the exclusivism of others who objected to it for reasons like those given by the Archbishop of Canterbury. The Parliament of Religions could not have taken place if it had not appealed to this sentiment, whose power was due to its perfect agreement with the *Zeitgeist*.

In the late nineteenth century, this Christian inclusivism was the theological counterpart of the state of relations among civilizations at that time. The industrialized West was “making the whole world one” by bringing it under its ever-expanding political, economic and cultural sway. Just as Western civilization claimed to be the fulfillment of less advanced civilizations, so Christianity saw itself as fulfilling the partial truth contained in other religions. At the Parliament a progressive missionary advocated an attempt “to approach the non-Christian religions in a spirit of love and not of antagonism, to understand and justly rate their value as expressions of the religious principle in man, to replace indiscriminate condemnation by reverential study.” But the ultimate aim was “to obtain conquest, not by crushing resistance, but by winning allegiance.”¹⁹

This inclusive Christian universalism²⁰ dreamed of human unity and proposed to achieve it by a perfectly logical method. For the West was steadily replacing the age-old variety of humankind with a single type of civilization. Many Christians naturally believed that religious divisions, like other differences, would fade away as the result of an increasing and eventually unanimous adoption of the creed at the heart of Western culture.

Events in the last century or so have moved in another direction, however. Neither the Christian nor the secular version of Western civilization now looks likely to extinguish the indomitable diversity of the human race. Today this diversity, the product of thousands of years of cultural evolution, is vigorously reasserting itself under new

conditions. Historically, the first striking evidence of its resurgence could be seen as far back as 1893 at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago.

On 21 September 1893, the *St. Louis Observer* reported with alarm the impression made by Dharmapala, the young Buddhist monk from what was then Ceylon:

With his black curly locks thrown back from his broad brow, his keen, clear eye fixed upon the audience, his long brown fingers emphasizing the utterances of his vibrant voice, ... one trembled to know that such a figure stood at the head of the movement to consolidate all the disciples of Buddha and to spread “the light of Asia” throughout the civilized world.²¹

Another newspaper reported about Dharmapala: “The Buddhist representative has created quite a furor in Chicago, ... has a hypnotic influence over crowds and astounds his listeners with his frank criticism.”²²

Judging from this and other accounts of the effect that the Asian delegates to the Parliament had on the American public, it appears that the days of the “overpowering, unidirectional impact of the West” on every other culture were over. Some trembled. Others were delighted.

6 The Delight of Difference

The sensation created by some of the spokesmen for Buddhism at the Parliament of Religions was a sign of things to come. A notable figure besides Dharmapala was Soyen Shaku, representing Zen Buddhism. Soon after returning to Japan he sent a student of his, D. T. Suzuki, to America. Suzuki arrived in the U.S. in 1897. In the next few decades he would come to know many of the leading intellectuals and artists of the country, including personalities as diverse as Erich Fromm, Thomas Merton and John Cage. The results of his association with these people exemplify the effects of Eastern culture on the American mind in the twentieth century. They may be illustrated by a statement of the composer John Cage, who said:

Since the forties and through study with D. T. Suzuki of the philosophy of Zen Buddhism, I’ve thought of music as a means of changing the mind ... an activity of sounds in which the artist found a way to let the sounds be themselves.²³

Quoting from this interview with George Leonard, Jack Miles comments:

John Cage, in short, was one of the many American artists of his day who were deeply influenced by the daring Japanese émigré who, consciously modeling himself on St. Paul, made himself into Zen Buddhism’s apostle to the gentiles.²⁴

This reversal of roles was an instance of the changes in cultural interactions that can be traced back to 1893. No longer were the peoples of the East merely recipients of the impact of the West.

The propagation of Christianity by Western missionaries provided a model for Asians to imitate, once they had recovered sufficiently from the initial shock of the European assault on their cultures. One outcome of the Parliament of Religions was a first wave of movements spreading Eastern philosophical and spiritual teachings to America and

Europe in somewhat the way that Christian missionaries operated in non-Western countries. This competition for converts made for a better intercultural balance than the previous one-way flow of influence from an aggressive West to a passive East.

But the missionary spirit, even when modified to suit the changing times, is essentially a manifestation of the universalism that flourished in the age of Western expansion. Those affected by it, whatever the tolerance or intolerance of their beliefs, tend to be seized by a zeal to disseminate their particular faith — religious or secular — throughout the world. The Parliament aroused or reinforced some such ambitions. More significant, though, was the stimulus it gave to a radically different outlook upon religious and other diversity.

A perspective on Christianity that must have startled many people at the Parliament was offered by Pung Kwang Yu, the representative of Confucianism. In passing, he pointed out the need for a good Chinese translation of the Bible. But the reasons he gave for it were not those that usually motivate translators of the Scriptures. Mentioning the inadequacy of whatever translations then existed — due to which, he said, there is “no Chinese scholar, after reading a few lines of it, but lays it aside” — he explained why this situation ought to be remedied:

Knowing well that the political and educational institutions, as well as the customs and manners of the people of Europe and America, are founded upon the principles of the Christian Religion, I recognize the importance of a knowledge of the principles of the Christian Religion to anyone who desires to make the customs and manners of the West a subject of study.²⁵

The Confucian delegate admitted that China, the home of one of humanity’s oldest, richest and most refined civilizations, could no longer isolate itself from the rest of the world. He suggested that the Chinese should study Christianity and try to understand Western thought and behavior, just as scholars in Europe and America had begun to study the “customs and manners” of societies other than their own. There was no question of the Chinese being converted to Christianity or of converting Christians to Confucianism. Clearly, each system of thought and way of life has its own validity for those who follow it.

Underlying the remarks of Pung Kwang Yu and other Asiatics at the Parliament of Religions was a pluralistic attitude based on a deep appreciation of the value of diversity. At the convention in Chicago this was a minority viewpoint which turned out to have unexpected popular appeal. Today it is more and more widely recognized that a positive acceptance of diversity is the only viable foundation for peaceful relations among peoples, religions and cultures in a world of intensively interacting civilizations.

As the forum where such pluralism first emerged into public view in a global context, the Parliament in 1893 can be seen as a turning point in history. Organized as a largely Christian event, it nevertheless provided a platform for a few delegates from the East who took the world by surprise with the force of their views and personalities. Saving the Parliament from being a spectacle of diversity with little of its substance, they projected a vision that looked beyond the disproportions of power in an imperialistic

age to a more equitable and multicultural future that would begin to take shape in the next century.

A recognition of what Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has called “the dignity of difference”²⁶ has been growing in the human consciousness ever since representatives of many religions and cultures assembled in Chicago one September morning over a hundred years ago. Later in the Parliament’s opening session, the chairman introduced a Swami from India. According to Dr. Barrows himself, “when Mr. Vivekananda addressed the audience as ‘Sisters and Brothers of America,’ there arose a peal of applause that lasted for several minutes.” At that moment, one woman afterwards recalled, thousands of people “rose to their feet as a tribute to something they knew not what.”²⁷

Accounts of the reaction to the first words spoken by the exotic Hindu suggest that it was not simply a sign of respect for what Swami Vivekananda represented. Few of those present are likely to have known much about the ancient civilization and profound spiritual tradition of India. But Vivekananda spoke from the heart (his brief, unplanned speech left him “almost exhausted with emotion”) and people responded from the heart. The surge of feeling that swept through the crowd seems to have had in it something of the passion of an embrace. We may call it the delight of difference.

