

Conflating Race, Religion, and Progress

Social Change, National Identity, and Islam in the Post–Civil War Era

We are all a little wild here with numberless projects of social reform; not a reading man but has a draft of a new community in his waistcoat pocket.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1840)

The poly-religious common ground African Muslims sought with white Christians and non-Muslim Africans, though distinctive, was symptomatic of the times. Emerson's description of religious life in America in a letter to the historian and essayist Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881) captured the experimentalist, adaptive, heterogeneous, spiritualist, and individualistic ethos of religious life in antebellum America. The religious issues facing African Muslims were unique in many ways because of slavery and institutionalized racism, but as Nicholas Said's embrace of the teachings of the scientist, mystic, philosopher, exegete, and visionary Emanuel Swedenborg reminds us, not all African Muslims were cut off from the socio-religious reform movements to which Emerson referred.¹ Americans sought to adapt their religious lives to Enlightenment ideals and the founding principles of their new republic, and they were not

¹ Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 225f. For a discussion of Emanuel Swedenborg's influence on the religious movements that emerged in antebellum America see Catherine Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 140–144; and Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay on Swedenborg in his *Representative Men: Seven Lectures* (Boston, MA: Phillips, Sampson, and Company, 1850), 95–145. This latter book was inspired by Thomas Carlyle's *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1840), which has a chapter on "The Hero as Prophet. Mahomet: Islam." I am indebted to Steve Wasserstrom for bringing this relation to my attention.

wanting in prophets, visionaries, fraternities, or volunteer associations. Mormons, Shakers, Evangelicals, Theosophists, Transcendentalists, Freemasons, Adventists, and Millenarians (just to name a few) all offered their own interpretations of religion and communal life.

The rapid growth of immigration to the United States in the latter half of the nineteenth century further altered America's religious landscape. In 1775, Catholics numbered about 25,000. By 1860, an estimated 3 million Catholics lived in the United States, and by 1900 their number rose to 12 million. Most of them immigrated to the United States from Southern Europe. Many, however, became citizens of the United States as U.S. boundaries expanded westward into former French and Spanish colonies. In 1776, Jews numbered around 2,000. By 1860, there were about 150,000 Jews in the United States, and by the early 1900s their number had risen to 2 million.² The Gold Rush and demand for agricultural and industrial labor also brought large numbers of immigrants from China (and later Japan) to the United States. Between 1850 and 1900, some 300,000 Chinese immigrants came to the United States.³ As I will discuss in the following chapter, the first two decades of the twentieth century also saw the immigration of some 60,000 Muslims from Anatolia, the Levant, Eastern Europe, and South Asia.

The western expansion of the United States also brought more Native Americans within the boundaries of the country and increased their rate of contact and conflict with European Americans. The North's victory in the Civil War preserved the Union, but it offered no lasting solution to the integration of newly freed African Americans into the social, political, and economic life of the country. Both churches and fraternal orders played a crucial role in the development of a distinct African American society and culture following the Civil War. They served as places where African Americans could exercise self-governance, publically celebrate their citizenship, form mutual bonds of fellowship, and come to one another's aid. Many blacks withdrew from white churches and established their own congregations. New black denominations emerged, and older black denominations originally founded in the North came to establish churches in the South. Prince Hall Masonry, which was founded by a free black Freemason named Prince Hall in Boston in 1775, formed branches in the

² Bret E. Carrol, *Routledge Historical Atlas of Religion in America* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 90–95, 108.

³ Stephan Thernstrom, Ann Orlov, and Oscar Handlin, eds., *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 223.

South during the Reconstruction Era, while black southerners formed hundreds of other lodges and fraternal orders.⁴

The postbellum era was indeed a time of great social change. Increased ethnic and racial diversity and the heterogeneity of religious life in America, coupled with a bloody Civil War, called for the rethinking of the essential character of America. These questions were further complicated by greater access to information about other people's religions and ways of life. Many factors, in addition to the emancipation of slaves, increased immigration from abroad, and the colonization of Native American territories, decreased the distance between European American Protestants and others. Industrialization brought a great amount of wealth and jobs to American cities, further fueling domestic and international migration into the burgeoning cities of the Northeast and the Midwest. As industry replaced agriculture as the engine of America's economy, America became more urban and its urban centers became more diverse.

Furthermore, the steam engine and railroads facilitated travel throughout the world. The increasing globalization of commerce made rapid transportation available not only in Europe and North America but wherever European interests were found. The world was getting smaller. The vastness of the English Empire gave an advantage to Anglophones. It is thus not surprising that when Jules Verne wrote about a fictional trip "around the world in eighty days" in 1873, he adopted an English protagonist who completed his travels by traversing the English Empire and the United States. The decreasing of distances between peoples made possible by steam ships and railroads was not lost on Americans. In fact, what Verne imagined in 1873 had already been completed in 1870 by an eccentric American entrepreneur, George Francis Train, who wrote that "Jules Verne wrote fiction ... of my fact."⁵ In the latter part of the nineteenth century, missionaries, travelers, pilgrims to the Holy Land, soldiers, and merchants brought news, artifacts, and merchandise back to the United States from such diverse places as Italy, Greece, Egypt, China, Japan, India, West Africa, Syria, North Africa, Anatolia, and Persia.

Increased contact with cultural, religious, and ethnic differences stimulated the growth of new disciplines, such as ethnology, comparative philology, and comparative religion. The practitioners of these disciplines

⁴ Albert J. Raboteau, *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 68–71.

⁵ Train traveled around the world four times. His 1870 trip was his second trip and took eighty days. His shortest trip was in 1892 and lasted sixty days. George Francis Train,

sought to translate both the cultures and the texts of other societies into Western European and American vernaculars, making it all the more necessary for any construction of American identity at this time to grapple with what Americans believed they knew about other people's collective identities. In short, the transcontinental encounters and exchanges that led to the founding of the Atlantic world in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries came into their own in late-nineteenth-century America.

RESPONSES TO DIVERSITY

There was a myriad of responses to what it meant to be American in the face of the rapid diversification, urbanization, and industrialization of the United States in the latter part of the nineteenth century. What was significant in these responses for the history of Islam in America was the way in which they conflated industrial development, commercial capitalism, egalitarian Enlightenment ideals, science, rationality, the white race, and Protestant Christianity to argue for the superiority of Anglo-American, liberal Protestantism. In what follows, I refer to this in shorthand as the conflation of race, religion, and progress. "Progress" here denotes the positive value that was attributed to industrial development, capitalism, and Enlightenment thought of as civilizing forces in the evolutionary history of mankind. I should note that talking about these categories in terms of "conflations," though helpful today, would have been anachronistic in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Race, religion, and progress were not seen as distinct analytical categories that could be conflated. Rather, they were defined in relation to one another at this time to define a singular national identity.

In the antebellum period, Anglo-American Protestants had not felt a necessity to assert their preeminence in society. Their cultural, political, and economic dominance was palpable in virtually all aspects of American life. They constituted what historians have called "the establishment." Ethnic, racial, and religious minorities were "outsiders" who, as discussed in the previous chapter, could enter into relation with the establishment by trying to establish some sort of common ground. The emancipation of slaves along with increased immigration, industrialization, and urbanization altered not only the social and religious landscape of America but also its economic and political power structures. Not only was there more ethnic, racial, and religious diversity in the country but

My Life in Many States and in Foreign Lands: Dictated in My Seventy-Fourth Year (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1902), p. x.

there were new classes of elites emerging from these varying communities in urban centers throughout the United States. Industrial capitalism also allowed for the emergence of a *nouveau riche*, cosmopolitan class, the likes of the famed Scottish industrialist Andrew Carnegie. This new post-Civil War era was characterized more by religious competition than poly-religious practices, and the competition was over the cultural authority to define America's national identity and to lay claim to its economic, industrial, and scientific advancements. The conflation of race, religion, and progress was thus a means by which nineteenth-century Anglo-American Protestants, awash in ethnic, racial, and religious diversity, sought to hold on to their dominant position in society by defining America as an essentially white, Protestant country, uniquely committed to progress.

The triumphant articulation of a white, Protestant American national identity through the conflation of race, religion, and progress is important for narrating the history of Islam in America at the turn of the twentieth century for two reasons. First, this conflation functioned as a matrix into which others could define their own identities in order to lay claim to America's progress and to help reshape America's national identity. As the next chapter will illustrate, early immigrants from South Asia and the Levant self-identified as members of the "white race" and, in the case of Christian Levantine immigrants, touted their association with the homeland of Jesus Christ as a means of becoming legal citizens and participating in America's modernity. Ironically insofar as such efforts were successful (particularly for lighter-skinned, Levantine Arabs), an establishment venture that was intended to maintain the social and cultural authority of the Protestants in actuality abetted the diversification of America by allowing for the inclusion of some non-Anglo, non-Protestants from the Muslim-majority world into American society as citizens.

