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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE

World Parliament of Religions 1893 and the Systematic Exclusion of the Sikhs

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Religious Studies

by

Nicole Ann Lewallen

June 2022

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Dr. Pashaura Singh, Chairperson  
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2022

The Thesis of Nicole Ann Lewallen is approved:

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In the early morning hours of September 11, 2001, America was brutally awakened by the unthinkable: they were under attack. Before the dust cleared that day, 2,977 American men, women and children lost their lives. As Americans scrambled to make sense out of the events that were unfolding, the reality of the situation became unconscionable. Nineteen members of a militant organization had successfully orchestrated a devastating attack on America by hijacking commercial planes and crashing them into high-profile buildings, intending to cause the maximum amount of damage in the minimum amount of time.

As the news stations started catching up with live events, snippets of information spread through the nation. One thing became clear: the masterminds behind the attacks belonged to a religious group that was Middle Eastern, bearded, and turbaned. Within a week, the full effects of that knowledge were felt in diasporic communities throughout the United States.

Balbir Singh Sodhi was the first innocent man to lose his life because of American misconceptions. Born in Punjab, India, Balbir had arrived in America in 1989. He was skilled with computers and held a job as a computer analyst in Los Angeles working for Hewlett-Packard Development Company. By 2001 he had relocated to Arizona as the proud owner of a gas station. He was, at the time of his murder, helping to plant flowers on the gas station property. Balbir was the first victim, but more than 300

additional hate crimes were perpetrated on Sikhs in America in the month that followed (Fact Sheet on Post-9/11 Discrimination and Violence against Sikh Americans).

Balbir was from India, the terrorists were from Afghanistan. Balbir was Sikh, the terrorists were extremists connected to the Islamic faith. Balbir was a victim of the September 11 attacks twice: once as an American and once as a Sikh. Why did Balbir lose his life? The first, and most obvious, answer is that his murderer was a criminal with a non-existent moral code and a thirst for violence. The second answer, and the less subtle of the two, is that Americans were largely ignorant of the Sikh religion and were unable to distinguish the Sikh community from the terrorists that had initiated the attacks on America.

This revelation does not provide answers as much as it raises a new question; how is it that America, a leading World Superpower, producer of great technology, discoverer of medical breakthroughs, and curator of information, possesses such basic ignorance? The answer, it seems, is that America has been writing these blank spots into their history since the first colonists arrived on their shores.

It is the purpose of this paper to show that America systematically ostracized the Sikh population based on bias and fear. Further, this paper will establish that the result of that systematic exclusion was a prolonged state of maintained ignorance of the Sikh tradition. American ignorance persisted until events of September 11, 2001, forcing the Sikh's to begin an educational campaign, and emerging from the silence that enshrouded them.

## **EARLY EAST ASIANS IN AMERICA**

America has, since their Revolution, maintained a complicated and hostile relationship with immigrants. Among the many races and cultures that are counted within the broad category of “immigrant,” are those persons who arrived in America from India. Though most scholarship places the first Indian immigrants at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is likely that Indians were in America long before the 1800s, and this is being supported by emerging research.

In 2020, Paul Heinegg completed an extensive project in which he completed a genealogical survey after reviewing expansive court documents of censuses conducted in 1790 and 1800 in the areas of Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Maryland, and Delaware. His findings are expressed in 2000 pages of genealogical information. His project produced surprising results; he found evidence that East Indian indentured servants from India were present in America as early as the first decade of the 1700s. One entry, procured from the Maryland Court, records an East Indian Servant boy valued at 2,500 pounds of tobacco. At the time, tobacco was Virginia’s largest cash crop. Cash crops were crops that were grown for financial gain, not for consumption by the farmers. This means it was used as cash becoming an acceptable form of payment for English goods, taxes, tithes, and the purchase of slaves. At the time of this entry, tobacco had a value of “twenty shillings per hundredweight” (Swiderski). Heinegg reports the following;



Maryland Prerogative Court (Inventories) Microfilm Roll  
63, CD 1, ac 1238, Liber 2, 1676 pp.177-178 (CD pp.208-9)  
Inventory of Cap<sup>t</sup> Edward Roe 3<sup>rd</sup> day of July 1676  
1 boy servant named John Thorn at 5 years to serve - 2000  
pounds tobacco  
1 East India servant boy - 2500 pounds tobacco  
(Heinegg)

There are 35 East Indian persons listed as indentured servants in the court records examined by Heinegg. His findings are consistent with reports that East India Indians arrived in America before the 1800s. Reverend William Bentley, a colonial clergyman from Salem, records in a journal that he encountered an Indian in 1790. The man described by Bentley came from Madras, the capital city of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, and was in the company of a British sea captain (Jacob 22). This may be the same Indian that Charles Townsend reports. Townsend reports that “The earliest definitive reference to a Sikh in the United States involves Captain Stephen Phillips (1764-1838) who was one of the first sea captains to travel to the ports of India on ships flying the flag of the United States” (Townsend 109). The captain had been engaged in extensive travel and trade with the East India Company before he retired and lived out the remainder of his life in Massachusetts. Significantly, he brought one of his sailors with him to work for him as a servant. The servant, called “George” had a unique style, described as wearing “the long white tunic of his people with loose trousers and a red sash. His black bearded face was surrounded by a great blue turban” (Townsend 109). |

In 1851, there was a report that six “East Indian Indians” participated in a Fourth of July parade in Salem, representing the East India Marine Society (Alexander 16). The

East India Marine Society had been founded in 1799 by sailors that had traveled past the Cape of Good Hope. Formed with the intention to raise funds to assist families of deceased sailors, the Society was engaged in the process of collecting “curiosities” and displaying them in a makeshift museum (Altman 5).

There are very few records dating Indian immigration in the earlier years, making it difficult to quantify the presence of Indians in early America. The first publicly available report of Sikhs arriving in America appeared on April 6, 1899, in The San Francisco Chronicle. Reportedly, four Sikh men arrived via Hong Kong and were permitted entry into America (Sikhs Allowed to Land). The Sikhs are described as “Sikh Lancers and Infantry in the Hong Kong Regiment, who went to Vancouver, British Columbia” (N. Singh 209). As it can be seen, it is reasonable to believe, based on court records and census data, that members of the Sikh tradition have been in America since the early part of the 1800s, though they were largely unacknowledged until after the turn of the century.

If it is difficult to find concrete evidence of Indian presence in America, it is nearly impossible to separate the Indians into regions and religions. America was unable to distinguish between the different Indic traditions. Many religious historians have investigated American encounters with Asia and have categorized “Hindoos,” “Gentoos,” “heathens,” and “pagans.” Stephen Prothero suggests that “of all the religions of Asia, Hinduism has the longest History in the United States” (Prothero 303).

However, the situation in the Sikh homeland may support the presence of Sikhs in America. To understand what underlying factors may have driven the younger sons of Sikh farmers out of India, it is important to understand the downward economic trends and over-arching domination of the British in India. Specifically, the Sikh communities suffered extensively under British rule, facing poverty and starvation.