7 Greasing the Wheels

“Swami Vivekananda,” said Merwin-Marie Snell, the president of the “scientific section” of the Parliament of Religions, “was beyond question the most popular and influential man in the Parliament, . . . and on all occasions he was received with greater enthusiasm than any other speaker.”²⁸ Yet the youthful Sannyasi had almost no experience in public speaking when he arrived uninvited in Chicago — where at first he was turned away, since no organization was sponsoring him and he had no “credentials” except a few years of wandering the length and breadth of India as a homeless ascetic.²⁹

The secret behind Vivekananda’s uncanny ability to bond with his audience can be glimpsed in a conversation he had with Robert Ingersoll, a well-known orator of the day and a champion of agnosticism. Ingersoll said, “I believe in making the most out of this world, in squeezing the orange dry, because this world is all we are sure of.” The Swami replied:

I know a better way to squeeze the orange of this world than you do, and I get more out of it. I know I cannot die, so I am not in a hurry; I know there is no fear, so I enjoy the squeezing. I have no duty, no bondage of wife and children and property; I can love all men and women. Everyone is God to me. Think of the joy of loving man as God! Squeeze your orange this way and get ten thousandfold more out of it. Get every single drop.

In another context, Vivekananda explained what he meant by loving all as God:

When you see a man going after a beautiful face, do you think that it is the handful of arranged material molecules which really attracts the man? Not at all. Behind those material particles there must be and is the play of divine influence and divine love. The ignorant man does not know it, but yet, consciously or unconsciously, he is attracted by

it and it alone. So even the lowest forms of attraction derive their power from God Himself... The Lord is the great magnet, and we are all like iron filings; we are being constantly attracted by Him, and all of us are struggling to reach Him... All the tremendous struggling and fighting in life is intended to make us go to Him ultimately and be one with Him.

Thus life is the field of an evolution of consciousness which must lead eventually to a spiritual transformation. The role of religions should be to infuse this process with an awareness of its real aim. As Vivekananda put it in his most substantial contribution to the Parliament, his "Paper on Hinduism" presented on September 19, 1893,

all the religions ... mean so many attempts of the human soul to grasp and realise the Infinite.... Unity in variety is the plan of nature, ... the absolute can only be realised, or thought of, or stated, through the relative, and the images, crosses, and crescents are simply so many symbols.... Every religion is only evolving a God out of the material man, and the same God is the inspirer of all of them.³⁰

The unity of the spirit behind all religions takes outward forms that are and must be extremely varied. When Vivekananda was in America, the notion of a universal religion was in the air. Adopting the same phrase, in effect he answered Christian inclusivism with a sort of Vedantic inclusivism. However, his "universal religion" was not the attempt of one religion to swallow up others and annul their differences, but an underlying oneness manifested in innumerable ways. He explained:

I see no two alike, yet we are all human beings. Where is this one humanity? ... I may not find it when I try to grasp it, to sense it, and to actualise it, yet I know for certain that it is there. If I am sure of anything, it is of this humanity which is common to us all... So it is with this universal religion, which runs through all the various religions of the world in the form of God.

He went on to clarify his understanding of this concept, stating emphatically that

if by the idea of a universal religion it is meant that one set of doctrines should be believed in by all mankind it is wholly impossible. It can never be, there can never be a time when all faces will be the same ... because variety is the first principle of life. What makes us formed beings? Differentiation.

If it is nevertheless possible to speak of a universal religion in some meaningful sense, it is because unity is the other side of the same truth — unity, but not uniformity:

What then do I mean by the ideal of a universal religion? I do not mean any one universal philosophy, or any one universal mythology, or any one universal ritual held alike by all; for I know that this world must go on working, wheel within wheel, this intricate mass of machinery, most complex, most wonderful. What can we do then? We can make it run smoothly, we can lessen the friction, we can grease the wheels, as it were. How?

In his answer to this question of how to "grease the wheels," Vivekananda reconciled the need for universality with the equally imperative principle of pluralism, which he was one of the first to insist upon in the dialogue among religions that began at the Parliament in Chicago:

By recognising the natural necessity of variation. Just as we have recognised unity by our very nature, so we must also recognise variation. We must learn that truth may be

expressed in a hundred thousand ways, and that each of these ways is true as far as it goes. ...every soul, every nation, every religion, consciously or unconsciously, is struggling upward, towards God; every vision of truth that man has, is a vision of Him and of none else.³¹

This includes agnostic or atheistic visions such as those of Buddhism, Jainism or modern science, which may be pursued in the spirit of an authentic quest for truth that is sometimes lacking in conventional religiosity. Even the masculine pronoun “Him” cannot be imposed on everyone as the only way of referring to God. In the traditions of India, the supreme Reality is also designated impersonally by the neuter, “It.” Vivekananda himself, following his teacher, the great saint Sri Ramakrishna, privately saw the Divine as Her, the universal Mother.

8 Collective Bonds

Swami Vivekananda saw the relationship between unity and differentiation from the standpoint of Vedanta. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the early twentieth-century French paleontologist, Jesuit priest and philosopher of evolution, worked it out in terms of a synthesis of science and Christian mysticism. According to Teilhard, we live in a “spiritually converging world” with a property of “collective unity” inherent in the nature of things. Even the atoms of matter are not independent of each other:

Something holds them together. Far from behaving as a mere inert receptacle, the space filled by their multitude operates upon it like an active centre of direction and transmission in which their plurality is organised.

Thus we “find ourselves faced by the unimaginable reality of collective bonds.... The farther and more deeply we penetrate into matter, by means of increasingly powerful methods, the more we are confounded by the interdependence of its parts.”³² In the course of evolution, this interdependent nature of existence gradually becomes conscious of itself, as it were.

The growing interconnection of peoples has been the central fact of the history of the last few centuries. After a long phase of cultural differentiation in which great civilizations took shape over the millenniums in all their social, intellectual, artistic and spiritual variety, the human race has been forcibly drawn together. While an evolutionary necessity has driven this convergence, a complementary aspect of the cosmic process works against the obliteration of differences in a sterile uniformity.

In Teilhard’s analysis, the state that must ultimately be reached by a “world undergoing psychical concentration” is that of “a system whose unity coincides with a paroxysm of harmonised complexity.” For in “any domain — whether it be the cells of a body, the members of a society or the elements of a spiritual synthesis — *union differentiates*. In every organised whole, the parts perfect themselves and fulfil themselves.”³³

Teilhard’s theories are speculative; but it can hardly be doubted that the fate of humankind will depend on some kind of synthesis of diversity and unity. As realistic a political thinker as Samuel Huntington realized this in his own way, as we have seen. Huntington’s formula for reducing conflict in this age of the confluence of civilizations

has been cited above. The steps, it may be recalled, are: “renounce universalism, accept diversity, and seek commonalities.”³⁴

No better advice could be given to the world’s populations and their leaders, especially to those whose disproportionate power and influence might tempt them to envisage a unipolar political order and global monoculture as means of achieving their own security. Principles resembling those advocated by Huntington in the 1990s for international politics have been familiar to the interfaith movement since the Parliament in Chicago in 1893. The religions, despite their reputation as obstacles to unity and progress, have a head start in the emerging intercivilizational dialogue. With their many ways of unlocking the doors of the spirit and inspiring a commitment to self-transcendence, they may turn out to hold a master-key to the future.