Secondly, in the context of European imperialism, a similar discourse around race, religion, and progress was employed to justify the colonization of much of the Muslim-majority world as a "civilizing" or "modernizing" project, the ethos of which Rudyard Kipling captured in the title of one of his poems, "The White Man's Burden."⁶ The first Muslim missionaries who immigrated to the United States in this period were intimately familiar with the way in which race, religion, and progress were conflated to support the colonization and oppression of dark-skinned non-Europeans. These Muslim missionaries did not challenge

⁶ For two classic discussions of these processes, see Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) and Timothy Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988).

the soundness of the conflation of race, religion, and progress through which an American national identity was articulated. As I will discuss in the latter half of this chapter, the earliest Muslim missionaries in the United States had to grapple with this conflation in order to articulate Islam's place within it. Chapter 5 will show how later Muslim missionaries' decision to proselytize in America was in large part influenced by a desire to turn the table on white Christians by arguing for the superiority of Islam as a race-blind religion, particularly suited for progress and modernity. They found their firmest footing in America among African Americans who had migrated to the North in search of a share in America's progress but were disappointed by the racism they encountered.

WHOSE COUNTRY?

The conflation of race, religion, and progress was already present in the development of the conception of "civilization" in earlier encounters between Anglo-American Protestants and African Muslims discussed in Chapter 1. In the late nineteenth century, under the influence of social evolutionary ideas developed around the works of such thinkers as Charles Darwin (1809–1882) and Herbert Spencer (1820–1906), this notion reached a triumphant pitch.⁷ The Congregationalist minister Josiah Strong, for example, wrote in his best-selling book, *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis* (1885):

If the dangers of immigration [from southern Europe], which have been pointed out, can be successfully met for the next few years, until it has passed its climax, it may be expected to add value to the amalgam which will constitute the new Anglo-Saxon race of the New World. Concerning our future, Herbert Spencer says: "One great result is, I think, tolerably clear. From biological truths it is to be inferred that the eventual mixture of the allied varieties of the Aryan race, forming the population, will produce a more powerful type of man than has hitherto existed, and a type of man more plastic, more adaptable, more capable of undergoing the modifications needful for complete social life. I think, whatever difficulties they may have to surmount, and whatever tribulations they may have to pass through, the Americans may reasonably look forward to a time when they will have produced a civilization grander than any the world has known."⁸

⁷ It should be noted that Darwin himself disavowed any relation between his biological findings and the evolutionary social theories espoused by Spencer at others at the time.

⁸ Josiah Strong, *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis* (New York: The Baker and Taylor Co., 1885), 172.

Strong attributed Spencer's prediction of American triumph to "two great ideas" forged out of the Enlightenment and the Protestant Reformation: *civil liberty* and *spiritual Christianity*:

The noblest races have always been lovers of liberty ... but it was left to the Anglo-Saxon branch fully to recognize the right of the individual to himself, and formally to declare it the foundation stone of government. The other great idea of which the Anglo-Saxon is the exponent is that of pure *spiritual* Christianity. It was no accident that the great reformation of the sixteenth century originated among a Teutonic, rather than a Latin people. It was the fire of liberty burning in the Saxon heart that flamed up against the absolutism of the Pope. Speaking roughly, the peoples of Europe which are Celtic are Catholic, and those which are Teutonic are Protestant; and where the Teutonic race was purest, there Protestantism spread with the greatest rapidity.... That means that most of the spiritual Christianity in the world is found among Anglo-Saxons and their converts; for this is the great missionary race.⁹

Strong further pointed to the "successes" of the Anglo-Saxons in commerce, industry, and empire-building as providential affirmation of Anglo-Saxon superiority:

This mighty Anglo-Saxon race, though comprising only one-fifteenth part of mankind, now rules more than one-third of the earth's surface, and more than one-fourth of its people.... Does it not look as if God were not only preparing in our Anglo-Saxon civilization the die with which to stamp the peoples of the earth, but as if he were also massing behind that die the mighty power with which to press it?... The physical changes accompanied by mental, which are taking place in the people of the United States are apparently to adapt men to the demands of a higher civilization.... "At the present day," says Mr. Darwin, "civilized nations are everywhere supplanting barbarous nations...; and they succeed mainly, though not exclusively, through their arts which are the products of the intellect?" Thus the Finns were supplanted by the Aryan races of Europe and Asia, the Tartars by the Russians, and thus the aborigines of North America, Australia and New Zealand are now disappearing before the all-conquering Anglo-Saxons. It would seem as if these inferior tribes were only precursors of a superior race, voices in the wilderness crying: "Prepare ye the way of the Lord!"¹⁰

Strong's vision for America struck a chord with popular nativist opposition to the increased ethnic and religious diversification of the United States at this time. "Neither he nor most of his readers felt any doubt about just who it was that *our* [in *Our Country*] referred to."¹¹

⁹ *Ibid.*, 159–160.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 161–176.

¹¹ William R. Hutchison, *Religious Pluralism in America: The Contentious History of a Founding Ideal* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 139.

Later in life, Strong, who was one of the founders of the liberal Social Gospel Movement, which sought to apply Jesus' teachings to the social challenges of industrialism and urban life, retreated from his hyper-optimistic rhetoric and its implicitly biological notion of race. To be fair, Strong's appeal to race, even between the covers of *Our Country*, was not consistent. "Anglo-Saxon" was an ambiguous racial category in *Our Country*. People like Strong often conflated "race" with "nation." "Anglo-Saxon" did not always designate a biological race; it also served as an assimilative place holder for the providential spread of Protestant Christianity to all peoples in the world.¹² The Anglo-Saxon race and Protestantism were the cultural and moral sources through which he sought to address the social perils he identified in a rapidly diversifying and industrializing America. These perils included "Romanism," polygamy (Mormonism), intemperance, rapid urbanization, socialism, and the mammon.

WHICH RELIGION? LET'S COMPARE THEM!

There were other, milder articulations of Anglo-American superiority that were also influenced by pseudo-scientific social evolutionary theories, but these were more likely to see Protestantism as fulfilling rather than supplanting other religions. The most influential advocate of such a position was James Freeman Clarke, a Unitarian minister who in 1867 was appointed to the faculty of Harvard Divinity School to teach "Comparative Theology," which entailed lectures on "world religions." He was most likely "this country's first academic lecturer on the subject." In 1871, Clarke published *Ten Great Religions: An Essay in Comparative Theology*, which went through numerous editions and "became by all odds the most widely read American work on the history and comparison of world religions past and present."¹³ Comparative theology viewed itself as akin to ethnology and evolutionary biology as an impartial mode of scientific inquiry. Its practitioners saw themselves as students of different religious beliefs and practices with the aim of defining what is "Religion," in the singular. "It may be called a science," Clarke wrote, "since it consists in the study of the facts of

¹² Ralph E. Luker, *The Social Gospel in Black and White: American Racial Reform, 1885–1912* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 268–275.

¹³ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *The American Protestant Encounter with World Religions* (Beloit, WI: Beloit College, 1962), 27–28.

human history, and their relation to each other. It does not dogmatize; it observes.”¹⁴ Despite claims to objectivity, the results of these observations were for the most part foregone conclusions: “It will be seen that each of the great ethnic religions [*note the plural*] is full on one side, but empty on the other while Christianity is full all around. Christianity is adapted to take their place, not because they are false, but because they are true as far as they go.”¹⁵ Clarke defined “ethnic religions” as “religions, each of which has always been confined within the boundaries of a particular race or family of mankind, and has never made proselytes or converts, except accidentally, outside of it.”¹⁶ According to this definition, Islam, a religion that expanded around the globe, should have been considered a “universal religion.” Clarke, however, contested that while this may appear to be the case, “Mohammedanism has never sought to make *converts*, but only *subjects*; it has not asked for belief, but merely for submission”¹⁷ (emphasis his). Similarly, Clarke argued that while Buddhism “has shown some tendencies toward catholicity” because it “has extended itself over the whole of the eastern half of Asia,” it only “includes a variety of nationalities, it is doubtful if it includes any variety of races. All the Buddhists,” he wrote, “appear to belong to the great Mongol family.”¹⁸

Far from an objective exercise in the scientific study of religion, Clarke’s comparative theology was committed to rationalizing the superiority of Protestantism in a country of increasing religious diversity. Clarke identified non-Protestant religions as “partial religions” in an evolutionary scale that was informed by pseudo-scientific theories about race and its relation to moral behavior and civilizational progress. “Now we find that each race, beside its special moral qualities, seems also to have special religious qualities which cause it to tend toward some one kind of religions more than to another kind.”¹⁹ According to this view, there was a natural connection between the races and religions of the world, which led Clarke to conclude that Protestantism, as the “universal religion” endowed with rational principles and truth, was necessarily a product of Northern Europeans and their descendants:

¹⁴ James Freeman Clarke, *Ten Great Religions: An Essay in Comparative Theology* (Boston, MA: James R. Osgood and Company, 1871), 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 16–17.