### **SIKHS IN INDIA**

The British East India Company began their hostile takeover of India in the early 1600s. Their control grew tighter until they controlled an estimated 200 million people. Sashi Tharoor, an Indian diplomat, and author, summarizes the destruction of India by the British: "The British systematically set about destroying India's textile manufacturing and exports" (Tharoor 7). As part of the Colonization campaign, the British East India Company defeated the Sikh's, successfully annexing the Punjab on March 30, 1849 (Bruce 372).

The forty years that followed produced extreme changes for the Sikh population who remained firmly under British control. The British, seeking to increase their own monetary gains, took control of the agriculture of the Punjab, forcing the Sikhs to engage in cultivating cash crops and reaping the benefits of those crops. The Sikh community suffered; and their once thriving reserve of resources quickly depleted as a result of British policy (Tharoor 23).

Tharoor explains that the British control of industrial production forced artisan Indians to turn to agricultural work. They had found this the only option as the British had dominated and eliminated their industries. The increase in agricultural work had the effect of taxing land beyond its capabilities to produce at the higher rates. Furthermore, the peasants who had previously worked the fields found the wages had been drastically reduced as a result of the influx of new "labor." The peasant's wives, who often remained in the home spinning and weaving, found that there was no market for *their* products. Thus, the peasants made less money in the fields, and the income from cloth disappeared. The result, according to Tharoor, was extreme rural poverty (Tharoor 9).

The Sikhs have historically been tied to the land. Patwant Singh, author of *The Sikhs*, explains that the Jats represent the "sizeable portion of the Sikh Community" (P. Singh loc 457). Singh further clarifies that it would be the Jats who "broadly represent those who work the land: the cultivators, farmers and peasants" (P. Singh loc 4110). Simply, the large majority of Sikhs were Jats. The Jats made up the majority of the peasants and the farmers. Therefore, the rural poverty Tharoor describes is directly tied to the Sikh population.

Facing such extreme reversals of their profits, the Sikh farmers and peasants were forced to search for ways to supplement their incomes. One way to find this supplementation was with the help of their younger sons. The younger sons of Sikh farmers in the Punjab often left India in search of work to help support their struggling

families. The situation in the Punjab under British rule supports the existence of indentured labor in America, suggesting that those sons likely entered into labor contracts seeking ways to send aid to their families.

### **American Perceptions of India**

America learned very little about Indian traditions from those who were already within their borders. They did, on the other hand, learn a significant amount of information about Indian traditions from the Christian Missionaries and British Colonizers in India. Furthermore, what they learned was not always accurate, nor did the information portray the traditions in a gracious way. Causing further confusion, the Indian traditions were not well defined apart from one another, and it was often hard to distinguish between them. Even if the traditions had been neatly categorized, America was not interested in embracing them. America was a nation trying to become a dominant super-power with an abundance of ambition and a very narrow point of view.

American students were exposed to the idea of the Orient through the writings of British scholars, government officials, and Christian missionaries that had traveled to East Asia. Rarely did the accounts of the encounters with Indian traditions encourage interaction with them. On the contrary, they were disparaging and frightening.

Michael Altman describes one of the early writings that came from a chaplain of the East India Company. The chaplain, Claudius Buchanan, reportedly described the

religion to be the antithesis of Christianity; it was dangerous, superstitious, and in desperate need of Christian intervention (Altman 30). Similar reports of violence, blood sacrifice, idolatry, and heathenism were generated by American missionaries that had traveled to India in an attempt to cure the “poor degenerate people” of their “spiritual disease” (Holwell 97).

Michael J. Altman further describes the effects these representations had on the American public. He claims that they “reinforced notions of America as white, Protestant, civilized and democratic by imagining India as dark, heathen, uncivilized and hierarchical” (Altman 49). In short, India came to be considered synonymous with punishment and violence while American Protestantism was synonymous with liberty and justice. Harjot Oberoi explains the detrimental flaw of adopting this approach to understanding foreign traditions. He explains, “By importing a Judeo-Christian and Islamic understanding of texts and scriptures into discussion of Indian religions, we could end up establishing religious identities that do not exist” (Oberoi 8). By engaging in this exact activity that Oberoi has warned against, Americans created an idea of Indian religions that was perilous, uncivilized, and in desperate need of intervention from the more civilized, polished, and acceptable American tradition.

### **WORLD PARLIAMENT OF RELIGIONS, 1893**

To fully understand how the Sikh community wrongly bore the blame of September 11, 2001, it is imperative to understand how they came to be buried in the

category of World Religions. The first blatant instance of this occurred at the World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893. This ostentatious event, held in conjunction with the Columbian Exposition, was a gathering of *all* the World's Religions with the intention of uniting them against *all* non-Religion.

In 1891, four thousand letters of Address were sent to Religions around the World (Barrows 18). Many potential delegates declined the invitation. American Presbyterian were among the churches that denounced the Parliament. Also speaking against the Parliament was the Archbishop of Canterbury who feared that by initiating the Conference, Christians would be acting as though other religions could be equal to Christianity (Barrows 20-2). Among the delegates who accepted their invitations were 12 Buddhists, 11 representatives of Judaism, 8 Hindus, 2 Muslims, 2 Parsis, 2 representatives of Shintoism, 2 Confucians, 1 representative of Taoism, and 1 Jain representative (Seager 1986, 87). There is no record in Barrows, Seager's or any other historical document suggesting that members of the Sikh faith received the Address or any invitation to participate in the Parliament. Likewise, there is no record existing within the Sikh community that an invitation or an Address was received.

As noted, Jains, Zoroastrians, and Hindus were among those that proudly attended the Parliament to spread awareness of their respective traditions. They were seemingly unaware of the bias that had fueled their invitations. A Hindu Monk garnered a considerable amount of attention for his speech and has remained a key figure in the history of the Parliament of Religions.

It is a bold statement to claim that the members of the Parliament were afraid to invite a member of the Sikh community to join the World Parliament of Religions. While it is imaginable that the events, for Sikhs, could have played out in such a manner, a closer examination of the Parliament in the context of the World Fair casts significant doubt on the possibility of such a positive outcome. After critically examining the unspoken motives of the Parliament of Religions, it becomes reasonable to deduce that the Committee *had* to exclude the Sikhs from their conference. The Sikhs, as can be seen in the following sections, posed a threat to the message of White, Christian superiority that the Congress was attempting to establish.

From its inception to the building of its committee, the Parliament had one goal: to spread White Protestant Christianity. The Committee was composed of Protestant leaders, a Catholic priest, and a Jewish Rabbi. These esteemed religious leaders were placed under the direction of Charles Carroll Bonney, a Reverend associated with the New Church (Swedenborgian), and an active supporter of World-conventions (Barrows 44). These prestigious, learned men drafted a formal notice of their intentions and sent it out to no fewer than 4,000 recipients. The address proclaimed,

“Believing that God is, and that he has not left himself without witness; believing that the influence of Religion tends to advance the general welfare, and is the most vital force in the social order of every people, and convinced that of a truth God is no respecter of persons, but that in every nation he that feareth him and worketh righteousness is accepted of him, we affectionately invite



the representatives of all faiths to aid us in presenting to the world, at the Exposition of 1893, the religious harmonies and unities of humanity, and also in showing forth the moral and spiritual agencies which are at the root of human progress" (Barrows 44).