9 The Highest Common Denominator

Huntington predicted correctly that the universalist pretensions of the West — especially America as the heir to Europe’s failed imperialism — would “increasingly bring it into conflict with other civilizations.”³⁵ As America abandons its neo-imperialist ambitions and consents to participate on more equal terms in a multipolar and multicultural world, a reduction of tensions should result. But a basis of mutual understanding and cooperation to meet the challenges of the global age will still be needed. Besides the renunciation of universalism and acceptance of diversity, there must also be a search for commonalities. Huntington spoke of a “thin” minimal morality derived from our shared human condition. But this does not get us very far. Religions and civilizations must engage in a deeper “exploration and expansion” of what they have in common.

Much of the apparent incompatibility between religions is due to their profusion of beliefs, mythologies, rituals and customs. These contribute to the rich and colorful diversity of human life and culture, but it is not at this level that the quest for commonalities is likely to be fruitful. Something more profound and universal is necessary. There is much evidence that as the spiritual core of religion is approached, the divisiveness of outward differences diminishes and is overpowered in the end by the sense of a living oneness.

At the Parliament in 1893, Swami Vivekananda advocated the kind of religion that consists “not in believing, but in being and becoming.”³⁶ Centuries earlier in the Islamic tradition, Ibn ‘Arabi had similarly drawn attention to the inadequacy of mere beliefs:

In general, most men have, perforce, an individual concept of their Lord, which they ascribe to Him and in which they seek Him. So long as the Reality is presented to them according to it they recognize Him and affirm him, whereas if presented in another form, they deny Him, flee from Him and treat Him improperly, while at the same time imagining they are acting toward Him fittingly.³⁷

Yet all beliefs are valid insofar as they point to Him. They have their use until we are able “to enter the presence of the Truth and receive from Him without interme-

diary.”³⁸ Then we will know that He cannot be limited by any belief. As Ibn 'Arabi saw:

It is He who is revealed in every face, sought in every sign, gazed upon by every eye, worshipped in every object of worship, and pursued in the unseen and the visible.³⁹

An overemphasis on beliefs, taking them to be absolute because they purport to represent the Absolute, has often turned religion into a source of conflict. On the other hand, saints, sages and masters revered in all traditions have insisted that belief is only the first step on the path to realization. If the doctrinal orientation is replaced by an experiential one, disputes between contending creeds will become irrelevant. Instead of an array of contradictory dogmas, the religious and spiritual traditions will be found to offer means of transcendence and inner transformation suited to the variety of human nature. All these lead out of the jarring discords of our present self-afflicting egoism to freer and happier, more luminous and harmonious states of being.

The accelerating evolution of consciousness seems to point to something beyond the limits of the rational mind as the key to our destiny. It is not only the revelations and divinations of the religious spirit that bear witness to a hidden dimension of existence, but also the highest flights of philosophy and the epiphanies of artistic creation, not to mention the spontaneous “peak experiences” of countless individuals. We now find science itself resorting more and more to language reminiscent of that used by mystics through the ages.

Duane Elgin, noting that mystical experiences or expanded states of awareness “appear to constitute the *highest* common denominator of human experience,” remarked:

This is a profoundly hopeful discovery in that, before the people of the world can cope with the problems of our global village, there must be some degree of shared agreement as to the nature of “reality” within which we collectively exist. Mystical experiences may provide an important element of that common agreement at a level that transcends cultural differences.⁴⁰

10 The Choice

“At present,” wrote the Indian mystic-philosopher Sri Aurobindo, “mankind is undergoing an evolutionary crisis in which is concealed a choice of its destiny.”⁴¹ When this was written in 1940, the world was in turmoil on a scale never seen before. It was clear that there was a crisis, though few would have found an evolutionary meaning in it. The war came to an end and the threat of an even more disastrous world war has not materialized. Yet in many ways the crisis has continued to deepen. At the same time, conceptual tools for understanding its nature have become more readily available.

Systems theory began to take shape as an interdisciplinary scientific field in the mid-twentieth century. Among its far-reaching applications, it allows us to look in a new way at the world-system comprising human society as a whole. Certain principles and processes of self-organization have been found to be common to biological, social and other systems of all kinds, from microscopic to cosmic dimensions. When human life is viewed from this angle, there emerges a description of the current state of things as a

crisis fraught with unprecedented potential for change — positive or negative. It appears that our species may indeed be confronted soon with nothing less than a “choice of its destiny.”

In *The Turning Point*, Fritjof Capra shows how systems theory has introduced a principle of self-transformation and self-transcendence into the concept of evolution, providing an understanding of nature’s creativity that was lacking in the neo-Darwinian model with its stress on adaptation. The outlines of the theory are simple enough:

The basic dynamics of evolution, according to the new systems view, begins with a system in homeostasis — a state of dynamic balance characterized by multiple, interdependent fluctuations. When the system is being disturbed it has the tendency to maintain its stability by means of negative feedback mechanisms, which tend to reduce the deviation from the balanced state. However, this is not the only possibility. Deviations may also be reinforced internally through positive feedback, either in response to environmental changes or spontaneously without any external influence.

The internal reinforcement of fluctuations may cause the system to reach a critical point, sometimes called a bifurcation, at which it “is forced to evolve into a new structure.” Capra explains:

When a system becomes unstable, there are always at least two new possible structures into which it can evolve... Which of these options is chosen is impossible to predict; there is true freedom of choice. As the system approaches the critical point, it ‘decides’ itself which way to go, and this decision will determine its evolution.⁴²

Not only mystics like Sri Aurobindo, but social scientists like the world-systems analyst Immanuel Wallerstein have arrived by different methods at the perception that humanity is passing through some such critical stage. At the beginning of 2001, Wallerstein wrote:

We are living in an historic bifurcation that will lead us over the next 50 years into a new social order, which may be better or worse than the one in which we now live, even far better or far worse, but will certainly be different.⁴³

In Wallerstein’s view, the modern world-system has reached a point of structural crisis for which parallels can be found on a lesser scale in the history of previous social systems. At this point, “their processes move far from equilibrium, leading to a bifurcation, chaotic oscillations, and finally a resolution into a new order, which means the end of the former historical social system.”⁴⁴ Wallerstein states further that “two things are true at these points of bifurcation: small inputs have large outputs (as opposed to times of the normal development of a system when large inputs have small outputs); and the outcome of such bifurcations is inherently indeterminate.”⁴⁵ This observation curiously resembles Sri Aurobindo’s assertion that we live in “the hour of the unexpected, the incalculable, the immeasurable,” one of those “periods when even a little effort produces great results and changes destiny,” in contrast to other “spaces of time when much labour goes to the making of a little result.”⁴⁶ Wallerstein’s analysis leads him to conclude that

it is precisely in periods of transition from one historical system to another one (whose nature we cannot know in advance) that human struggle takes on the most meaning. Or

to put it another way, it is only in such times of transition that what we call free will outweighs the pressures of the existing system to return to equilibria. Thus, fundamental change is possible albeit never certain, and this fact makes claims on our moral responsibility to act rationally, in good faith, and with strength to seek a better historical system.⁴⁷