In the South of Europe the Catholic Church, by its ingenious organization and its complex arrangements, introduced into life discipline and culture. In the North of Europe Protestant Christianity, by its appeal to the individual soul, awakens conscience and stimulates to individual and national progress. The nations of Southern Europe accepted Christianity mainly as a religion of sentiment and feeling; the nations of Northern Europe, as a religion of truth and principle. God adapted Christianity to the needs of these Northern races; but he also adapted these races, with their original instincts and their primitive religion, to the needs of Christianity. Without them, we do not see how there could be such a thing in Europe to-day as Protestantism.²⁰

The superiority of Protestantism for Clarke was demonstrated, just as it was for Strong, by Northern Europeans' "civilizational" progress toward such Enlightenment ideals as universal brotherhood and individual liberty on the one hand, and by its sheer power on the other.

The North [of Europe] developed individual freedom, the South social organization. The North gave force, the South culture.... But in modern civilization a third element has been added, which has brought these two powers of Northern freedom and Southern culture into equipoise and harmony. This new element is Christianity, which develops, at the same time, the sense of personal responsibility, by teaching the individual destiny and worth of every soul, and also the mutual dependence and interlacing brotherhood of all human society. This Christian element in modern civilization saves it from the double danger of a relapse into barbarism on the one hand, and a too refined luxury on the other. The nations of Europe, to-day, which are the most advanced in civilization, literature, and art, are also the most deeply pervaded with the love of freedom; and the most civilized nations on the globe, instead of being the most effeminate, are also the most powerful.²¹

Non-Northern Europeans and their "partial religions," according to Clarke, were the "decaying soil" in which the "universal religion" of Protestantism "must root itself."²² Clarke explained: "When the Papacy became a tyranny, and the Renaissance called for free thought, it suddenly put forth Protestantism, as the tree by the water-side sends forth its shoots in due season."²³ The power and progress of Anglo-Saxon Protestants in the latter half of the nineteenth century was proof that that season had come.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 395.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 359–360.

²² *Ibid.*, 2.

²³ *Ibid.*, 29–30.

CONSERVATIVE REACTIONS

While liberal Protestants took for granted that “civilizational progress” could be used as an empirical measure of the veracity and utility of religion, more conservative Protestants objected to the fact that such a measure privileged human activity over scriptural authority and doctrinal fidelity. They maintained that the Protestant establishment, rather than adapting to religious diversity and reforming in response to the social changes of the time, should stick to the business of saving souls through Christ. To cite but one example, Reverend S. H. Kellogg, a Presbyterian missionary to India and the author of *A Handbook of Comparative Religion* (1899), took liberal Protestants, such as Clarke, to task on this issue:

As Christians, we do well also to keep in mind that not only is the fashionable modern view as to the evolutionary religious progress of mankind, and the relation of the various ethnic religions to Christianity, contradicted by the facts of history, but also, no less certainly, is it in the most direct opposition to the teachings of those Scriptures which as Christians we profess to receive as the Word of God. In both the Old and the New Testaments, there is much about the religions which surrounded the writers of the various books; and never once do those writers, speaking ‘as they were moved by the Holy Ghost’ exhibit that broad ‘sympathy’ with the ethnic religions which, we are now taught by many, it is the first duty of the intelligent Christian to cherish.²⁴

For Kellogg and ilk, the Bible, not evolutionary progress nor rationally or socially determined truths, was the litmus test for the veracity of religion: “Nothing could be more explicit than the words of the apostle with regard to Jesus Christ: ‘In none other is there salvation: for neither is there any other name under heaven, that is given among men, wherein we must be saved’ ” (Acts 4:12).²⁵

For Clarke and other liberal Protestants, however, such a position did not take into account what they regarded as the reality of human nature. In Clarke’s view, all of humanity innately sought God, and to assume that non-Christian searches for God were utterly false was disrespectful of humanity’s inborn religious nature and irreverent of divine providence. He wrote:

[Such a view] supposes man to be the easy and universal dupe of fraud. But these religions do not rest on such a sandy foundation, but on the feeling of dependence,

²⁴ Samuel H. Kellogg, *A Handbook of Comparative Religion* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1899), 160.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 172f, quote on 177.

the sense of accountability, the recognition of spiritual realities very near to this world of matter, and the need of looking up and worshiping some unseen power higher and better than ourselves. A decent respect for the opinions of mankind forbids us to ascribe pagan religions to priestcraft as their chief source. And a reverence for Divine Providence brings us to the same conclusion. Can it be that God has left himself without a witness in the world, except among the Hebrews? This narrow creed excludes God from any communion with the great majority of human beings. The Father of the human race is represented as selecting a few of his children to keep near himself, and as leaving all the rest to perish in their ignorance and error.²⁶

Clarke's respect for others' religious understandings and his recognition of the human as "eminently a religious being," were not only ways by which he sought to make theological sense of religious diversity, but also attempts to assure the preeminence of Protestantism by adapting it to a modernizing world that was coming increasingly under the influence of science and non-religious theories of progress. The notion that non-Christian religions are completely false, he wrote,

contradicts that law of progress which alone gives meaning and unity to history. Instead of progress, it teaches degeneracy and failure. But elsewhere [in the natural world], we see progress, not recession. Geology shows us higher forms of life succeeding to the lower. Botany exhibits the lichens and mosses preparing a soil for more complex forms of vegetation. Civil history shows the savage state giving way to the semi-civilized, and that to the civilized. If heathen religions are a step, a preparation for Christianity, then this law of degrees [i.e., evolution] appears also in religion.... Then we can understand why Christ's coming was delayed till the fullness of the time had come. But otherwise all, in this most important sphere of human life, is in disorder, without unity, progress, meaning, or providence.²⁷

Clarke's scientific discourse was intended to counter the rise of scientific positivism and moral relativism, which in his view asserted "that man passes from a theological stage to one of metaphysics, and from that to one of science, from which later and higher epoch both theology and philosophy are excluded."²⁸ Clarke's underscoring of the rationally determined innateness of religion and his assertion that Protestantism is directly related to contemporary progress of humanity was intended to demonstrate the continued relevance of religion (read Protestantism) in the new, modern United States of America:

²⁶ Clarke, *Ten Great Religions*, 7–8.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 489.



FIGURE 2. A session of the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions. From John Henry Barrows's *The World's Parliament of Religions* (1893).

[Protestant] Christianity blossoms out into modern science, literature, art,... Christianity, the spirit of faith, hope, and love, is the deep fountain of modern civilization.... We cannot, indeed, here *prove* that Christianity is the cause of these features peculiar to modern life; but we find it everywhere associated with them, and so we can say that it only, of all the religions of mankind, has been capable of accompanying man in his progress from evil to good, from good to better.²⁹

THE WORLD'S PARLIAMENT OF RELIGIONS (1893)

By making the shared humanity of adherents of different religions the basis of Protestant encounters with other religions and by ranking religions according to an evolutionary scale of “civilizational progress,” Clarke posited an understanding of religious diversity that captured postbellum liberal Protestant America’s understanding of itself and its place in history. Following the Civil War, the United States constitutionally affirmed its founding belief in the equality of *all* men through the passage of the 13th–15th Amendments, which outlawed slavery and granted citizenship to former slaves and voting rights to black men. Nonetheless, most Americans valued humanity as measured by a civilizational scale of “progress.”

