



The Invasion of the Easterners

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THEY FIRST INVADED AMERICAN shores in 1883, when Protap Chunder Mozoomdar, a leader in the Brahmo Samaj, an offshoot of Hinduism in the Indian region of Bengal, traveled across America. Anagarika Dharmapala, a leader of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism from Ceylon, had been in touch with Americans for many years before he was invited to represent “Southern Buddhism” at the World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago. Then, in September, 1893, Swami Vivekananda, a young firebrand from the *Advaita* branch of Hinduism, wearing a red turban and bright orange robes, lit up the conference with his fiery oratory, in perfect, poetic English.

“After hearing him we feel how foolish it is to send missionaries to this learned nation,” the *New York Herald* wrote.

These eastern teachers were all from India, and Boston was kind to them. Sara Chapman Bull, of Brattle Street in Cambridge, became Vivekananda’s leading patron. And in Eliot, Maine, near Portsmouth, New Hampshire, Sarah J. Farmer provided a platform for them at Green Acre, her annual forum where she put the World’s Parliament of Religions on a permanent basis every summer. These were the men who offered American journalists the stereotypes that they would try to use to describe ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in 1912.

But these earlier speakers differed from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in several important ways.

First, India was struggling to free itself from British control. Therefore, the Indians brought a heavy anti-colonial message with them to America. At the Parliament in Chicago, Vivekananda excoriated church missionary efforts in India, telling the audience that India could use many things from the West, but that the churches could kindly keep their religion to themselves. Dharmapala made no apologies for linking Sinhalese Buddhism to the struggle for Ceylon’s independence, and Mozoomdar, and the poet Rabindranath Tagore after him, who happened to meet ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in America in 1912, placed Indian *cultural* nationalism at the center of their concerns. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in contrast, argued for a single global identity, and rarely addressed political affairs.

Second, Vivekananda was no slouch when it came to turning on the charm with

He was single and thirty years old when he came to Chicago. Dharmapala was also a single monk, aged twenty-nine, but he had taken a lifelong vow of chastity. But 'Abdu'l-Bahá had been married for over forty years. He and his wife, Munirih, had four educated, grown-up daughters and several grandchildren.

Third, while 'Abdu'l-Bahá had plenty of financial support for his trip, and a growing community of Bahá'ís in the United States who sometimes hosted him, the other easterners had no base of support in America. They were constantly raising money to support their travels and to fund their projects back home. Americans, especially the press, were regularly surprised that 'Abdu'l-Bahá was not only turning down offers of money, but was actually giving it out in America, such as at the Bowery Mission.

Fourth, and most importantly, the Indian teachers formulated a politicized rhetorical dichotomy that portrayed their "ancient" and "spiritual" East as superior to the degraded, *nouveau-riche*, "materialistic" West that surpassed them in global power. But 'Abdu'l-Bahá, from the moment he stepped off the *Cedric* in New York harbor, had praised America for its material, scientific, and entrepreneurial spirit, which he found to be powerful and unique. He also repeatedly stated his opinion that America's great *spiritual* capacity would enable them to lead the world to peace.

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FOOTNOTE / ENDNOTE:

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