11 A New Order

The events set in motion on September 11, 2001, rocked the world at a time when, contrary to the trend during much of the previous century, cultural and religious factors were beginning to figure more and more prominently in national politics and international relations. Predictions of an escalating “clash of civilizations” suddenly seemed less far-fetched. To be sure, there have been legitimate criticisms of Huntington’s use of this phrase. We need not accept his ideas in their entirety or endorse the inevitability of such a clash, turning it into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Yet if we want to understand the complexities of our times, we might do well to take note of Huntington’s central thesis that the “forces of integration in the world ... are precisely what are generating counterforces of cultural assertion and civilizational consciousness.”⁴⁸

In referring to these forces and counterforces, Huntington momentarily adopts the terminology of systems theory. But he seems to do so inadvertently, missing the complementarity of these apparently opposing tendencies. For the most part, he writes as if the integration of the world-system as a whole and the self-assertive autonomy of its cultural subsystems were inherently antagonistic. In contrast to this, Capra summarizes an alternative view based on the general study of systems:

In a healthy system — an individual, a society, or an ecosystem — there is a balance between integration and self-assertion. This balance is not static but consists of a dynamic interplay of the two complementary tendencies, which makes the whole system flexible and open to change.⁴⁹

This model suggests what kind of world might emerge from the present upheavals. If human life escapes being torn apart by conflict or else reduced to a globalized monotony, it could arrive at a new equilibrium. Cultural differences would remain as a source of vitality and mutual enrichment, but violent discords would be resolved in a harmony we might call the “clasp of civilizations.”

Professor Huntington sees the revitalization of non-Western cultures largely from the short-term standpoint of the tension between the rising power of these societies and what remains of Western dominance. But his thinking has another side that is often overlooked. His insights into the remaking of world order, mentioned in the subtitle of his book, can be brought into focus by comparing his ideas with an Eastern perspective.

Sri Aurobindo, whom we have already met as a forerunner of systems thinking, was a leader of renascent India at an early stage of the Asian revival whose more recent manifestations are the subject of much of Huntington’s discussion. In the second decade of the twentieth century, this Cambridge-educated Bengali anticipated the essence of the “clash of civilizations” idea when he foresaw that “a compelling physical oneness forced on us by scientific inventions and modern circumstances” would at first

“probably accentuate rather than diminish conflict in many directions, enhance political and economic struggles of many kinds and hasten too a cultural struggle.”⁵⁰ Here we already have Huntington’s “forces of integration ... generating counterforces of cultural assertion.”

In the view of this Indian thinker, writing when European colonialism had not yet been effectively challenged, the likelihood of such struggles arose partly from the need to alter drastically an arrangement of the world that had “been worked out by economic forces, by political diplomacies, treaties and purchases and by military violence without regard to any moral principle or any general rule of the good of mankind.” Yet this process had “served roughly certain ends of the World-Force in its development and helped at much cost of bloodshed, suffering, cruelty, oppression and revolt to bring humanity more together.”⁵¹

Sri Aurobindo would have agreed with Huntington’s blunt statement that the “West won the world not by the superiority of its ideas or values or religion ... but rather by its superiority in applying organized violence.”⁵² Nevertheless, he saw that all this brutality “has had its justification, not moral but biological,” for it has resulted in a “loose, natural organic unity of mankind ... a unity of life, of involuntary association, of a closely interdependent existence of the constituent parts in which the life and movements of one affect the life of the others in a way which would have been impossible a hundred years ago.” There is no going back now:

A new order is demanded by the new conditions and, so long as it is not created, there will be a transitional era of continued trouble or recurrent disorders... There may be in the process a maximum of loss and suffering through the clash of national and imperial egoisms or else a minimum, if reason and goodwill prevail.⁵³

When this was written — in *The Ideal of Human Unity*, first published serially between 1915 and 1918 — imperialism posed a serious obstacle to the feasibility of the new order that was envisaged. The author imagined “some kind of confederation of the peoples for common human ends, for the removal of all causes of strife and difference, for interrelation and the regulation of mutual aid and interchange, yet leaving to each unit a full internal freedom and power of self-determination.” This was an ideal that had already “attracted the human mind as a yet distant possibility.” But it had to be admitted that “the actual circumstances forbid any hope of such an ideal consummation in the near future.” Clearly, it was “idle to hope for a federation of free nations until ... the present inequalities between nation and nation are removed.” But inequalities could begin to disappear only when European countries disbanded their empires. It seemed unrealistic to expect this to happen any time soon, since

to face disinterestedly the emergence into free national activity of vigorous and sometimes enormous masses of men, once subjects and passive means of self-enrichment but henceforth to be powerful equals and perhaps formidable rivals, is too great a demand upon egoistic human nature to be easily and spontaneously conceded.

Yet by 1950 — when Sri Aurobindo, in the last year of his life, added a postscript chapter to the second edition of *The Ideal of Human Unity* — the sun had set on the British empire and European imperialism in general. Most of the peoples who had been

subject to European rule were already independent or would soon be free. “Two stupendous and world-devastating wars,” he wrote, “have swept over the globe and have been accompanied or followed by revolutions with far-reaching consequences which have altered the political map of the earth and the international balance.” One momentous result had been the founding of the United Nations. But as Sri Aurobindo pointed out, “the present organisation cannot be itself final, it is only an imperfect beginning useful and necessary as a primary nucleus of that larger institution in which all the peoples of the earth can meet each other in a single international unity.”⁵⁴

In spite of the astonishingly swift transition to more equitable international relations, in 1950 it was too soon to celebrate the advent of a harmonious world. During the Cold War, the huge masses of people who had just been liberated were relegated in large part to a marginalized “third world.” Meanwhile the human race held its breath as the protagonists of two Western ideologies played a game of nuclear brinkmanship. Only after the disintegration of the Soviet Union did it start to become evident that the spectacular rise and fall of communism and fascism had not been the twentieth-century political developments with the most enduring significance for the future.

Those vast populations recently released from servitude are perhaps not as peripheral to the march of human progress as was once assumed. For it was during the last century that, in Huntington’s vivid phrases, “the unidirectional impact of one civilization on all others” began to be replaced by “intense, sustained, and multidirectional interactions among all civilizations.” Under conditions of “far more equal and reciprocal” relations, “the creativity, resilience, and individuality of non-Western cultures”⁵⁵ might well become important factors in the emergence of a new world order.