Perhaps nowhere was white America’s self-understanding after the Civil War better synthesized and more publically demonstrated than at

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition of Chicago. The Columbian Exposition was a triumphalist celebration of American industry and progress on the 400-year anniversary of Christopher Columbus's arrival in the "New World." Other massive world fairs had taken place in London (1886) and Paris (1889) and Philadelphia (1876), but the Chicago fair was deliberately organized to exceed all of them in extravagance and publicity. The fair was divided into two contrasting parts. At one end was the White City, which displayed the marvels of American industry, wealth, and ingenuity; at the other was the Midway, a vast display of people of varying races and ethnicities, imported from all over the world, placed in simulated village settings, and ordered on an evolutionary scale to demonstrate the progress of humanity toward the (fittingly named) White City.³⁰

The perceived relation between race, religion, and progress was unmistakable in the spatial ordering of the Midway. The Teutonic and Celtic races represented by German and Irish villages were situated closest to the White City. In the middle were the "semi-civilized" worlds of Muslims and other West and East Asians.³¹ Then, at the opposite end of the White City, in the words of a contemporary literary critic, Denton J. Snider, "we descend to the savage races, the African of Dahomey and the North American Indian, each of which has its place."³² Newspapers underscored the didactic message of the fair's evolutionary ordering of space and time. "What an opportunity," wrote the *Chicago Tribune*, "was here afforded to the scientific mind to descend the spiral of evolution, tracing humanity in its highest phases down almost to its animalistic origins."³³

Indelible impressions left by the contrast between the White City and the Midway on fairgoers were captured in a contemporary novel titled, *Sweet Clover*:

That Midway is just a representation of matter, and this great White City is an emblem of mind. In the Midway it's some dirty and all barbaric. It deafens you with noise; the worst folks in there are avaricious and bad; and the best are just children in their ignorance, and when you're feelin' bewildered with the smells and sounds and sights, always changin' like one o' these kaleidoscopes, and when you come out o' that mile-long babel [i.e., the Midway] where you've been

³⁰ See Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876–1916* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 38–71.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

³² Denton J. Snider, *World's Fair Studies* (Chicago, IL: Sigma Publishing Company, 1895), 256.

³³ "Through the Looking Glass," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 1, 1893, 9.

elbowed and cheated, you pass under a bridge – and all of a sudden you are in a great, beautiful silence [i.e., the White City]. The angels on the Woman’s Buildin’ smile down and bless you, and you know that in what seemed like one step, you’ve passed out o’ darkness and into light.³⁴

What the World’s Columbian Exposition in particular and the European and American world fairs of the era more generally demonstrated for contemporaries was the *power* of their countries to order the world and to reproduce others’ realities.³⁵ The Columbian Exposition was triumphalist in its display of the United States’ image of itself and smug in its ability to “empirically” and “scientifically” demonstrate U.S. superiority in a simulated world, complete with “natives” from every corner of the world who gaily played out their traditional roles for America’s education and amusement.

The president of the World’s Congresses at the Columbian Exposition, Charles C. Bonney, a lay member of the Swedenborgian Church, decided that one of the congresses should be on “world religions” in order to demonstrate the contributions religion, as an innate aspect of human experience, has made to humanity’s evolutionary progress. Bonney selected John Henry Barrows, a minister at Chicago’s First Presbyterian Church, to chair this congress, which came to be known as the World’s Parliament of Religions. Barrows invited representatives of varying religions from different parts of the world to take part in the congress, but Protestants ended up comprising about 65 percent of the final delegate count.³⁶

The Parliament was organized with the same sense of triumphalism present at the rest of the Exposition. The underlying assumption of the Parliament was that an “empirical” and “scientific” examination of the world’s religions would show the superiority of America’s liberal Protestant understandings of religion as an individualistic and spiritual connection with a loving and beneficent deity that shapes humans’ moral and social behavior. In his welcome address, Bonney asserted that “[i]n this Congress the word ‘Religion’ means the love and worship of God and the love and service of man. We believe the scripture that ‘of a truth God is no respecter of persons, but in every nation he that feareth God

³⁴ Clara Louisa Burnham, *Sweet Clover* (Chicago, IL: Laird and Lee, 1893), 201, cited in Rydell, *All the World’s a Fair*, 67.

³⁵ See Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, 1–34.

³⁶ Richard H. Seager, *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism: Voices From the World’s Parliament of Religions, 1893* (La Salle, IL: Open Court Publishing, 1993), 35.

and worketh righteousness is accepted of him’,” (Acts 10:34–35).³⁷ He further exclaimed that “the members of this Congress meet, as men, on a common ground of perfect equality.... But no attempt is here made to treat all religions as of equal merit.”³⁸ Barrows, in his introductory comments, went on to assert that the very fact that the Parliament was planned and realized by American Protestant Christians, who possess the ability, the foresight, and the religion “fitted to the needs of all men,” demonstrates the superiority of their faith: “Christendom may proudly hold up this Congress of the Faiths as a torch of truth and of love which may prove the morning star of the twentieth century. There is a true and noble sense in which America is a Christian nation.... Justice Ameer Ali, of Calcutta,...has expressed the opinion that only in this Western republic would such a congress as this have been undertaken and achieved.”³⁹

Even though they had invited others to come and speak to them about the values found in their varying religions, Barrows and other organizers saw the Parliament as a form of missionary work.⁴⁰ They believed that once they had spoken of the value of their faith and of its contribution to human progress – as evidenced by the industrial, scientific, and aesthetic wonders on display at the White City – they would convince others of the superiority of their religion. Moreover, by demonstrating the important contributions religions more generally had made to human progress over time, the organizers also wanted to demonstrate to their fellow citizens the relevance of religion – properly understood – to the material progress of their nation on display at the Columbian Exposition.

In the World’s Parliament of Religions we see the ideas of Clarke and his ilk reaching their logical conclusion; the valuing of others’ quest for the divine ultimately meant that adherents of other religions should be allowed to speak for themselves. Barrows defined the Parliament as a place “wherein devout men of all faiths may speak for themselves without

³⁷ Charles Carroll Bonney, “Words of Welcome,” reprinted in Seager, *Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, 17.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

³⁹ John Henry Barrows, “Words of Welcome,” reprinted in Seager, *Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, 24–25.

⁴⁰ James Freeman Clarke’s explanation of Comparative Theology demonstrates this point: “Finally, this department of Comparative Theology shows the relation of each partial religion to human civilization, and observes how each religion of the world is a step in the progress of humanity. It shows that both the position and the negative side of a religion make it a preparation for a higher religion, and that the universal religion must root itself in the decaying soil of partial religions. And in this sense Comparative Theology becomes the science of missions.” Clarke, *Ten Great Religions*, 2.

hindrance, without criticism and without compromise, and tell what they believe and why they believe it.”⁴¹ Similarly, Bonney asserted that “the very basis of our convocation is the idea that the representatives of each religion sincerely believe that it is the truest and the best of all; and that they will, therefore, hear with perfect candor and without fear the convictions of other sincere souls on the great questions of the immortal life.”⁴² In this sense, the Parliament was a true watershed. It was, as some have correctly observed, a major turning point in American religious history.⁴³ The national newspaper coverage of the Parliament popularized ecumenism and the notion that there is some value in other religions, and argued that religion in the singular, a “universal religion,” has to *account for* rather than *eradicate* diversity of religious opinions among humans. It also allowed average Americans to come face to face with members of other religious traditions, some of whom, such as Vivekananda, a young Hindu reformer, stayed in the United States and lectured on the universal teachings of their religion to small but receptive audiences among American seekers of spirituality.

During the Parliament, Americans heard from members of other religious traditions who were as smug about the veracity of their religions as liberal Protestants. Before entering this discussion, however, it is important to note the voices that were not heard. No Mormon was officially invited to participate in the Parliament. Most of the women who spoke at the Parliament were of liberal Protestant denominations, either Universalists or Unitarians. Several Jewish women also spoke, but no women from other religious traditions were represented. The voices of African Americans and Native Americans were conspicuously underrepresented. There was one brief, anthropological paper on Native Americans, and only two African Americans spoke.⁴⁴ These limited African American voices were particularly significant because they belied the triumphalist spirit of the Exposition. Bishop Benjamin Arnett of the African Methodist Episcopal Church told the Parliament in a congratulatory tone that “We have gathered from the East, from the West, from the North, from the South this day to celebrate the triumph of human freedom on the American continent. For there is not one slave within all of our borders.” But he also sought to curb the triumphalism of the

⁴¹ Barrows, “Words of Welcome,” reprinted in Seager, *Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, 25.

⁴² Bonney, “Words of Welcome,” reprinted in Seager, *Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, 21.

⁴³ Seager, “Pluralism and the American Mainstream: The View from the World’s Parliament of Religions,” *Harvard Theological Review* 82, n. 3 (July 1989), 301–324, esp. 304n7.