In short, the Committee intended to bring together representatives of all World Religions and unite them against all non-religions. However, the opening line of the address specifically laid out the foundation for what they considered to be religion. A religion, according to their Address, must meet specific qualifications. First, a religion must include belief. Second, religion must acknowledge one true God. These beliefs, according to the Committee, should lead to the creation of a defined social order. Finally, the fear of God and the belief in religion should guide the men of the social order to some form of "righteousness."

This definition of religion is not arbitrary. These requirements follow a very distinct, very Protestant idea of how a Religion should present itself and how it should function within a society. America had always been a White-Protestant Christian nation, though it was relatively young at the time. Since it won its Independence approximately 100 years earlier, America had been convincing itself, and its students, that it was superior *because* it was white and Protestant.

It does not take a great stretch of the imagination to presume that the organizers of the Parliament maintained concerns about inviting Indic traditions to speak about their religions. They would have been aware of the presumed danger that accompanied those traditions. Nevertheless, the Committee requested the presence

and participation of several Indian delegates. Among the Indians that were invited were the Hon. Pung Kwang Yu and Rung Hsien Ho who spoke at length regarding Confucianism. The esteemed Professor Manilal N. D'vivedi and Protap Chunder Mozoomdar were requested to deliver speeches on different branches of Hinduism. The most memorable delegate of the Convention was Vivekananda, a Hindu Monk, who had obtained an invitation shortly before the commencement (Barrows 4, 16, 17, 18, 22, 32, 105).

Obviously, to assume that the Sikh tradition was excluded based on their ethnic origins presents contradictions. If this was the reason that propelled their exclusion, the Parliament would have also excluded the other Indian delegates that were in attendance. What then, set the Sikhs apart from the East Asian traditions that *were* invited? Why would they have been excluded from the World Parliament of 1893? Perhaps it could be assumed that the existence of the Sikh tradition was not known by the Committee, or that it somehow did not meet their prerequisites that they had clearly laid out in their Address?

## **THE SIKHS**

It is true that the Sikh tradition was younger than their Indian counterparts, dating back to 1499. Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, was believed to be 30 years old when he underwent a mystic experience that led to the creation of the Sikh tradition. During this experience, Nanak had an encounter with God and was given

*amrit* (nectar) to drink while he received specific divine instructions from God. The interaction has been recorded in the *Janamsakhis* (historical biographies of Nanak's life).

The instructions have been recorded as follows;

“Nanak, I am with thee. Through thee will my name be magnified. Whosoever follows thee, him will I save. Go into the world to pray and teach mankind how to pray. Be not sullied by the ways of the world” (D. B. Singh 16).

After this mystic experience, Nanak dedicated his life to the building of the Sikh religion as instructed. He extolled the existence of God, whom he called Akal Purakh (“Timeless One”). He believed that liberation from a cycle of birth and rebirth was possible, through a “merging of the human spirit with the all-embracing spirit of God” (McLeod 449).

At the time of the World Parliament, the Sikh tradition had been growing in strength and numbers for almost 400 years. Throughout those four centuries the Sikh faith had undergone a complete metamorphosis. At first, the Sikh community was largely unorganized and ill-defined. They were groups of believers who continued with their rituals and religious acts without a need to embrace a specific religious entity. Sikhs enjoyed a religious diversity under an umbrella label allowing for different groups to engage in their religion in the ways that best fulfilled their needs.

The ways Sikhs performed their religion were based in their location, region, and governmental loyalty. Sikhs were not concerned with delineating themselves from their counterparts because they lived, worked, and interacted with them, including the ever-

present Hindu tradition (Oberoi 48). However, as time progressed and the political, economic, and social world that embraced them shifted, they found themselves evolving and adapting.

Nanak, having brought the message of God to the people, had implemented the first significant changes in the life of the Sikhs. A critic of the caste system, Nanak initiated the tradition of maintaining community kitchens called *langars*, that offered free meals to all followers, regardless of the caste they once claimed (K. Singh 40). This tradition was continued and strengthened by the second Guru, Angad (1504-1552), who continued to open the kitchens and organized a way to collect donations for the support of the kitchens.

Significantly, Guru Angad developed the Gurmukhi script. This had the effect of providing the Sikh community with a written language that did not belong to the Hindu tradition or the Muslim tradition, further separating the Sikhs into their own independent identity. Guru Angad's Gurmukhi became the foundation of the Sikh Scripture (K. Singh 49).

During the time of the third Guru, Amar Das (1479-1574), tensions began forming between the Sikh and Hindu communities. Amar Das had initiated significant changes in the function and performance of the Sikh tradition. He designated a specific date for the annual gathering of Sikhs. He also initiated specific, non-Hindu rituals that would be required at life events such as birth, marriage, and death. Significantly, Amar Das, following the example set by Nanak, defended women, supported widow

remarriage, and restricted women from participating in *sati*, a tradition in which widows would throw themselves onto their husband's funeral pyre (K. Singh 51). Each of Amar Das's changes seized the attention of the *Brahmins*, (Hindu priests). Concerned with the obvious (not to mention public) break from accepted Hindu customs, the Brahmins initiated a system of oppression on the Sikh community. Amar Das is also credited with choosing the site that would eventually become the most holy site for the Sikh community, though in his lifetime the site was simply a "mud hut on the water's edge he had built for meditation and prayer" (P. Singh loc 547).

The fourth Guru, Ram Das (1534-81), invested much time in composing hymns that would become key entries in the Sikh Scripture. Ram Das dutifully continued construction on the Holy Site chosen by Amar Das while building a town around it. He commissioned a great pool to be built as the center of the Holy site. The town, which was to become the religious capital of the Sikhs, provided a place for engagement, trade, and worship (K. Singh 52). Before his death, he chose his youngest son to lead as the next Sikh Guru.

By the time his son, Arjun Mal (1563-1606), assumed his role as the fifth Guru, there was an immediate need for a temple that would belong to the Sikh community. In the center of the holy pool his father had commissioned, Arjun began building the Harimander Sahib, known as the "Divine Temple of God". The temple has been rebuilt, but the site remains the most holy Sikh site in the World (P. Singh, 2006, 75). Furthermore, Arjun also compiled the sacred work of the Sikh faith: The Adi

Granth, a collection of writings handed down from the previous Gurus, as well as collections of works written by poet-saints (P. Singh, 2003, 24).

During Arjun's time as Guru, the Sikh community grew. The temple that he had commissioned gave the Sikh community a central place to worship. The city around it, known as Amritsar, grew in size and strengthened. Significantly, the city was an independent city in a kingdom ruled by Moguls. The controlling Mogul Emperor was Akbar, also known as Akbar the Great. Akbar fell ill and died in 1605. His son, Prince Salim, succeeded him, becoming known as Emperor Jahangir (Smith 77).