12 Coming Together and Coming Apart

“The 1990s,” Huntington observed, “have seen the eruption of a global identity crisis.” Not just individuals, but also peoples and nations, “are attempting to answer the most basic question humans can face: Who are we?”⁵⁶ Even much earlier in the century, Sri Aurobindo had noted that “one of the capital phenomena of the tendencies of national and communal life” at that time was a subjectivism sometimes expressed in the formula “to be ourselves.” Although this turn of the collective consciousness “opens the way to great dangers and errors,” he believed that “it is the essential condition for that which has now become the demand of the Time-Spirit on the human race, that it shall find subjectively, not only in the individual, but in the nation and in the unity of the human race itself, its deeper being, its inner law, its real self and live according to that and no longer by artificial standards.”⁵⁷

Since there are not many as yet who think of themselves primarily as members of the human race, the role of the nation and other larger and smaller entities intermediate between the individual and humankind as a whole becomes central to the problem of collective life. In Sri Aurobindo’s view, “the unity of the human race to be entirely sound and in consonance with the deepest laws of life must be founded on free groupings, and the groupings again must be the natural association of free individuals.” To be more specific, “the free and natural nation-unit and perhaps the nation-group

would be the just and living support of a sound and harmonious world-system.” For this to come about, “the peoples of humanity must be allowed to group themselves according to their free-will and their natural affinities.”⁵⁸

When this was written in the early 1900s, it was far from being a practical proposition. It was presented as “an ideal which it is certainly impossible to realise under present conditions or perhaps in any near future of the human race.”⁵⁹ Yet before the century was over, Samuel Huntington could write that since the end of the Cold War, countries throughout the world “have been groping for groupings, and they are finding those groupings with countries of similar culture and the same civilization.” According to Huntington, a “civilization-based world-order is emerging” in which “societies sharing cultural affinities cooperate with each other.”⁶⁰ What Sri Aurobindo had speculated about a few decades earlier in a chapter entitled “The Ideal Solution — A Free Grouping of Mankind” appears to be happening today.

But this phenomenon has two sides. “Peoples and countries with similar cultures are coming together,” Huntington writes, but he adds: “Peoples and countries with different cultures are coming apart.”⁶¹ This coming apart does not always happen peacefully. A reconfiguration of global politics on cultural lines may be creating opportunities for enhanced cooperation, but it is also opening up new fields for conflict. If, as Sri Aurobindo thought, a “distribution of mankind in large natural aggregates would have the advantage of simplifying a number of difficult world-problems,” conceivably it could also lead to “huge continental clashes.”⁶²

If the part played by cultural identity in international relations is increasing, prospects for peace will depend heavily on the extent to which culture, including religion, is a cause of friction. Attitudes toward diversity thus become crucial. We have seen that there are three basic types of response to difference. The terms often applied to religious outlooks — exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism⁶³ — can be extended to the ways people react to diversity in general. The shape of things to come may be decided by which of these three prevails in the collective mind of humanity.

13 Us vs. Them

We seem at present to be witnessing an alarming recrudescence of exclusivism, sometimes referred to in its religious form as fundamentalism and in its ethnic manifestation as tribalism. Whatever clashes of civilizations are actually taking place or are in danger of breaking out can be attributed to this trend which is aggravating everywhere the sense of an opposition between a culturally or religiously defined “us” and “them.” Professor Huntington conceives of identity in exclusive terms when he says: “We know who we are only when we know who we are not and often only when we know whom we are against.”⁶⁴ If so, cultural identity would inevitably determine not only our friends, but our enemies.

Even Sri Aurobindo, without going to this extreme, recognized that especially “in new nations or in those struggling to realise themselves in spite of political subjection or defeat” there is a need “to feel the difference between themselves and others so that

they may assert and justify their individuality.” This self-assertion is perfectly legitimate up to a point. Every nation or community has “the right to be itself ... as against any attempt at domination by other nations or of attack upon its separate development by any excessive tendency of human uniformity.... This right it must assert not only or even principally for its own sake, but in the interests of humanity.”⁶⁵

But for its self-assertion to serve such a larger purpose, the right of a group or country to be itself cannot mean “that it should roll itself up like a hedgehog, shut itself up in its dogmas, prejudices, limitations, imperfections, in the form and mould of its past or its present achievement and refuse mental or physical commerce and interchange or spiritual or actual commingling with the rest of the world.”⁶⁶ The hardening of boundaries that is the vice of exclusivism not only poses an obstacle to world harmony, but blocks the healthy development of the groups that try to defend themselves in this way, for it cuts off the exchange of energies that sustains life and progress.

Historically, the exclusive attitude of religions and cultures toward each other was almost the norm at one time — though there were important exceptions, especially in Asia. Today, however, gone are the distances and technological limitations that once kept interactions to a minimum, favoring isolationism and restricting the damage that people belonging to mutually hostile cultures could inflict on each other. Rampant exclusivism might cause human society to revert to something like what it was in medieval times, but under the conditions of an “inextricable, confused entanglement of chaotic unity”⁶⁷ in which a return to the insularity of the past is impossible. The probable result would be a world that could best be described by the “sheer chaos” paradigm which Huntington presents as a worst-case scenario. Sri Aurobindo likewise conceived of the possibility that something of this sort might come about. But in view of the strength of the forces drawing humanity together, he felt that

the ideal of the entire separateness of the peoples each developing its sharply separatist culture with an alien exclusion law for other leading ideas and cultural forms ... is not likely to prevail. For that to happen the whole aim of unification preparing in Nature must fall to pieces, an improbable but not quite impossible catastrophe.⁶⁸

14 Anonymous Americans

While exclusivism asserts itself against the integration of the world-system, an opposite mentality presses for unity through homogeneity. Its success would mark the completion of a process that began around the time of Columbus and continued for at least four centuries in what Huntington characterized as a phase of “the sustained, overpowering, unidirectional impact of the West on all other civilizations.” Sri Aurobindo wrote in 1918: “Europe dominates the world and it is natural to forecast a Westernised world.” It seemed plausible that the forces then at work would

bring about in the end a swallowing unification and a destruction of all other civilisations by one aggressive European type: whether that type will be bourgeois economical or labour materialistic or a rationalistic intellectualism cannot easily be foreseen, but at present in one form or another this is the actuality that is most in the front.⁶⁹

Europe no longer dominates the world; but the “bourgeois economical” version of its

civilization, now free of serious competition from the “labour materialistic” type and championed by a new superpower, appears in some ways to be in a stronger position than ever to engulf everything else. American-dominated globalization is invading non-Western societies and subtly undermining their distinctiveness in spite of all attempts to reaffirm indigenous cultures. The unipolar order advocated in recent years by a prominent school of American political thought would be conducive to an increasing uniformity. In 1989, a neoconservative argued that “America’s purpose should be to steer the world away from its coming multipolar future toward a qualitatively new outcome — a unipolar world.” Another declared: “If we succeed, we will have forged a Pax Americana unlike any previous peace, one of harmony, not of conquest.”⁷⁰ Leaving aside motives of political domination, underlying such apparently benign aims are the assumptions of what Huntington refers to as Western universalism.