⁴⁴ Seager, *Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, 6–7.

Parliament by reminding his audience of the evils committed in the name of Christianity in America:

We know what has been done in the name of Christianity, in the name of religion, in the name of God. We were stolen from our native land in the name of religion, chained as captives, and brought to this continent in the name of the liberty of the gospel; they bound our limbs with fetters in the name of the liberty of the gospel; they bound our limbs with fetters in the name of the Nazarene in order to save our souls; they sold us to teach the principles of religion; they sealed the Bible to increase our faith in God; pious prayers were offered for those who chained our fathers, who stole our mothers, who sold our brothers for paltry gold, all in the name of Christianity, to save our poor souls. When the price of flesh went down the interest in our souls became small; when the slave trade was abolished by the strong hand of true Christianity, then false Christianity had no interest in our souls at all.⁴⁵

An aging Frederick Douglass, the only other African American to speak at the Parliament, was not on the schedule but was asked as an audience member to address the Parliament extemporaneously on the anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. In his own brilliant rhetoric, he sardonically drew the audience's attention to the fact that they were in a bubble, secluded from the religious prejudices of the world that surrounded them. "I did not come here to speak," he told visitors of the Parliament.

I am somewhat in the condition of a man who attended a missionary meeting in London. "Give me a subject," he said, when called upon for a speech, "and I will address you." Said his friends, sitting behind him: "Pitch into the Roman Catholics." I take it that it would be very dangerous in this meeting to pitch into the Roman Catholics, for we are all Catholics, ready to strike hands with all manner of men, from all then nations of the earth, not disposed to draw the line anywhere absolutely.⁴⁶

Douglass concluded his speech by asserting that, in the age of Jim Crow, he was more concerned with "human rights" than "human religions." By distinguishing the two concepts, Douglass struck an open blow to the Parliament's attempt to demonstrate that the two concepts were necessarily related to one another in American Protestantism. He questioned "whether this great nation of ours is great enough to live up to its own convictions, carry out its own declaration of independence, and execute the provisions of its own constitution."⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Benjamin William Arnett, "Christianity and the Negro," reprinted in Seager, *Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, 140.

⁴⁶ Frederick Douglass, "Impromptu Comments," reprinted in Seager, *Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, 135.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 135–136.

This contrast in the way in which blacks and whites experienced the Columbian Exposition and the World's Parliament of Religions underscores the fact that the "common ground of perfect equality" which Bonney sought to create religiously had no real index in the social and political world of late-nineteenth-century America. There were no African American Muslim voices from the Parliament, but, as we saw in the previous chapter, some African Muslims, like 'Umar ibn Said, also sought to establish common religious ground with their white masters in order to hold them morally accountable to God. One could imagine that had they been present at the Parliament, they too would have been keenly aware of the disparity in power between blacks and whites and of the hypocritical gap between confessed religious ideals and sociopolitical realities. This, after all, was a time of Anglo-Saxon, Protestant triumphalism, popular nativism, Jim Crow, and an increase in racial violence, especially lynching. It was also a time of grave social change brought on by the rise of industrial cities and the slums that accompanied them. The World's Parliament of Religions was a historical turning point in the history of religious pluralism in the United States, but it was also an aberration in its own time. Its goals and aims did not correspond to the reality of contemporary American society which was marked by social unrest and antagonistic competition between races, ethnicities, and religions. It is thus not surprising that soon after the Columbian Exposition the Parliament was for the most part forgotten until the 1980s, when interest in religious pluralism was rekindled in light of the arrival of new immigrant religions from Asia and Africa in the 1960s and 1970s.⁴⁸

MOHAMMED ALEXANDER RUSSELL WEBB: THEOSOPHY, THE PARLIAMENT, AND INDIAN ISLAM

While the steps taken at the Parliament to allow the practitioners of other religions to speak for themselves was too radical for most Americans in the 1890s, there were a few Americans, mainly Theosophists, who were assimilating science and "Eastern" religions into a new "Western" religious

⁴⁸ Seager, "Pluralism and the American Mainstream," 303–308. Despite the fact that the Parliament slipped from the minds of most Americans at the turn of the twentieth century, there were some marginal ventures that sought to realize the pluralistic ideals of the Parliament at such places as Greenacre in Maine. See Leigh E. Schmidt, "Cosmopolitan Piety: Sympathy, Comparative Religions, and Nineteenth Century Liberalism" in *Practicing Protestants: Histories of Christian Life in America, 1630–1965*, ed. Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, Leigh E. Schmidt, and Mark Valeri (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2006), 218.



FIGURE 3. Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb. From *Neely's History of the Parliament of Religions and Religious Congresses at the World's Columbian Exposition* (1893).

discourse. In this process, Theosophists were in conversation both with native practitioners of “Eastern” religions and with scholars of comparative philology and comparative religion.⁴⁹ They served as intermediaries between liberal Protestants and the exotic “East,” providing the intellectual means and social networks through which the imagined religious

⁴⁹ For a concise authoritative overview of the Theosophical Society and its impact on Western esoteric thought, see Kocku von Stuckard, *Western Esotericism: A Brief History of Secret Knowledge* (London: Equinox, 2005), 122–132.

other could be culturally and socially encountered in the flesh. Indeed, many of the Asian scholars of Buddhism and Hinduism who attended the Parliament were Theosophists, and there were a number of American Theosophist delegates at the Parliament. The one representative of Islam at the Parliament, Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb, was an American diplomat and a Theosophist who formally converted to Islam around 1888 and went on to found the first American Muslim mission – the short-lived American Islamic Propaganda – in New York City in 1892.⁵⁰

Webb's religious journey represents an important counter-establishment response to the social changes and increased religious diversity of his time. Webb, like most of his contemporary Theosophists, was spiritual in the sense that he believed in an immortal soul and spiritual existence, but was deeply resentful of the Christian church. Early in life he rejected Christianity and embarked on a personal search for "religion" by studying Theosophical literature on varying "Eastern" religions. He eventually settled on Islam and decided to propagate its teachings in America in an effort to define an alternate American national identity, one that was anti-ecclesiastical and promoted free thought. He gained financial and moral support for his mission from a few Muslim merchants in India who, like their American counterparts, were also at this time awash in religious diversity and sociopolitical change brought about by British colonial rule. Some of these Indian Muslims saw in Webb a "white hope" who could assist in reviving a spirit of education and progress among Muslims in India (discussed below). In sum, Webb's extraordinary life journey exemplified personally how Islamic and American religious histories intersected at the turn of the twentieth century.

Webb was born to a Presbyterian family in Hudson, New York in 1846. He reported that as an adolescent, he was disillusioned by the church and "orthodox Christianity." In typical romantic fashion, he recalled enjoying the "sermons preached by God Himself through the murmuring brooks, the gorgeous flowers and the joyous birds" more than the "abstruse discourses of the minister."⁵¹ After graduating from Claverack College, Webb moved to Missouri to work as a journalist and eventually became the editor of the *Missouri Republican*. While working

⁵⁰ Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, 332; Umar F. Abd-Allah, *A Muslim in Victorian America: The Life of Alexander Russell Webb* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 66.

⁵¹ Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb, *The Three Lectures of Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb, Esq., Delivered at Madras, Hyderabad (Deccan) and Bombay, with a Brief Sketch of His Life* (Madras: Hassan Ali, Lawrence Asylum Press, 1892), 24.

as a journalist, he explained: “After trying in vain to find something in the Christian system to satisfy the longings of my soul and meet the demands of reason, I drifted into materialism, and for several years had no religion at all.”⁵² He dabbled in Spiritualism and the occult.⁵³ In 1881 he joined the Pioneer Theosophical Society of St. Louis.⁵⁴ He studied “Oriental religions” through Theosophical literature and works popular with Theosophists, such as Paul Carus’s *The Gospel of Buddha*.⁵⁵ When he explained his conversion to Muslim audiences in India, Webb, aware that other Muslims would most likely disapprove of his association with Theosophy, mentioned that he had read Theosophical literature but never divulged that he became a Theosophist. He told his Muslim audiences in India that “I will not weary you with details [of my conversion] further than to say that at that time I had access to a most excellent library of about 13,000 volumes, from four to seven hours a day at my disposal, and that I was intensely in earnest in my efforts to solve the mysteries of life and death, and to know what relation the religious systems of the world bore to these mysteries.”⁵⁶ The latter part of this statement regarding his questioning of the mysteries of life and death and the relation between religions and these mysteries clearly hinted at his continued involvement with the Theosophical Society, and long after his conversion, contemporary members of the Theosophical Society counted him – though coolly – as one of them.⁵⁷

Webb was convinced that Theosophy was compatible with Islam. “My adoption of Islam” he wrote, “was not the result of misguided sentiment, blind credulity or sudden emotional impulse.” After some years of studying “Oriental religions” through a Theosophical lens, Webb arrived at a personal theory of religion and then went out to find the religion that matched his theory:

After I had fully satisfied myself of the immortality of the soul, and that the conditions of the life beyond the grave were regulated by the thoughts, deeds and acts of the earth life; that man was, in a sense, his own savior and redeemer, and that the intercession of anyone between him and his God could be of no benefit to him, I began to compare the various religions, in order to ascertain which was

⁵² Ibid., 24.