Emperor Jahangir was concerned with the rising success and acceptance of Arjun and felt that Arjun was overly involved in Mogul affairs. He ordered the execution of the Guru. The manner of death is not known, though the Sikhs maintained he suffered a painful death by fire (Jakobsh 28). His son, Hargobind became the sixth Guru.

As a result of his father's murder, Hargobind had an immediate need to surround himself, and the entire Sikh community with protection. The threat to Sikh safety and the need for self-protection drastically changed the role of Sikh leadership. Doris Jakobsh describes the new role Gurus assumed:

“Guru Hargobind was believed to possess both worldly and spiritual authority. Trusted devotees were trained in martial activities; the guru also had an infantry. In place of their usual offerings of money, devotees were now to bring to the guru horses and arms as tithes. Sikh territories were demarcated from surrounding territories by thorny trees along their boundaries” (Jakobsh 29).

Hargobind built the *Akal Takht* (the Throne of the Timeless One). The Sikhs consider the Akal Takht to be the seat of the highest temporal authority on Earth and it can be found across from the Holy Temple (N. Singh 42). Hargobind also made peace with Jahangir, and the Emperor left the Sikh community alone. It was not until his third son, Prince Khurram, succeeded him that the Sikhs were harassed by the Moguls once again, but was limited to small kerfuffle, such as the capturing of animals and livestock (Jakobsh 57). Guru Hargobind was forced to relocate to avoid these instances, but the trend of increasing military presence continued until the tenth Guru took his place as the leader of the Sikh community (K. Singh 70-6).

Under the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh (1666-1708), the Sikh faith underwent the most distinct and defining changes. At the annual gathering of Sikhs in 1699, Gobind requested five men offer themselves as a sacrifice to him. One by one, Gobind took the volunteers into a tent and returned a few moments later, his sword dripping with blood. After the fifth victim disappeared into the tent, Gobind Singh revealed that all the men were still alive. He called the men “the beloved ones” and initiated the first Sikh baptism (McLeod 323).

Each man was instructed to drink from a bowl that contained sweetened water. Each initiate adopted new surnames becoming known as “Singh”. Gobind prescribed from that moment forward, baptized Sikhs would never cut their hair, would always keep a comb on them, would wear a specific style of underclothes, would wear a steel bracelet on their wrist, and would carry a small sword. These Sikhs, Gobind

decreed, would be known as Khalsa Sikhs (K. Singh 85-7). Upon his death in 1708, Gobind initiated one last and permanent change to the Sikh tradition; He bequeathed the title of Guru to the Adi Granth, declaring that the holy book would be the living Guru forever.

The years after Gobind were not easy for the Sikhs. After the death of Gobind, Banda Bahadur, a Sikh military leader, led an agrarian revolt against Bahadur Shah, the reigning Mughal Emperor. This resulted in a temporary increase in Sikh lands, and a significant influx of new Sikh converts. The successful expansion continued until Banda was caught and killed in 1716 (K. Singh 109-16).

Banda's death marked the beginning of a long and harrowing time for the Sikh community. With Banda dead, the Mughals attempted to regain control of the lands. They were relentless and hostile. On the other hand, the East India Company was gaining more wealth and expanding their forces to control more territory (N. Singh 127). Additionally, the Sikhs faced the wrath of the Afghans who also desired control of the land. The Sikhs were forced to continuously maintain and protect their land from all three adversaries. The tension and the hostility continued until 1763 (K. Singh 115-59).

Among the Sikhs that battled to protect the interest of the Sikhs was a young man named Ranjit Singh (1780-1839). Ranjit, with help of his mother-in-law, took control of Lahore. At the age of 21, he was crowned the first "Emperor of the Sikhs" (N. Singh 128). Ranjit accepted an invitation that had been extended by the British and entered into the Amritsar Treaty of 1809. This treaty effectively established friendship



between the Sikhs and the British. It prevented Ranjit from expanding his kingdom past a particular boundary and it prevented the British from engaging or controlling with Ranjit's delineated territories (R. Singh 379).

For a time, the British maintained their agreement, and their lack of involvement allowed Ranjit to expand his empire and rebuild the cities already in his control. Significantly, the Sikh community rebuilt Lahore, Sialkot, Batala, Jhang and Bhera under the rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Furthermore, with Ranjit's guidance new towns were created, among them were Gujranwala, Fatehabad, Kapurthala, Rahon, Hallowal, Phillaur, Sujampur, Sayyidwala, and Nur Mahal (P. Singh loc 1522). Cities that had survived and been improved upon (such as Amritsar) began importing their goods to locations such as Yarkand, Turfan, Chinese Turkestan, Afghanistan, Bokhara, Persia, and Arabia (P. Singh loc 1523).

Under Ranjit Singh's rule, the Sikhs successfully reconstructed, recovering from a devastating period of warfare. The Sikh empire reached its peak with the legendary Ranjit in control. Ranjit Singh led the Sikhs until they "emerged triumphant at the end of the eighteenth century" (P. Singh loc 1634). However, the Sikh's faced yet another setback in 1839, when the famed Maharaja died.

Nikky Singh describes the devastating effects of Ranjit's death, she notes that "along with him vanished those claims of power and friendship chaos ensued in that splendid Empire. It became a bloodbath of warring factions" (N. Singh 136). A few years later, in 1843, Ranjit's five-year-old son assumed the throne with his mother appointed

as regent. The British saw this assignment as a great weakness, and they abandoned the treaty they had once honored (Jakobsh 85).

In 1849, the British annexed the Punjab and quickly took control. The British assumed an involvement in the management of the Sikh temple, which gave them direct control of the Sikh community. This control by the British was unique to the Sikhs. Fox argues that there was “No doubt their culturally given beliefs in the Singhs as a martial race led the British to a direct involvement in Sikh sacred institutions that they religiously avoided in Hindu and Muslim affairs” (Fox 158). Further acknowledging the martial nature of the Sikhs, the British filled their British Indian Army with Sikh soldiers, effectively “glorifying” them. In the years between 1875 and 1914, Punjabi presence in the British Indian Army increased. A total of three-fifths of all soldiers in the Army at the end of 1914 were Punjabi, and half of those were Sikhs (P. Singh 2897).

The British not only acknowledged the Sikh’s for their military ability, but for their efficiency as well. The British, having assumed control of the lands, also recognized the production capability of the Sikhs. The Sikhs had proven to be skilled farmers and stewards of the land. The British invested large amounts of capital into irrigation and cultivation while forcing the Sikhs to tirelessly work the land in the name of the British Crown. So effective were these investments that the Sikhs tripled the production of wheat in three short years, England was the sole benefactor of the profit increase (Fox 55).

In the midst of working the land and fighting against the control of the British, the Sikhs began building schools and places of worship for themselves. In 1880, the Sikhs opened a printing press and by 1886 their most important Sikh paper, *Khalsa Akbar*, was in circulation (Oberoi 284). The paper reached a wide audience and transmitted news of the Sikh community and relayed pertinent information regarding the Sikh faith.

