

Women Provide Prophetic Voices in 1893 – Part 1

Marcus Braybrooke – *The Interfaith Observer* - 15 December 2012

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ON THESE SHOULDERS – 1893 WORLD PARLIAMENT OF RELIGIONS

“As Columbus discovered America, the Columbian Exposition in Chicago discovered woman.” This was the optimistic boast of Bertha Palmer (1849-1918), president of the Board of Lady Managers at the Exposition, of which the 1893 World Parliament of Religions was part. She was a businesswoman and philanthropist. The Palmer House, where many participants in the 1893 Parliament stayed, bears her name.

Of more than 200 speakers at the first Parliament, 11 percent were women. Propelled by a fierce thirst for equality, they were a force to be reckoned with. This month and next TIO will profile some of their outstanding contributions, words which brought a prophetic dimension to the historic gathering.

One well known speaker was **Rev. Antoinette Brown Blackwell** who in 1852 was the first woman to be ordained in the United States. She told the Parliament that God, who is no respecter of persons is no respecter of a person’s sex. “Women,” she said, “are indispensable to the religious evolution of the human race.



Rev. Antoinette Brown Blackwell

When only nine, Antoinette daringly injected a prayer into her family's religious observance and as a youth began preaching at Sunday meetings. Supported by her parents, who believed in equal education for men, women, and blacks, she enrolled at Oberlin College and was allowed to join a theological course – provided no one knew!

Antoinette was ordained in 1852 by Luther Lee, a socially radical Methodist minister, but could not find church employment. Her marriage to Samuel C. Blackwell, a social reformer, allowed her to focus on women's rights – more on improving women's status in society than suffrage. A prolific writer and speaker, she encouraged women to seek out masculine professions, asked men to share in household duties, and co-founded the American Woman Suffrage Association.

At the Parliament, she juxtaposed equal rights for women with widening the “religious pulpit” to “take in all faiths,” a spiritual inclusiveness that would take longer than women’s suffrage to blossom:

Women are taking an active, increasing share in the education, the thought, and the investigations of the age and are passing into almost every field of work certainly to no obvious disadvantage to any worthy interest. This great Parliament of Religions is in evidence that narrow conservatism is rapidly decreasing and that our conception of the religious pulpit must widen until it can take in all faiths, all tongues, which strive to enforce the living spirit of the love of God and man.

In 1878 Rev. Brown joined the Unitarian Church and was recognized as a minister. In 1920, at age 95, she was the only participant of the 1850 Women's Rights Convention to be alive to see the Nineteenth Amendment at last give women the right to vote. Antoinette’s first vote was in the presidential election in November 1920. She died almost a year later, on November 5, 1921, at the age of 96.

Equally well known was **Julia Ward Howe**, author of the “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” who triggered one of the most dramatic moments at the Parliament. In the words of the Chicago Herald, she “locked horns” with William Wilkinson, “whose many platitudes drew forth the applause of the cosmopolitan audience.” In his closing words, to the cheers of the audience, Wilkinson said “Christianity’s attitude towards other religions is one of universal, absolute, eternal, unappeasable hostility.” (To be fair to the professor, he did say that such hostility was to the religions, not their adherents.)

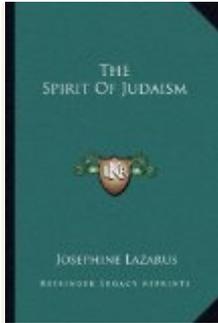


Julia Ward Howe

Very quietly, Julia Ward Howe, pacifist and champion of women’s rights, “rapped the professor on the knuckles” – to quote the Chicago Herald again – “taking the word ‘Christianity’ back to Christ himself whose sacrifice was “for the whole of humanity” – to the wild applause of the fickle audience.

If you read Barrow’s official history, this clash has been edited out. Sometimes one has to go to the newspapers to discover the truth. In her short address, Julia, who grew up Episcopalian but became Unitarian, also had time to mock the trickery of the priesthood and lambast “any religion that sacrifices women to the brutality of men. I think nothing is religion which puts one individual absolutely above others and surely nothing is religion which puts one sex above another.”

Rev. Annis F. Eastmann from New York was equally outspoken making an interreligious argument for the equality of women. “Women’s degradation and misery were caused by man’s oppression.” This oppression was not because of religion but because of social and economic causes, for, she said, “Buddha declared the equality of male and female in spiritual matters. The laws of Moses exalt women... Christ said ‘Whoever doth the will of God, the same is my brother and sister and mother.’”



Photos of Josephine Lazarus are unavailable on the internet, but her *The Spirit of Judaism* (1895) can still be found in hardback and paper.

Women speakers were not only concerned with the status of women. The dangers of growing anti-Semitism at a time when many Jews had fled from Russia to escape the pogroms of Tsar Alexander III were highlighted by **Josephine Lazarus**, a powerful Jewish voice. “In barbarous Russia, liberal France, and philosophic Germany the problem is most acute,” she said, going on to warn the Parliament that “there is *no country* [her italics] now civilized or uncivilized, where some echo of it has not reached; even in our own free-breathing America, some wave has come to die upon our shores.”

Her warnings were timely. Within a year of the end of the Parliament Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish army officer, was arrested in France. Lazarus later wrote a book called *Madame Dreyfus*. In numerous articles Josephine Lazarus urged Jews to acquire a larger knowledge of the Jewish situation, to emerge from their spiritual isolation, and to enter into fellowship with those among whom they live. Her plea to Christians was for a more liberal attitude toward Jews and Jewish thought.

Next month we will remember more of these powerful women who helped set the ethical agenda for the 20th century.