⁵³ “Hopes to Islamize America,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 21, 1892, 2.

⁵⁴ *The Path* 8 (1893–1894), 27.

⁵⁵ Webb, *The Three Lectures*, 12; Abd-Allah, *A Muslim in Victorian America*, 57.

⁵⁶ Webb, *The Three Lectures*, 24.

⁵⁷ *The Path* 8 (1893–1894), 27, 112; *Lucifer: A Theosophical Magazine* 11 (September 1892–February 1893), 428–429.

the best and most efficacious as a means of securing happiness in the next life. To do this it was necessary to apply to each system, not only the tests of reason, but certain truths which I had learned during my long course of study and experiment outside the lines of orthodoxy, and in fields which priest and preacher usually avoid. And now let us see what Islam really is, and I think the reader will readily understand why I accept it.⁵⁸

Webb's readings in apologies for Islam by John Davenport and Godfrey Higgins⁵⁹ and in English translations of works by such Muslim mystics as Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali (d. 1111), Mushrif al-Din Sa'di (d. 1292), and Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273),⁶⁰ led him to see Islam as an instantiation of "rational" or "universal" religion (outside "orthodoxy" or "priestcraft"). When Webb, who was a lifelong supporter of the Democratic Party, was offered the opportunity to serve as a diplomat in Grover Cleveland's first administration (1885–1889), he consciously sought an appointment in the "East" to further pursue his study of "Oriental religions." He was assigned to head the U.S. diplomatic mission in the Philippines in 1887.⁶¹

The rational, seemingly disciplined process through which Webb discovered his religion before actually encountering that religion in practice demonstrates the appeal Theosophy held for liberal Protestants who wished to make sense of religious difference in an age of science and increased contact between peoples of varying religions. Like Webb, the organizers of the World's Parliament of Religions had deduced what was universally religious and went out to affirm empirically their definition of religion by showcasing adherents of other religions who could confirm their view. Neither Webb nor the Parliament took other religions very seriously as alternative ethical worldviews that related dynamically to their historical contexts to shape communal and individual lives. Having decided what constitutes "religion," Webb searched in Islamic writings for teachings that would substantiate his point of view.

Reality, however, proved to be a mixed bag of affirmation and rebuke for Webb, just as it was for the organizers of the Parliament. While

⁵⁸ Webb, *Islam in America: A Brief Statement of Mohammedanism and an Outline of the American Islamic Propaganda* (New York: Oriental Publishing Company, 1893), 14.

⁵⁹ John Davenport, *An Apology for Mohammed and the Koran* (London: J. Davy and Sons, 1869) and Godfrey Higgins, *An Apology for the Life and Character of the Celebrated Prophet of Arabia Called Mohamed or the Illustrious* (London: Rowland Hunter et al., 1829).

⁶⁰ Abd-Allah, *A Muslim in Victorian America*, 136, 168, 191, and 201; "The Death of the Prophet," *Moslem World*, November 1893, 4, cited in Abd-Allah, *A Muslim in Victorian America*, 191; and Webb, *Islam in America*, 26–27.

⁶¹ Abd-Allah, *A Muslim in Victorian America*, 4, 87, and 104–106.

traveling among Muslims in India and elsewhere, Webb found much that he admired, but he also met people who repelled him either because they imitated British or “Western” materialist cultural practices or because, in his view, they insisted on the rote observance of Islamic law. Of the former he wrote, “Why these poor, addle-pated people will sacrifice their manhood and play lick-spittle to a lot of beefy, whiskey soaked brutes who despise them I cannot imagine.”⁶² The latter he regarded as “fanatical Mussulman...Poor, benighted creatures! They have no more idea of the spirit of Islam than the cows or horses.”⁶³ Here Webb echoes the common distinction made in Protestant thought between spiritual and legalistic religions. Spiritual religions are dynamic while nomocentric religions are ossified and doctrinaire. Meeting “Eastern” Muslims who did not reject materialism nor shared his Theosophical view of a spiritual Islam did not turn Webb away from his new faith. On the contrary, the neophyte firmly believed that Theosophy had brought him to a deeper understanding of Islam than the Muslims to whom he lectured in India:

I certainly cannot hope to tell anyone here anything which he does not already know of Islam as an exoteric religious system.... Now I am fully aware of the fact that there are many professed Mussulmans who do not know that there is a philosophic side to their religion; and perhaps it is just as well that they do not, for such knowledge might, possibly, lead them away from the plain, safe and simple truths already within their grasp, and out into the broad and dangerous ocean of metaphysical speculation where their frail mental barks would be wrecked upon the rocks of doubt and despair.⁶⁴

Webb rationalized the “exoteric” dimensions of Islam as laws that could be shown to be “thoroughly applicable to all the needs of humanity” rather than a set of divine injunctions. He focused on “the spirit that prevails among the Moslems of the higher [spiritual] class” and on an unnamed “spiritual truth” that Muhammad taught and which he claimed in typical esoteric fashion “every man who knows anything of the spiritual side of religion ought to know.”⁶⁵

Webb obviously believed in the superiority of his Theosophical or metaphysical understanding of Islam just as the organizers of the Parliament

⁶² Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb, *Yankee Muslim*, ed. and intro. Brent D. Singleton (Rockville, MD: Borgo-Wildside Press, 2007), 170.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁶⁴ Webb, *The Three Lectures*, 40.

⁶⁵ Webb, “The Spirit of Islam,” reprinted in Seager, *Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, 275–276.

believed in the superiority of liberal Protestantism. He was one of the representatives of “Eastern” religions at the Parliament who contested the white, Protestant triumphalism of the fair.⁶⁶ In a description of his American Islamic Propaganda prior to the Parliament, he made his anti-church sentiments plain and sung a triumphant praise of Islam:

The plainly apparent decay of church Christianity and the defection from that system of many of the most intelligent and progressive people in nearly all large American cities seem to encourage the belief that the time has now arrived for the spread of the true faith from the Eastern to the Western Hemisphere. Its adoption as the universal religion seems only a question of a comparatively short time.⁶⁷

In his address to the Parliament, Webb also rejected Christian claims to universality and rationality and attributed these qualities to Islam:

I wish...I could impress upon your minds the feelings of millions of Mussulmans in India, Turkey, and Egypt, who are looking to this Parliament of Religions with the deepest, the fondest hope. There is not a Mussulman on earth who does not believe that ultimately Islam will be the universal faith.... I have not returned to the United States to make you all Mussulmans in spite of yourselves....But I have faith in the American intellect, in the American intelligence, and in the American love of fair play, and will defy any intelligent man to understand Islam and not love it.⁶⁸

In his alternative vision for America and his optimistic outlook of his mission, Webb misread the depth of prejudice among most Americans against Islam. The audience listened to him in the spirit of tolerance called for by the occasion, but it did so reluctantly. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, “He met with a reception wherein hisses and cheers were equally mingled. Cries of ‘Shame’ greeted him when he spoke of polygamy, but there was enthusiastic approval when he said that the Mussulman daily offers his prayers to the same God that the Christian adores.”⁶⁹

Webb’s audience may not have afforded him the same courtesy they gave their foreign-born guests because this white, American diplomat’s conversion to Islam challenged the Parliament’s and nineteenth-century

⁶⁶ Another representative of “Eastern” religions, Vivekananda, told the Parliament: “If the Parliament of Religions has shown anything to the world it is this: It has proved to the world that holiness, purity and charity are not the exclusive possessions of any church in the world, and that every system has produced men and women of the most exalted character.” Seager, *Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, 337.

⁶⁷ *Moslem World* (May 12, 1893).

⁶⁸ Webb, “The Spirit of Islam,” reprinted in Seager, *Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, 270–273.

⁶⁹ “Discourses on Religion of Islam,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 21, 1893, 9.