### **MEETING THE REQUIREMENTS**

It is, therefore, difficult to imagine that in 1893, the organizers of the World Parliament of Religions were unaware that the Sikhs existed. The Sikhs had been growing in number and reputation in India at a dramatic pace and had garnered the attention of both Hindus and Muslims. It stands to reason that they would have also attracted the notice of the Christian Missionaries that were based in India, the missionaries' purpose in India was to bring awareness of salvation to the people of the Orient. Furthermore, the British were fully aware of the Sikhs as they had publicly acknowledged their military ability and they had enjoyed extreme profits off the labor of the Sikhs. As it has been established, America was in the habit of retrieving much of their knowledge of India from the missionaries and the British. Understanding that this exchange of information existed and was persistent, it is reasonable to assume the Parliament Committee was aware of the Sikh tradition in some capacity, even if that capacity was limited.

The Committee, knowing of the Sikh's existence and not excluding them based on their nationality and race, may have determined that the Sikh faith did not fulfill their specific requirements for being defined as a "Religion." To recap, the Committee, in their original address, stipulated that a "Religion" must meet four specific requirements to be considered. According to the Committee, a religion must include belief, a monotheistic God, social order, and it must motivate believers to some form of "righteousness."

From its very inception, the Sikh tradition has been based in belief. The beliefs and convictions of Guru Nanak have been recorded by Guru Arjan as part of the compilation of Sikh Scripture. The Adi Granth begins with a composition that is attributed to Sikhism's founder, Nanak. The composition is referred to as *Japji* (P. Singh, 2019). The *Japji* has always played a significant role in Sikh life. It reads:

There is One God.  
He is the Supreme Truth.  
He, the Creator,  
Is without fear and without hate.  
He, the Omnipresent,  
Pervades the universe.  
He is not born,  
Nor does He die to be born again.  
By His grace shalt thou worship Him.  
Before time itself  
There was truth.  
When time began to run its course  
He was the truth.  
Even now, He is the truth  
And evermore shall truth prevail.

This verse, praising God, was reportedly spoken by Nanak. The words acknowledge the existence of one God, who is the *only* God. Further, the Sikhs proclaim that God to be the truth. They maintain that believers can find salvation only through the one true God. This verse is extremely important to the Sikh community. It is the first prayer recited by Sikhs after waking and before bathing each morning. It encapsulates the beliefs that provide the foundation for the entire Sikh tradition.

Sikhism has been described as “uncompromisingly monotheistic.” God, in the Sikh tradition, is “Ultimate, Transcendent Reality, Nirguna (without attributes), Timeless, Boundless, Formless, Ever-existent, Immutable, Ineffable, All-by Himself and even Unknowable in His entirety” (Alimardi). The monotheistic nature of the tradition has never been in question. To assume that the Committee in charge of choosing which traditions would be represented at the Parliament of 1893 disqualified the Sikh’s based on failing to have belief in a monotheistic God is simply not possible.

The Congress further defined religion as one that brought about social order. Though the Sikhs have gained a reputation of being militarily adept, they have maintained a strict code of honor and ethics. The Adi Granth has stipulated that there are five primary evils that Sikhs must be always aware of and work to overcome. The first of these vices is known as sexual desire, followed by anger, greed, attachment, and conceit. The scripture warns Sikhs that these vices will hinder their ability to connect with God and achieve salvation. While warning Sikhs to monitor their thoughts and actions, the Adi Granth reads:

“You are engrossed in false pursuits. You wander like a dog, a pig, a crow; soon, you shall have to get up and leave. || 1 || You believe that you yourself are great, and that others are small. Those who are false in thought, word and deed, I have seen them going to hell. || 2 || The lustful, the angry, the clever, the deceitful and the lazy waste their lives in slander, and never remember their Lord in meditation. || 3 || Says Kabeer, the fools, the idiots and the brutes do not remember the Lord. They do not know the Lord’s Name; how can they be carried across?” (S. Singh 2213).

A cursory glance at selections of the Sikh scripture establish clearly and efficiently that it contains a moral code for all Sikhs to follow. To achieve salvation and earn a place in Heaven, a Sikh must not be unfaithful to their spouse, must not covet things that are not in their possession, must control their anger, and must not allow greed and attachment to influence their choices. This is a clear and organized moral code that is designed to maintain social order by employing honesty, fairness, and ethical behavior.

It could not have been the lack of a social order or moral code that kept the Sikh community blacklisted from the prestigious World Parliament of Religions in 1893. It also follows that the exclusion was not based on lack of righteousness. The Sikhs, in an attempt to attain salvation, turn their backs on the five vices that are listed in the Adi Granth, while embracing the divine name of God. Striving to become one with the ultimate God, Sikhs also actively embrace a universal system of equality.

Unlike other Indic traditions, the Sikh tradition has always maintained that women were included in the concept of equality. Women, according to the Sikh

tradition, are not to be placed below men in any way. The words of Guru Nanak, as recorded in the Adi Granth, are as follows:

“From woman, man is born; within woman, man is conceived; to woman he is engaged and married. Woman becomes his friend; through woman, the future generations come. When his woman dies, he seeks another woman; to woman he is bound. So why call her bad? From her, kings are born. From woman, woman is born; without woman, there would be no one at all.” (S. Singh 949).

However, it was not just women that the Gurus esteemed to possess equality. All persons were considered equal, regardless of caste, religion, fealty, color, or gender. This was made clear during the first baptism performed by Gobind Singh. After asking for five followers to offer themselves as sacrifices and revealing that they had not been slaughtered, Gobind had each man drink sweetened water from the same cup. Moments before the men drank from the cup, they had belonged to different Hindu Castes. They would not have been permitted to drink from one cup. Yet, each man was instructed to disregard his Hindu name, and forget the differences imposed on him by the unfavorable caste system. They were newly baptized and equal in the eyes of the Guru and in the eyes of the entire Sikh community (K. Singh 80).

The perception and understanding of equality did not start with the first baptism. It had been present from the inception of the Sikh faith. Nanak did not just deny the caste system, he abhorred it. That is the reason he had installed community

kitchens, called *langars*. He wanted to have a space for community members to come together and share meals at the same table. This was a practice that was absolutely forbidden in the Hindu tradition. The Hindus had believed that if a lower caste man were to cast even a shadow over food that was being prepared, the food became impure (K. Singh 40). Nanak sought to eradicate this system of inequality and subsequent Gurus maintained the tradition. Each place of worship that was opened in the name of Sikhs contains a community kitchen that is available to all.

It appears that the Sikh tradition fulfilled every requirement described by the Parliament's committee. They were an established tradition with a strong moral code and were focused on the belief that one supreme God created and ruled the world. Furthermore, they believed that only through God could they be saved. But, if the Sikhs fulfilled every requirement, and if the organizers knew of their existence, why were they not invited to spread awareness of their own tradition?

Of course, the answer may be lost to history, the truth having died with those who held it. However, when the Parliament of World Religions is investigated in the context of the great Columbian Exposition, the true motives of the Parliament are revealed. In revealing the true motives of the Parliament, it can be seen that the Sikhs were excluded because they posed a threat to the success of the Parliament. Simply, they were excluded as a result of fear.