The Western — and nowadays particularly American — belief in the universality of Western culture is expressed in two ways. “Normatively,” Huntington explains, it “posits that people throughout the world should embrace Western values, institutions, and culture because they embody the highest, most enlightened, most liberal, most rational, most modern, and most civilized thinking of humankind.” It should be easy to win people over to these good things since, according to the descriptive formulation of the same belief, in reality they already “want to adopt Western values, institutions, and practices” whether they know it or not. “If they seem not to have that desire and to be committed to their own traditional cultures, they are victims of a ‘false consciousness’ comparable to that which Marxists found among proletarians who supported capitalism.”⁷¹

Another parallel besides the Marxist one can be found in Christian inclusivism. Theologically, the term “inclusivism” refers to a certain approach to mitigating the most problematic tenet of exclusive Christianity. The belief in question has to do with the contradiction to which Vivekananda alluded ironically when he remarked: “Christians talk of universal brotherhood; but anyone who is not a Christian must go to that place where he will be eternally barbecued.”⁷²

To avoid sending untold millions on this macabre picnic because they were so unlucky as to be born in the wrong places — mostly in poor countries, where one might think their lives on earth were hard enough without adding an everlasting post-mortem punishment for not having been affluent Christians — the doctrines of a more humane and tolerant Catholic tradition have been refined and increasingly accepted. The influential theologian Karl Rahner extended salvation to members of other religions by the argument that they are “anonymous Christians.” That is to say, good people everywhere are really Christians at heart though they may not be aware of it. Thus they are eligible to be saved by the grace of Christ even if it has to act through such imperfect vehicles as Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam.

Western universalism can be regarded as a sort of cultural inclusivism which looks at cultural diversity in much the same way as theological inclusivism views religious diversity — simultaneously tolerating and subverting it. As we have seen, the Parliament of Religions was once hailed as the first step toward the union of all religions “in

their true center — Jesus Christ.” Similarly, the bourgeois economical millennium of a Pax Americana would arrive when all nations are united in their true center — the American dollar. Diversity need not be actively suppressed, for all consumers in this prosperous and frenetic McWorld⁷³ could be considered anonymous Americans even if they cling to fading vestiges of their traditional ways.

The levelling of differences, as one expansive civilization assimilates and replaces all others, would eliminate many sources of conflict and inefficiency. An “end of history”⁷⁴ such as was prematurely anticipated at the close of the Cold War might have advantages which make it in some ways an attractive prospect. But it would be a mixed blessing if its outcome is what Sri Aurobindo warned that it could be:

The disappearance of national variation into a single uniform human unity . . . might lead to political peace, economic well-being, perfect administration, the solution of a hundred material problems, as did on a lesser scale the Roman unity in old times; but to what eventual good if it leads also to an uncreative sterilisation of the mind and the stagnation of the soul of the race?⁷⁵

15 The Clasp of Civilizations?

In spite of a disconcerting tendency to veer toward one extreme or the other, the world-system may yet find a balance between the complementary forces of cultural self-assertion and integration. The first Parliament of Religions, aptly described as “the dawn of religious pluralism,” was a signpost pointing in the direction of such a harmony in difference. It was the historical moment when a respect for the value of diversity emerged as a recognized factor in religion with global implications, offering an alternative to attitudes of mutual exclusion and animosity as well as to the claims of any creed to universalize itself and supplant its rivals.

The Parliament was the first public occasion for dialogue between Christianity and a number of other religions. It was also a forum where representatives of several non-Western cultures were able to make their voices heard for the first time in a world in which Europe and its offshoots were overwhelmingly dominant.⁷⁶ The response to those delegates took everyone by surprise. Much more than polite applause greeted not only Vivekananda, who from complete anonymity became overnight a (reluctant) celebrity, but also other Asians. The Parliament’s impact on world events is difficult to measure; but in launching the movement of interfaith dialogue, bringing Eastern spirituality to the West, and contributing to a resurgence in India, its effects were far from negligible.

In some ways, what happened at the Parliament of Religions was too far ahead of its time for its significance to be fully understood by its contemporaries. Now that it has a better chance of being understood, it has been all but forgotten. It was an event that not only initiated a new kind of interaction between religions, but foreshadowed a change in the relations among civilizations themselves. This change, which has an objective and a subjective side, has now taken place up to a certain point. Objectively, the rapid dissolution of European empires in the mid-twentieth century paved the way for a movement toward political and economic equality that is still incomplete. Its

logical consummation would be a federation of free and equal nations empowered to eliminate war and violence as methods of handling differences and able to act far more effectively to end such evils as poverty and the destruction of our natural environment.

Meanwhile, subjective adjustment to the altered reality has lagged behind the outward developments. Anachronistic attitudes persist, delaying progress toward a better world-arrangement. The relations among civilizations that existed in ancient and medieval times or in the era of European expansion were compatible with an exclusive rejection or else an inclusive absorption of people of other cultures and religions. Such intolerant exclusivism or assimilative inclusivism are inadequate or inappropriate ways of dealing with today's interlocking world, which demands instead a pluralistic embrace of diversity.

Fortunately, there is no reason to think that the necessary psychological adaptation is something beyond normal human capacity. Interest in foreign cultures and appreciation of faiths other than one's own are much more common today than they were a century or two ago. The Parliament that opened in Chicago on September 11, 1893, showed that even in those days — and in the contentious area of religion — a crowd of fairly ordinary people could react enthusiastically to an unprecedented representation of human variety. The message of that distant event has become all the more relevant in view of regressive trends since a more recent September 11 that was the stark antithesis of the one 108 years earlier.⁷⁷

In the last paragraph of *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Huntington quotes Lester Pearson, who said in the 1950s that humanity was entering

an age when different civilizations will have to learn to live side by side in peaceful interchange, learning from each other, studying each others' history and ideals and art and culture, mutually enriching each others' lives. The alternative, in this overcrowded little world, is misunderstanding, tension, clash, and catastrophe.⁷⁸

Earlier in the century, Sri Aurobindo had observed this process of mutual enrichment already under way. In *The Ideal of Human Unity*, he included religion as a crucial area of interchange:

The growth of knowledge is interesting the peoples in each other's art, culture, religion, ideas and is breaking down at many points the prejudice, arrogance and exclusiveness of the old nationalistic sentiment. Religion, which ought to have led the way, but owing to its greater dependence on its external parts and its infrarational rather than its spiritual impulses has been as much, or even more, a sower of discord as a teacher of unity, — religion is beginning to realise, a little dimly and ineffectively as yet, that spirituality is after all its own chief business and true aim and that it is also the common element and the common bond of all religions.⁷⁹

Religion, as Huntington points out, is still “a central, perhaps *the* central, force that motivates and mobilizes people”⁸⁰ in much of the world. If so, the importance of converting it from “a sower of discord” to “a teacher of unity” should be obvious. The religions, even if they do not lead the way, must be persuaded to join hands with other forces that are drawing humanity closer together. If they could tap their powerful

resources for unity, they might contribute to creating the subjective conditions for a better world-order in a manner such as Sri Aurobindo envisaged:

As these influences grow and come more and more consciously to cooperate with each other, it might be hoped that the necessary psychological modification will quietly, gradually, but still irresistibly and at last with an increasing force of rapidity take place which can prepare a real and fundamental change in the life of humanity.