America's deep-seated belief in the enviable superiority of America and its Protestant faith. The audience's applause for Webb's claim that Muslims and Christians pray to the same God shows that the Parliament's attendees sought to reaffirm what they already knew rather than to encounter difference seriously. Webb was the familiar in strange clothing. Newspaper accounts of Webb's two addresses to the Parliament made a point of estranging him from his compatriots by drawing attention to his "odd" appearance: "his head surmounted by a red fez and his bushy brown beard."⁷⁰

Most visitors to the Parliament would have known Webb as an American diplomat who converted to Islam and had been commissioned by Muslims from the "East" to establish Islam in the United States. Six months before he spoke at the Parliament, the *New York Times* described his mission: "He is the American Mohammedan whom the wealthy Mussulmans of India and the East have sent to introduce the faith of Islam – the Religion of the Sword, as some have called it – among the 'civilized' Christians of the West."⁷¹ The *Chicago Tribune* also wrote condescendingly of his mission: "The proposed Moslem propaganda in this country offers a new fad for those curiously constructed beings who are always chasing after new and strange doctrines."⁷²

Webb himself defined his mission as an effort to promote rational inquiry into religion by educating "thinking Americans" about the teachings of Prophet Muhammad and by dispelling unjustified prejudices against Islam. He wrote that his aim was not "to make proselytes for Islam, but to arouse and encourage among English-speaking Christians a spirit of calm, persistent and unprejudiced investigation to be applied to their own as well as other systems of religion."⁷³ His goal was to lay the groundwork for Muslim missionaries from India who would later come to formally convert Americans.⁷⁴ Webb outlined the anticipated components of his mission in a monograph addressed to the American public:

The first step in this great work will be the establishment of a weekly journal devoted to the elucidation of Islamic doctrines and laws, and the discussion of matters bearing thereon as well as to record news items of interest to Mussulmans in all parts of the world. It is expected that this journal will be the means of

⁷⁰ Ibid., 9.

⁷¹ "Muhammed Webb's Mission," *New York Times*, February 25, 1893.

⁷² "The Moslem Propaganda," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 25, 1892, 12.

⁷³ Webb, *Islam in America*, 7.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 67.

creating and encouraging direct intercourse between the Mohammedan world and the more intelligent masses of our country.... Besides the journal a free lecture room and library will be opened to the public where those who desire to do so, can study Islamic literature and converse with the learned Moulvis [religious scholars] who are expected to arrive in New York in August or September [of 1893]. A book publishing house will also be established which will print and circulate Islamic books and pamphlets.⁷⁵

Webb managed to realize all of the above goals but only for a brief period of time (about four years). In 1893, he founded the American Moslem Brotherhood and the Moslem Publishing Company, both located at 30 East 23rd Street in New York City. On October 7, 1893, about two weeks after he had delivered his speeches at the World's Parliament of Religions, he opened a lecture hall in New York City at 458 West 20th Street. The lecture hall was open to the public and made the mission's literature available to the public gratis. Regular meetings were held on Friday nights and informal lectures offered on Sundays.⁷⁶ It was Webb's plan to establish small study circles throughout the United States to discuss Islam. He began publishing a 16-page journal called *The Moslem World* on May 12, 1893.⁷⁷ Later, he published *The Voice of Islam*, and at one point, as a result of financial difficulties, the two journals were combined in *The Moslem World and Voice of Islam*. In December 1895, a *New York Times* reporter who was given a copy of the journal, which Webb put together at his home office on the top floor of the barn of his modest house in Ulster Park, New York, described it as "a neatly printed little paper of four pages, with three columns on each page."⁷⁸

For Webb the promotion of Islam went hand in hand with free thought and rational inquiry into religion. He felt that Islam and its prophet had been "so persistently and grossly misrepresented and misunderstood by Christians" that only "broad-minded Americans" unfettered from "the chains that bind them to the church" could "give Islamic doctrines a fair, unprejudiced and honest investigation."⁷⁹ For his Indian Muslim sponsors, however, Webb's conversion to Islam and his desire to propagate Islam in America represented a "white hope" who could revive a nationalist sense of pride and progress among Indian Muslims under British

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 67–68.

⁷⁶ "For the Faith of Islam," *New York Times*, October 8, 1893.

⁷⁷ "The Islamic Propaganda," *New York Times*, May 28, 1893, 4.

⁷⁸ "Fall of Islam in America," *New York Times*, December 1, 1895, 21.

⁷⁹ Webb, *Islam in America*, 9–10.

colonial rule. One of the most ardent supporters of Webb's mission in Bombay, Budruddin Abdulla Kur, explained:

We see this day in India a rare and pitiable phenomenon of a powerful nation of sixty millions of Mussulmans absorbed in apathy and lethargy, and steeped in ignorance, in so far at least as secular education is concerned. Now, who can rouse such a vast number of our Mahomedan brethren to a sense of their duty in educational matters in a surer and a better way than the civilized English and American Mussulmans? For these people can easily make us realise our degraded and fallen condition, and bring about a revival of learning in our community. I have not the least doubt that the noble instincts of the English race, when permeated with the sublime doctrines of Islam, will influence and appeal to the imagination of the Indian Mussulmans to cast aside their languor and the sleep of centuries and take a new place in the roll-call of nations.... For the educational development and progress of the Indian Mussulman in their present helpless condition, my eyes are hopefully riveted in India upon the grace of the British Government and in the West upon the civilized American and English converts, whose help and fresh zeal will be of inestimable value in the noble cause of regeneration and revival.⁸⁰

In the late nineteenth century, Kur was not alone among upper-class Indian Muslims in expressing anxious concerns about the welfare of Muslims in British India. In the aftermath of the Sepoy mutiny-rebellion of 1857, the British government formally took power over India from the East India Company, whose administrative policies were largely blamed for the mutiny-rebellion. Among the most pressing tasks before the crown's viceroy was the reform of the British Indian army and civil-bureaucracy. The colonial government reserved all senior positions exclusively for British officials. For more menial positions, it began to recruit Indians from new social classes who were unlikely to have loyalties to the old Mughal dynasty or the varying regional dynasties that emerged throughout India in the eighteenth century. The crown also adopted a policy of mixing Indians from varying socio-religious groups in army regiments in an effort to "counterpoise natives against natives."⁸¹

These policies resulted in racial tension between the British and Indians and promoted rivalries between Indian socio-religious communities. Consequently, many elite Indian Muslims became very concerned about their future under the British Raj. Their concerns were further exacerbated by a sense of shortcoming in the face of Western Europeans'

⁸⁰ Budruddin Abdulla Kur, "Letter to the Editor" in *The Times of India* (November 22, 1892) cited in *Yankee Muslim*, ed. Singleton, 290.

⁸¹ Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy* (London: Routledge, 1998), 98.

military, scientific, and technological advancements in the modern era. Like Kur, the eminent Indian Muslim reformer, Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–1898) (among others) believed that the future of Islam in India was at stake. Khan worried that individual Muslims who advanced in India under the new British government would lose their Islam and thus, at a time when socio-religious rivalries demanded group solidarity, they would not wish to contribute to the advancement of Indian Muslims as a community. “So if we desire the progress of the Muslim *qaum* [i.e., nation] and its welfare and prosperity,” Khan wrote, “it is our duty to strive at the same time for them [i.e., Muslims] to remain Muslims, because if they do not remain Muslims and then progress, this progress will not be the progress of our *qaum*.”⁸² Khan also expressed a concern about Muslims “well acquainted with English and interested in English sciences” being “thrown into doubt about the truth of the principles of Islam.”⁸³ To address these problems, he sought to reinterpret Islamic theology, arguing for a natural affinity between Islam, reason, and science. He believed that this “reality” of Islam had been overshadowed in modern times by adherences to centuries-old dogmas. Like Kur, he saw education as the principle means by which Indian Muslims could advance within British India and still maintain their distinct social identity. To this end, he founded the Muhammadan Anglo Oriental College in 1875, which later became the Aligarh Muslim University.

Given how widespread concerns about the plight of Muslims were under the British Raj, it is easy to see why Kur and others who supported Webb’s mission hoped that the conversion of white Anglophones to Islam would contribute to an Islamic revival in India. Just as the liminality of African Muslims discussed in Chapter 1 allowed Americans to cross racial and religious boundaries in order to pursue their missionary and commercial interests in Africa, Webb’s liminal status as a “Yankee Mohammedan”⁸⁴ allowed the Indian Muslims who had enlisted him to spread Islam in the United States to cross racial and religious boundaries to pursue not only their missionary aims but also their community-building agendas in British India (and

⁸² An article by Sayyid Ahmad Khan, published in *Tahdhib al-akblāq*, vol. 3, cited in Christian W. Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology*, 303.