## **BEFORE THE COLUMBIAN EXPOSITION 1893**

The first step in understanding the context in which the Parliament and the Fair are placed, is to understand how America understood itself and how the Columbian Exposition came to be. It is not a novel idea that America has defined itself in relation to something else. Edward Said describes this phenomenon in *Orientalism*, "...the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (Said 1). Yet, in the contrasts made between the two cultures, there was an inequality; America inherently considered themselves superior to the Orient.

As stated, America had been collecting information on the people of India for some time through the writings of the British and missionaries. The ideas and impressions of the Other presented did not exalt the Indian traditions or people. One of the earliest writings addressing Indic traditions came from a chaplain of the East India Company. His version of the religious traditions of India was disparaging at best. He described the religions to be the antithesis of Christianity. He portrayed them as dangerous, superstitious, and in desperate need of Christian intervention (Tweed and Prothero 54). Similar reports of violence, blood sacrifice, idolatry, and heathenism were generated by American missionaries that had traveled to India in an attempt to cure the "poor degenerate people" of their "spiritual disease" (Holwell 97).

As knowledge of the Indian traditions (often referred to as "Hindoo") increased through conversation with Britain and published reports, American writers and editors began adopting the topics as a form of entertainment for their American

audiences. Michael J. Altman describes the effects these representations had on the American public. He argues that these misconceptions were instilled in the minds of American youths through textbooks at an early age. The young impressionable students were taught that they were White, Protestant, and blessed because they were not dark, heathen, and Hindu (Altman 55).

The textbooks helped to create the next generation of American citizens while educating them on the “right” and “wrong” beliefs. American children were able to identify as superior because they belonged to the true, or right religion. After understanding this key lesson, the young students were able to identify the “Other” as the wrong race believing in the wrong religion. Thus, the American students learned they were civilized, and the Other was uncivilized.

As those students began to age and become the controlling generation, the idea that they were superior to the Other did not stop them from enlisting immigrant labor and obtaining commodities from South Asia. As Jonathon Eacott describes in *Selling Empires*, the triangle between Britain, America and India kept the countries closely tied together. India was consistently vital to both Britain and America, despite the negative views of her people and beliefs. This interdependence continued throughout the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, though it could be argued that the dependence continues today (Eacott 439).

As America continued to grow and began increasing their exports exponentially, they suffered an extreme lack of available labor to maintain the rate of production of

their exports. Shortly after the Philadelphia Exposition of 1876, America's desire to control the world market burgeoned. The American press fueled the expanding desire by stressing the importance of cultivating foreign markets for American products. These were the same products that were being overproduced and causing concern for Americans (Jacobson 22).

Obtaining immigrant labor was not as challenging as might be imagined. The wages that were offered to the poor immigrants were tempting, even in their meagerest existence. As factories and their rates of production increased in America, the importation of labor also increased. The influx of workers created niches within itself separating itself by race and ability. The imported Chinese laborers were desired for their competence in the fields, likely a result of their experience in the rice paddies. Many Indian immigrants worked the fields of California, as the climate was reminiscent of their homeland (Jacobson 70). Notably, in India the group that had displayed the greatest aptitude for farming and crop production were Sikhs. It is speculated that the early Indian immigrants that worked the land in California were not Hindu, but Sikh.

While the imported labor boosted American industrial power, it also began to cause concerns for the Americans. As the racial divides grew deeper, the white Protestant Americans started contemplating the virtues that each racial group possessed. They considered these races uncivilized, and inferior to Americans. Virtue, they justified, was a product of culture and civilization. If a race of people lacked culture

and civilization, it was assumed that they also lacked virtues. If they lacked virtues, then it was inconceivable that they could participate in civic proceedings (Jacobson 69). This resulted in a series of laws and legislations that were designed to subdue and control the immigrant populations.

The immigrants were not just Asian, there were many immigrants arriving in America looking for a better life for themselves, their families, and their future generations. Each group had the same dreams, but they had different religious backgrounds and different cultural traditions. To the Americans, or at least the Americans that claimed any leadership roles or responsibilities, the immigrants were just another commodity, an import that was necessary to further increase production and flood the world market with American products.

A new trend began to develop among the wives of middle-class American families; the women fell in love with the idea that they called the "Orient." This specific group of women greatly influenced the import of Oriental furniture, clothing, and miscellaneous items. They were in the position to make purchases, decorate their homes, and spend time shopping and collecting imports that they considered "exotic." They eagerly decorated their parlors with foreign goods. In this way, they were able to publicly display their wealth and gain acceptance from their peers, who, in turn, were also decorating *their* parlors in the same coveted fashion (Hoganson 14). A favorite design concept embraced by the household matrons was called a "cozy corner." These cozy corners were spaces, typically in the corner of the room, that

embraced all things “Orient.” They included brightly colored tapestries and cushions resembling styles found in photographs of the harems of the Orient. These corners with their lush fabrics, exotic pillows, and ill-subdued Oriental themes became the highlight of fashion and elegance. Wealthier women, who were in the privileged position of controlling larger domains often decorated entire rooms in this style (Hoganson 16-7).

As matrons continued to acquire foreign goods, the news agencies of the time seized the opportunity to target these women and increase their sales and profits. Exotic travel plans centered around shopping destinations that were advertised in newspapers. With the increase of ocean shipping, the demand for exotic imports soared. America was obsessed with the Orient, but they were not accepting of immigrants. In fact, America was still working hard to subdue and control the immigrant population that was flowing into their borders. The late 1800s brought about the Chinese Exclusion Act, Jim Crow Laws, Anti-Immigration Laws, and heightened racial tensions (Lears 116, 129-31).

America seemed to be on a fast upward trajectory. It was quickly becoming a global superpower, controlling the world market in exports and imports. The industrial and mechanization industry within America’s boundaries was multiplying and America was gaining wealth at a breakneck speed. One major advancement that was propelling America forward was the railroad. With the hope of the railroad becoming more profitable, the rich were eager to invest in it. Eventually, one of the main banking establishments that had invested in the railroad was forced to declare bankruptcy. This

had a devastating effect on the American economy and a chain reaction was set into motion. The New York Stock Exchange was forced to close, factories were forced to close, existing railroads failed, and the lumber market crashed. Amid this great failure, two great fires, one in Chicago and one in Boston destroyed massive amounts of real estate (Lears 78-9, 135). The bank reserves in America suffered a paralyzing loss, decreasing almost 30% in a single month. A panic ensued and a Great Depression followed.

### **COLUMBIAN EXPOSITION 1893**

Economic conditions remained meager for several years. Families existed on minimal funds, though the Depression officially ended in 1879. America started rebuilding its economy and its cities began to repair themselves. By the end of 1880, the national wealth of America was nearly triple what it had been just a decade earlier. America's engineering abilities were realizing amazing feats such as the Brooklyn Bridge and the Niagara Suspension Bridge (Rosenberg 44). Then, in 1889, America's ego suffered a blow: the Paris Exposition Universelle International proved to be a great success for France and Europe. At the prestigious event, visitors were treated to the sight of the Eiffel Tower. After two years of construction, it was the centerpiece of the fair. The magnificent structure surpassed all other buildings. It proved to be the tallest manmade structure in the World, its towering height and wide base amazed more than 30 million spectators.