No doubt this is optimistic, but it does not sound wildly utopian. Recently, as we have seen, sober thinkers in the West, too, have argued quite rationally that we live in times when fundamental change is possible. Huntington dismisses throughout his book the notion that Western civilization is being or can or should be universalized and imposed on everyone, yet he admits in the end that some kind of universal civilization might emerge through the cultivation of commonalities. He does not elaborate on what this could mean; but to be consistent, he cannot have had in mind a disappearance of the cultural differences he insisted on so emphatically. He might not have objected to something along the lines of Sri Aurobindo's formulation:

The earth is in travail now of one common, large and flexible civilisation for the whole human race into which each modern and ancient culture shall bring its contribution and each clearly defined human aggregate shall introduce its necessary element of variation.⁸¹

This implies a mutual transformation that will make cultures more compatible with each other without sacrificing their distinct identities. The optimal outcome is suggested by Richard Nisbett in a comparative study of the psychology of Asians and Westerners:

East and West may contribute to a blended world where social and cognitive aspects of both regions are represented but transformed — like the individual ingredients in a stew that are recognizable but are altered as they alter the whole. It may not be too much to hope that this stew will contain the best of each culture.⁸²

An appreciation of the value of diversity is undoubtedly more widespread today than at any time in history. It is likely that this pluralism, essential in a world of intensively interacting cultures, will continue to grow as we enter the global age. But a "blended world" implies what we may call a convergent pluralism. Sri Aurobindo recognized that each culture "should be, not merged into or fused with some other culture differing from it in principle or temperament, but evolved to its full power." At the same time, he stressed the aspect of convergence:

At present, the first great need of the psychological life of humanity is the growth towards a greater unity; but its need is that of a living unity, not in the externals of civilisation,... not a uniformity,... but a free development everywhere with a constant friendly interchange, a close understanding, a feeling of our common humanity, its great common ideals and the truths towards which it is driving and a certain unity and correlation of effort in the united human advance.⁸³

To expect such cooperation and goodwill from masses of people may appear unrealistic. But throughout history, human societies have been coalescing to form larger and larger aggregations with some degree of cohesion and minimizing of internal strife.

This process has now to be expanded to encompass the entire human race without losing the vital differentiation of countries, regions and cultures.

The possibility of a clasp of civilizations is consistent with both faith and reason, not to speak of an irrepressible intuition in the human heart called hope. Despite all appearances to the contrary, we may believe that a future of harmony, peace and unity in diversity has been drawing steadily nearer ever since one day in Chicago when thousands rose to their feet as a young man from India greeted them as “Sisters and Brothers of America.”

Notes

1. See Richard Seager, Ronald Kidd and Diana Eck, *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism: Voices from the World's Parliament of Religions, 1893* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1993), p. 15, and Marie Louise Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1992), vol. 1, pp. 74–77.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 17. Bonney's words may be compared with the more recent and well-known statement of Hans Küng, “There can be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions” (*Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic*, New York: Crossroad, 1991, p. 105). John Hick comments: “Today, to insist on the unique superiority of your own faith is to be part of the problem ... the only stable and enduring basis for peace will come about when dialogue leads to a mutual acceptance of the world religions as different but equally valid relationships to the ultimate reality.” (“Religious Pluralism and Islam,” lecture delivered to the Institute for Islamic Culture and Thought, Tehran, Feb. 2005, <http://www.johnhick.org.uk/article11.html>)
3. Seager, Kidd and Eck, *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, pp. 17–18, 23, 15.
4. Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in the West*, vol. 1, p. 78.
5. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2002), vol. 5, pp. 20–21.
6. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 4.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
8. Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in the West*, vol. 1, p. 71.
9. As an example of how things have changed, one may compare the present Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, who is deeply engaged in interfaith work, with his nineteenth-century predecessor who refused to participate in a meeting with members of other religions.
10. Romain Rolland, *The Life of Vivekananda and the Universal Gospel: A Study of Mysticism and Action in Living India*, trans. E. F. Malcolm-Smith (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2004), p. 93.
11. Seager, Kidd and Eck, *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, p. xiii.
12. Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), p. 213.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 320, 318.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 48, 50–51.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 53–54.
17. Seager, Kidd and Eck, *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, p. 453.

18. Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in the West*, vol. 1, p. 71. Among the principal organizers of the Parliament, Charles Bonney — described by Vivekananda as “the sweet, learned, patient Mr. Bonney with all his soul speaking through his bright eyes” (ibid., p. 68) — was undoubtedly genuine in his wish to bring religions together on a basis of equality. Rev. John Henry Barrows, on the other hand, after editing *The World’s Parliament of Religions* (Chicago: Parliament Publishing Co., 1893), went on to write *Christianity the World-Religion* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1897) and *The Christian Conquest of Asia* (New York: Scribner, 1899).
19. Seager, Kidd and Eck, *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, p. 325.
20. By “universalism” is meant here not the theological doctrine of the ultimate salvation of all souls, but the assumption that one’s own system, whether religious or cultural, is the best for everyone and the impulse to get it universally adopted — as in Huntington’s advice to the West and especially the United States to “renounce universalism.” Likewise, “inclusive” and “exclusive” are not restricted here to their theological connotations, but extended to assimilative (inclusive) and rejectionist (exclusive) reactions to diversity in general. Universalism reflects the movement of self-enlargement that underlies the inclusive attitude, in contrast to the movement of contraction and self-defense proper to the exclusive mentality. In practice, exclusivism and inclusivism are often mixed together in various combinations with each other and with a third basic attitude, the positive acceptance of the value of diversity called pluralism.
21. Seager, Kidd and Eck, *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, p. 420.
22. Cited in “Reflections in a Chicago Mirror,” editorial in *Hinduism Today*, Nov. 1993, <http://www.hinduismtoday.com/archives/1993/11/1993-11-06.html>.
23. George Leonard, *Into the Light of Things: The Art of the Commonplace from Wordsworth to John Cage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 147.
24. Jack Miles, “Global Requiem: The Apocalyptic Moment in Religion, Science, and Art,” *CrossCurrents* 50, no. 3 (Fall 2000).
25. Seager, Kidd and Eck, *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, p. 375.
26. Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (London: Continuum Press, 2002).
27. Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in the West*, vol. 1, p. 81. Mrs. Blodgett spoke of seven thousand people, but this figure seems to represent the combined capacity of the two adjacent halls used for the Parliament, the Hall of Columbus and the Hall of Washington. The number of people present on the first day in the Hall of Columbus would probably have been around four thousand (ibid., pp. 74–75).
28. *Vivekananda: A Biography in Pictures* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2003), p. 51.
29. When Vivekananda presented himself in Chicago in July, 1893, he was told that the Parliament had been postponed to September, but that it was too late for him to be registered as a delegate, even apart from his lack of qualifications and institutional backing. He ended up going to Boston, where J. H. Wright, a professor of Greek at Harvard, was astonished by the Swami’s intellect and wrote letters to people connected with the Parliament which led to his acceptance as a representative of Hinduism. See “Trip to America” in Swami Nikhilananda, *Vivekananda: A Biography* (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1953), http://www.ramakrishnavivekananda.info/vivekananda_biography/vivekananda_biography.htm.
30. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, vol. 7, p. 77, vol. 3, p. 75; vol. 1, pp. 17–18.
31. Ibid., vol. 2, pp. 381–82.

32. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, trans. Bernard Wall (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), pp. 297, 41–42, 44.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 262. Teilhard's ideas are controversial, but have exerted a growing influence. Fritjof Capra wrote in *The Turning Point: Science, Society and the Rising Culture* (London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1983), pp. 331–32: "Teilhard's theory of evolution is in sharp contrast to the neo-Darwinian theory but shows some remarkable similarities with the new systems theory.... Teilhard de Chardin has often been ignored, disdained, or attacked by scientists unable to look beyond the reductionist Cartesian framework of their disciplines. However, with the new systems approach to the study of living organisms, his ideas will appear in a new light and are likely to contribute significantly to general recognition of the harmony between the views of scientists and mystics."
34. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, p. 318.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 20. A list of Huntington's policy recommendations to the United States and European countries concludes: "and, most important, to recognize that Western intervention in the affairs of other civilizations is probably the single most dangerous source of instability and potential global conflict in a multicivilizational world." (*Ibid.*, p. 312)
36. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, vol. 1, p. 13.
37. Ibn 'Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. R. W. J. Austin (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 137, cited by Hick in "Religious Pluralism and Islam."
38. Ibn 'Arabi, *Futûhât al-Makkiyya*, chapter 78, cited by Cecilia Twinch in "The Beauty of Oneness witnessed in the emptiness of the heart," <http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/articles/twinch.html>.
39. Ibn 'Arabi, *Futûhât al-Makkiyya*, cited at <http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/>.
40. Duane Elgin, "The Tao of Personal and Social Transformation" in *Beyond Ego: Transpersonal Dimensions in Psychology*, Roger Walsh and Frances Vaughan eds. (Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1980), p. 254. It is not claimed that all mystical states are the same or that cultural conditioning plays no role in how they are experienced. What is suggested is that such experiences may be windows on a wider world, as William James put it. Moreover, the universal accessibility of this realm of higher awareness in one form or another seems to be a significant commonality of cultures. Most of the likely objections to exploring such a hypothesis imply a preoccupation with the interpretation of the results of spiritual experience that loses sight of the transformative potential of an experiential orientation. But an adequate discussion of this subject would require a separate essay.
41. Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine* (Twin Lakes, WI: Lotus Press, 2000), p. 1092.
42. Capra, *The Turning Point*, pp. 310–12.
43. Immanuel Wallerstein, "The Critical Issues of the Coming Decades" (Commentary No. 55, Jan. 1, 2001), <http://fbc.binghamton.edu/55en.htm>.
44. Immanuel Wallerstein, "Global Culture(s) — Salvation, Menace, or Myth?" (paper delivered at conference on "New Cultural Formations in an Era of Transnational Globalization," Academia Sinica, Taiwan, Oct. 6-7, 2001), <http://fbc.binghamton.edu/iwglolucultw.htm>.
45. Immanuel Wallerstein, "Uncertainty and Creativity" (talk at "Forum 2000: Concerns and Hopes on the Threshold of the New Millennium," Prague, Sept. 3-6, 1997), <http://fbc.binghamton.edu/iwuncer.htm>.
46. Sri Aurobindo, *Essays Divine and Human* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1994), p. 154.
47. Wallerstein, "Uncertainty and Creativity."
48. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, p. 36.

49. Capra, *The Turning Point*, p. 27.
50. Sri Aurobindo, *The Renaissance in India and Other Essays on Indian Culture* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2004), p. 64.
51. Sri Aurobindo, *The Ideal of Human Unity* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1998), p. 158.
52. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, p. 51.
53. Sri Aurobindo, *The Ideal of Human Unity*, pp. 158, 193.
54. *Ibid.*, pp. 276, 78–79, 165–66, 310, 315. The World Federalist Movement, with its numerous member and associated organizations around the world, is now working for a world federation of the kind Sri Aurobindo envisioned; see <http://www.wfm.org/site/index.php/base/main>.
55. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, pp. 53–54.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 125.
57. Sri Aurobindo, *The Human Cycle: The Psychology of Social Development* (Twin Lakes, WI: Lotus Light Publications, 1999), p. 39.
58. Sri Aurobindo, *The Ideal of Human Unity*, pp. 243, 162, 270.
59. *Ibid.*, p. 244.
60. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, p. 20.
61. *Ibid.*, p. 125.
62. Sri Aurobindo, *The Ideal of Human Unity*, pp. 132, 320.
63. This “typological framework” was proposed by Alan Race in *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983); for a useful discussion, see Rita Gross, “Religious Diversity: Some Implications for Monotheism,” *Cross-Currents* 49, no. 3 (Fall 1999).
64. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, p. 21.
65. Sri Aurobindo, *The Human Cycle*, pp. 38, 70.
66. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
67. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
68. Sri Aurobindo, *The Renaissance in India*, p. 64.
69. *Ibid.*
70. Charles Krauthammer, “Universal Dominion: Toward a Unipolar World,” *National Interest* 18 (Winter 1989), pp. 48–49, and Joshua Muravchik, *Exporting Democracy: Fulfilling America’s Destiny* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 1991), p. 227, cited in Gary Dorrien, “Imperial Designs: Theological Ethics and the Ideologies of International Politics,” *Cross-Currents* 54, no. 2 (Summer 2004).
71. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, p. 310.
72. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, vol. 2, p. 380.
73. See Benjamin Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism are Reshaping the World* (New York: Ballantine, 1996).
74. See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 2006).
75. Sri Aurobindo, *The Ideal of Human Unity*, pp. 249–50.
76. The most glaring omission in the representation of non-Western cultures at the Parliament was the absence of delegates from the Muslim world. Two prominent Indian Muslims who were scheduled to participate did not turn up. Apart from some papers on Islam by Christian

missionaries, the religion was represented only by one American convert to Islam.

77. What happened on September 11, 2001, has occasioned both constructive and destructive reactions. Among other things, it has given a new urgency to the interfaith movement and heightened the public awareness of the importance of interreligious dialogue and understanding. More generally, it has been observed that the national trauma in the United States had very different effects on different people. In an article entitled "Evolution of Consciousness in Response to Terrorist Attacks: Towards a Theory of Cultural Transformation" (*Humanistic Psychologist*, Fall 2002), Kathleen Wall and Olga Louchakova explained: "Trauma shatters old structures of consciousness, both in the individual and collective psyches, and provides an opportunity for the development of either healing and imaginative new structures or pathological and rigidified reactions."
78. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, p. 321.
79. Sri Aurobindo, *The Ideal of Human Unity*, p. 281.
80. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, p. 66.
81. Sri Aurobindo, *The Ideal of Human Unity*, p. 49.
82. Richard Nisbett, *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently ... and Why* (New York: Free Press, 2004), p. 229.
83. Sri Aurobindo, *The Ideal of Human Unity*, pp. 275, 273.