Not one to be outdone by another country, America's desire to be a controlling super-nation found strength once again. The 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Christopher Columbus offered America the perfect setting to display their strength and superior knowledge. Thus, the idea of a great Columbian Exposition was born. The Columbian Exposition provided the perfect opportunity for America to display its wealth, its mechanical advancements, and its supremacy over the other nations. It was not a humble affair; it was not designed to be a quiet national exhibit.

Chicago was chosen to host the ostentatious event. Only the most renowned architects were hired to design the grandiose spectacle that took over 12,000 workers three years to complete. The large manufacturers building became the World's largest building as it boasted a perimeter of over one mile. A seven-foot clock was proudly displayed in alabaster to symbolize American clockmaking. Tiffany & Company made its grand debut in the jewelry department. America proudly displayed its textile goods that finally rivaled those of Europe. Singer introduced their household sewing machines as well as their thread, spools, and other notions (Rosenberg 43, 64, 82, 88, 193).

Among the amazing displays laid out for thousands of visitors to experience was the agricultural building. The massive building housed physical testaments of America's shift from family farms to mechanized workspaces. John Deere made his debut with large farm tractors and heavy equipment that could perform the same amount of work as five able-bodied men (Appelbaum 29). The mechanical harvester was introduced by McCormick, forever changing the way that America harvested their crops each season

(Appelbaum 36). As phenomenal as these exhibits were, they paled in comparison to the greatest exhibit at the Fair; the electrical building. The Columbian exposition was the first Fair to be run on electricity making it possible for the fair to remain open both day and night (Appelbaum 40-5).

The Ferris wheel was the most prominent display and could be easily seen from great distances. The axle of the great wheel was a massive 45-foot piece of steel, the largest single piece of steel ever forged. The wheel reached a height of 264 feet, with each of the 30 cars holding no less than 60 people. The immense novelty was a key producer of profit at the Fair, bringing in over \$300,000 in actual profits throughout the duration of its operation (Appelbaum 129).

F.W. Putnam, a renowned professor from Harvard University was placed in charge of the exhibits that specialized in anthropology, ethnology, and history. His lauded displays included Native American habitats as well as Eskimo exhibits. He described his vision as “a living picture of the typical native peoples of different parts of America; each family to be living in its native habitation; the people to be dressed in native costume, surrounded by characteristic household utensils, implements, and weapons and engaged in their native occupations and manufacturers” (Ralph 173). In a grand display, Putnam exploited Natives and other non-white races by showcasing his anthropology exhibits to make ‘known thousands of measurements and special notes of the physical size and characteristics of members of the various native tribes...of the foreign visitors to and employees at the Fair’ with the result of making those people



appear inferior to the Americans (Ralph 179). Each demeaning distinction effectively offered American spectators “empirical proof” that America was superior in characteristics, knowledge, and physicality to those “other” races.

Every single detail of the immense Exposition was meticulously planned to convey a particular message: America was second to none, they were the next global superpower, they were going to control the world market and lead the world in manufacturing, technology, and advancement. That this ability was achieved on the backs of immigrant and slave labor was never acknowledged. In fact, it was pushed to the shadows and actively ignored while the spectators remained awed by the literal and figural stained-glass windows that surrounded them in towers of gilded ivory and glistening crystal.

If the details were so conscientiously planned to promulgate the preeminence of America, it stands to reason that the many Congresses assembled within the Fair were designed in the same way. The most pretentious of these Congresses included the Congress of Education, the Congress of Engineers, a Congress of Bankers, and a Railway Congress (Rosenberg 253). The World Parliament of Religions was not an exception to this design.

It stands to reason that the delegates, all hand chosen by the Parliament, were chosen for their individual tendencies to increase awareness of the “True Religion” (Christianity) and to increase negative focus on any religion that did not agree with the tenets of the one, right Religion. This necessitated the exclusion of particular

traditions. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints was excluded. At the time, this religious group was less than 100 years old and there were many tensions between them and the Christian community (Altman 45). The Native Americans were also excluded.

During the 17 days of the Parliament, attention was drawn to Vivekananda, a Vedantic Hindu monk. He had not been formally invited to the Parliament, having instead wrested an invitation shortly before the Parliament commenced. He did not, in fact, have a single speech prepared. Yet, when obtaining literature on the World's Parliament of Religions, his name carries the highest rate of repetition.

Not being white, Christian, or American, it seems that he would have been written into the shadows of the commentaries of the great event. Instead, he had claimed the spotlight. Even Barrows had drawn attention to Vivekananda in his memoirs and first-hand account of the Parliament. However, this unique unfolding of events may not be as unusual as it seems.

Vivekananda had been educated by private tutors before receiving his formal education. After his father's death he grew close with his Guru, Ramakrishna. However, upon Ramakrishna's death, Vivekananda was left with little financial support, and a desire for comfortable things and good food. The monastery he had started was not able to fill his needs and he left to engage in a solitary wandering lifestyle (Tejasananda 30). His desire to continue wandering came to an end when he made the decision to travel to America. Though his reasons behind his desire to leave India behind have been

the cause of speculation, Narisngh Prosald Sil, a critic of Vivekananda's, suggests leaving India was a result of Vivekananda's selfish desires:

“Never really a spiritually inclined man, all hagiographical insistence notwithstanding, Narendranath had taken to cowl to escape from the hunger and deprivation of his impoverished home to lead the carefree life of a monk with his cohorts without social or financial hassle or responsibility...he wholeheartedly wished to get out of the terribly indigent and inhospitable family environment and to go far away from it, never to return” (Sil 39-40).

Regardless of what fueled his desire to travel to America, Vivekananda made the arduous journey to Chicago. He was unaware that an Exposition was being planned, but it would have quickly become apparent to him. He wished to obtain an invitation but was unable to do so. On the advice of a devotee, he relocated to Boston. Maybe by chance, likely by strategic set-up, Vivekananda made the acquaintance of Dr. John Henry Wright, a well-respected and well-connected professor at Harvard University. Dr. Wright was instantly impressed by the vibrant and animated Vivekananda. After Vivekananda expressed his desire to attend the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, Dr. Wright enthusiastically supported him and wrote to the Parliament Committee encouraging them to accept Vivekananda's application. As a result of Dr. Wright's efforts, the committee responded positively, approving the request. Vivekananda secured an invitation to attend the event.

John Barrows described the moment Vivekananda entered the event. Interestingly, Barrows recounts the clothing worn by Vivekananda, while failing

to comment or notice the clothing of the other delegates. He describes Vivekananda's appearance as being "clad in gorgeous red apparel, his bronzed face surmounted with a huge turban of yellow" (Barrows 104). More interestingly, the less ostentatious Indian delegates, who had been properly vetted and formally invited, were passed over in Barrows introductions. He gave them only a cursory acknowledgment and said, "there were present, also, Mohammedan and Parsee and Jain ecclesiastics, each a picturesque study in color and movement, and all eager to explain and defend their forms of faith" (Barrows 105).

When Vivekananda was called on to address the Parliament, his introduction received a full 2-minute standing ovation described as "deafening". He began with a greeting that eventually became his most famous:

"Sisters and Brothers of America, It fills my heart with joy unspeakable to rise in response to the warm and cordial welcome which you have given us. I thank you in the name of the most ancient order of monks in the world; I thank you in the name of the mother of religions, and I thank you in the name of the millions and millions of Hindu people of all classes and sects" (Barrows 157).

On the close of the 5<sup>th</sup> day, the chairman called upon Vivekananda to speak of the variance of beliefs between the different churches that were represented. So impressive was his appearance and performance, *Spectacle of the White City, The Chicago 1893 World's Fair* highlights Vivekananda's success while describing him as "a wildly romantic 30-year-old Hindu" who "exercised a wonderful influence over his auditors" (Appelbaum 138).

It is not surprising then, that as the World Parliament concluded in September of 1893, the media had invested a large amount of time and money in the coverage of the unprepared but well-spoken Hindu Monk. A few months after the close of the Parliament, the Madras Times spoke of Vivekananda, describing him as one of the “most learned men” who “pronounced the Hindu System to be the most attractive.” The article continues, “finally a Hindu monk stood up before a crowd of men and women and put Hinduism before them in its fairest light, divested of all its gross appendages- what wonder that a number of astonished people accepted the new ideas with greedy ears” (Bonet-Maury).

#### **CONCLUSION - ERADICATING SILENCES**

The perceived success of Vivekananda likely has a connection to the reason why the Sikhs were left out of the Parliament. Vivekananda was the “Other.” He was vibrant, he was theatrical, he was romantic, and he lived up to every stereotype America had formed of the Orient. It did not matter so much what he had to say, they weren’t listening anyway. They were extorting the stereotype and with every word, and every movement, Vivekananda made Christianity look more reserved, more cultured, and more believable. He, unwittingly, became the spokesperson for what “not” to believe.

The other delegates did not have that ability. They were, as a group, well-spoken and reserved. They were not “wildly romantic,” and they did not use the

podium as a stage. They failed to fulfill the need to embrace a stereotype, and their quiet demeanors were not a threat to the beliefs of a Christian nation.

However, the Sikhs had the potential to draw attention *away* from the Christian faith. At the very least, they were not going to appear exotic. It would have been difficult for the Christian leaders to condemn the Sikhs for their belief in one true God, a single holy scripture, and a strong ethical code that was eerily similar to their own. Had they attempted to present the Sikh faith as wild, romantic, and strange, they would have been condemning practices that mirrored their own coveted tradition. There was, in fact, no way to criticize the Sikh tradition without placing their own tradition in a negative light. If pluralism was the actual purpose of the Parliament, the Sikhs would have been invited. However, that was not the overarching goal, therefore, the Sikhs *had* to be excluded.

This exclusion was the beginning of a conscious ignorance of the Sikh tradition. That unawareness was not adequately addressed in the century that followed the Parliament. America's unfamiliarity with the Sikh tradition continued until the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>. It may have remained in that state indefinitely, except the Sikhs joined together as a powerful diasporic voice and launched an educational campaign to break down the barriers that the historical silences had imposed upon them.

There are many lessons to discover in the story of the Sikh exclusion. They were, presumably purposefully, placed into a historical silence and left there for 108 years. In

that century, they continued to grow in silence. The Sikh diaspora became powerful, and they did so with little to no recognition. The ignorance of the American people was brought to light after the September 11 attacks, but the Sikh community did not shrink further into the silence, instead, they broke free of it.

Amandeep Sidhu, cofounder of The Sikh Coalition, recounts his experiences following the September 11 attacks. He writes:

“I remember meeting with two Sikh friends in my apartment on the weekend after the 9/11 attacks to discuss what we could do to make things better. How would we define who we were as Sikhs without simply deflecting hatred and bias onto members of the Muslim community? How would we prevent the “but we’re not Muslim” reaction that many members of the Sikh American community wanted to implement? Needless to say, we had to strike a careful balance to ensure not only that we grew stronger as Sikhs, but that our bonds to our fellow advocates in the Muslim, Arab, Hindu, and broader South Asian community were strengthened, not weakened. We resolved that our response would be: “We are Sikh, this is what Sikhs believe in, the Sikh faith is an independent religion from northern India, separate and distinct from Islam – and by the way, it is not OK to direct anger and frustration at innocent Muslims, Arabs, and South Asians.” With this nuanced response, we would simultaneously respond to our mistaken identity and educate others about who we were as a people.” (Sidhu and Gohil 166).

The Sikhs have responded, but they have done more than just respond. They have launched an entire Sikh’s Civil Rights campaign fighting for their protection and their right to practice their religion in America freely and without prejudice. With an estimated 700,000 Sikhs living in America, they have become successful in the diaspora,

earning more than the average American family per year. Most of their proceeds fund humanitarian works.

In 2017, a potential flood was threatening areas in Northern California. Hundreds of Americans were evacuated from their homes. There was nowhere for them to go. The local schools did not have the space or the supplies to house the quantity of evacuees that desperately needed shelter. The Sikh Gurdwaras, on the other hand, made room. Opening their doors to evacuees within 60 miles, the Sikh community came together to shelter, feed, and protect the victims. It has been reported that a single Gurdwara sheltered almost 300 people. The Sikh Community and the Gurdwaras asked for nothing in return (Williams).

Silences are continuing to be written into history. The Chicago Fair was designed to prove to the World that America had become a great superpower. The Congresses of the Fair were designed to supplement that sentiment. The purpose of the World Parliament of Religions was to display the dominance and the superiority of the Christian faith. First, by presenting the Christian tradition in a favorable way, then by displaying exotic, superstitious and presumably dangerous traditions. The visible contrast between the Christian tradition and the Other effectively highlighted their extreme differences and placed Christianity in a position to appear superior, more coherent and more stable to those in attendance.

The Sikh tradition was excluded from the event. They were not excluded because the tradition somehow failed to meet the prerequisites of "Religion," but



because the Sikh faith could not be used to make the Christian tradition appear more desirable. The Sikh tradition, with its monotheistic beliefs and strong ethical codes, would have appeared as a genuine rival of Christianity. The Sikh tradition could not be considered superstitious, romantic, dangerous, or exotic. If an Indic tradition was not those things, then what would Christians compare themselves too? Therefore, the Sikhs *had* to be excluded because they posed a genuine threat to the belief that Christianity was the supreme and true religion. Out of fear, they were written into a historical silence.

That silence enveloped the Sikh faith for over a century. During that time, Americans remained largely ignorant of the Sikh faith. As a result, many Americans wrongly blamed the Sikh community when they were attacked by terrorists. The Sikhs, being a diasporic community that had the ability, the means, and the desire to acknowledge the silence, took necessary steps to eradicate the injustice. But the astute student must be wary; what communities, people and groups have been silenced and left without the ability to find their voices?

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