⁸³ Sayyid Ahmad Khan, “Lecture on Islam” given in Lahore on February 2, 1884 before the Anjuman-i himayat-i Islam (‘the Association for the Support of Islam’) in Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 314–15.

⁸⁴ *Daily Inter Ocean*, September 21, 1893, cited in Seager, *Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, 278 and Singleton, “Introduction,” in *Yankee Muslim*, 9.

perhaps even their commercial interests, given that his mission was supported predominantly by Muslim merchants).⁸⁵

Unfortunately, Webb's mission in the United States was short lived in part due to lack of funding. The prosperous Calcutta merchant, Abdullah Arab, who learned about Webb's plans for a Muslim mission in the United States through Kur and who travelled to the Philippines to negotiate with Webb the financial terms of such a mission, had only managed to send Webb \$11,427.51. This amount, according to Webb, amounted to a quarter of what he had been promised by way of salary and housing benefits alone.⁸⁶ By the end of 1895, Webb claimed to have spent nearly twice the amount of money he received from abroad on his Propaganda. The extra money, he claimed, was raised "here in various ways, by subscriptions, advertisements, &c."⁸⁷

Webb also had difficulty gaining followers among the white, middle-class Americans whom he targeted. Most of these Americans were not interested in Islam. A *New York Times* article described his efforts to convert American Christians to Islam as "a highly-impudent and a highly-ridiculous performance" that "does not appear feasible except to himself and his Mohammedan backers."⁸⁸ Prejudices against Islam also ran so deep that even Theosophists, who counted among the free-thinking truth-seekers whom Webb had told his Muslim audiences in India were primed for the message of Islam, were highly skeptical and disapproved of Webb's mission. One of the founding presidents of the Theosophical Society, Henry Steel Olcott, who was one of the more sympathetic Theosophists toward Webb's mission, nonetheless described Islam as "that iron body of bigoted intolerance" whose "sweet indwelling spirit" Webb was trying to release through Theosophy.⁸⁹ Another Theosophist remarked, "In fact, we are thoroughly disappointed in trying to find the *why* of Mr. Webb's conversion.... On the whole, we do not think that an Islamism of unsupported statements will be much of an appeal to freethinkers."⁹⁰ Some Theosophists thought that Islam was too dogmatically monotheistic: "Islamism seems to many to exact a belief in *a* God, and the conception of *a* God demands that that being shall be separate from those who

⁸⁵ Webb, *Islam in America*, 68–69; Abd-Allah, *A Muslim in Victorian America*, 60–65; and "Fall of Islam in America," *New York Times*, December 1, 1895, 21.

⁸⁶ "Mohammed Webb's Account," *New York Times*, March 27, 1896.

⁸⁷ "Fall of Islam in America," *New York Times*, December 1, 1895, 21.

⁸⁸ "The Islamic Propaganda," *New York Times*, May 28, 1893, 4.

⁸⁹ *Lucifer* 11 (September 1892–February 1893), 513.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 440.

believe in him. This view does not appeal to many Western Theosophists, because they assert that there can be no God different or separate from man.”⁹¹ Given the hostile atmosphere he faced and the scandals that arose in his organization, it is likely that even the people who gathered around Webb to help with his mission seem to have been motivated by inaccurate newspapers reports of the large sums of money Webb had brought with him from “the Orient.”⁹²

By 1897, Webb’s mission was officially defunct. In 1899, he moved his family to Rutherford, New Jersey where he bought the *Rutherford News* and served as its editor. In 1901, he sold the paper and left journalism as a profession. In that same year, Sultan ‘Abd al-Hamid II appointed him Honorary Consul General of the Ottoman Empire at New York as an acknowledgment of his services on behalf of Islam. He was also honored with the title “Bey.”⁹³ Webb remained a Theosophist Muslim and was active in the local politics of Rutherford until he died on October 1, 1916. He did not, however, raise his children as Muslim. His wife belonged to the local Unitarian Church whose pastor, Elizabeth Padgham, performed the funeral rites for Webb.

THE PARLIAMENT’S “TROJAN HORSE EFFECT” AND ISLAM

The inclusionary religious beliefs and practices of the World’s Parliament of Religions – fashioned as we have seen by liberal Protestant thought on the one hand and by metaphysical religions (such as the Theosophical Society) on the other – had what William Hutchison has called a “Trojan Horse effect” on nineteenth-century American Protestant claims to “universal religion.”⁹⁴ Most of the Parliament’s attendees were too busy celebrating American Protestant triumphs to notice the irony in Webb, and followers of other “Eastern” religions, claiming their religion as the “universal religion” of an enlightened and rational humanity. Nonetheless, the gathering’s inclusionary practices, to use Hutchison’s language again, left the door ajar. Following the Parliament, Vivekananda, who adamantly questioned American Protestants’ triumphalism at the Parliament, went

⁹¹ *The Path* 8 (1893–1894), 112–114.

⁹² See, for examples, the relations of John H. Lant and Nefeesa M. T. Keep with Webb’s propaganda as they are portrayed in the following *New York Times* articles: “Muhammed Webb Locked Out,” July 14, 1894, 5; “Nefeesa Keep Breakfasts,” July 16, 1894, 1; “Fall of Islam in America,” December 1, 1895, 21.

⁹³ “Sultan Honors an American,” *New York Times*, October 1, 1901.

⁹⁴ Hutchison, *Religious Pluralism in America*, 181–182.

on to offer numerous lectures about the universal and “scientific” dimensions of Hindu metaphysics in the Vedas. Soon after, one of his followers, Abhedananda, established an American branch of Vivekananda’s Vedanta Society in 1898.⁹⁵ Baha’is, the followers of a messianic religion that emerged among Shi’is in mid-nineteenth-century Iran, also began arriving in the United States as early as 1894⁹⁶ to promote their faith in “the West” as a universal, rational religion, particularly suited for modernity.⁹⁷

Both the Vedanta Society and the Baha’i Faith made converts in the United States. According to the decennial census of “religious bodies” conducted between 1906 and 1936 by the Bureau of Census, there were 340 members of the Vedanta Society and 1,280 Baha’is in the United States in 1906. By 1936, their numbers, though still modest, had doubled to reach 628 and 2,584, respectively. Both of these religious communities have had a continuous history of activity in the United States since their introduction in the 1890s.

It is worthwhile to contrast the relative success of these groups with the failure of Webb’s mission. All of these missionary ventures promoted an alternate “universal religion” in America among middle and upper-middle class Americans who were spiritual seekers adverse to the Christian church, but only Webb’s venture became defunct. Undoubtedly, Webb’s mission failed in large part for financial reasons and for its lack of sustained institutional support. It also seems clear, however, that another reason for the failure of his mission was the fact that he was proselytizing Islam and arguing for Islam as *the* “universal religion” of humanity. The social stigma surrounding Islam among white Americans was too great to overcome. As the hisses Webb heard during his lecture at the Parliament evidence, the opening in the gate left ajar by inclusive Protestant beliefs and practices and the universalizing discourses of metaphysical religions was not wide enough to accommodate Islam in the same way that it was able to accommodate other groups such as the Vedanta Society and the Baha’i movement. Most Americans resented and ridiculed him because of the inverse space his liminality as

⁹⁵ U.S. Department of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of the Census, *Religious Bodies: 1906* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1910), 658.

⁹⁶ Peter Smith, “The American Bahá’í Community, 1894–1917: A Preliminary Survey,” in *Studies in Bábí & Bahá’í History*, vol. 1, ed. Moojan Momen (Los Angeles, CA: Kalimat Press, 1982), 85–224.

⁹⁷ For a discussion of this topic, see Juan Cole, *Modernity and the Millennium: The Genesis of the Baha’i Faith in the Nineteenth-century Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).



FIGURE 4. The Royal Musicians of Hindustan. Inayat Khan is the third musician from the left. Courtesy of the International Headquarters of the Sufi Movement, the Netherlands.

a “Yankee Mohammedan” broached for Islam in the United States at a time when America was celebrating its triumphs as an Anglo-Saxon, Protestant nation.

INAYAT KHAN AND THE SUFI ORDER OF THE WEST

The missionary of Muslim background who was able to get his foot through the door was Inayat Khan, whose universalist, esoteric interpretation of Sufism stripped the Sufi tradition from Islam in order to gain him acceptance in the United States. Although Inayat Khan’s teachings were inspired by the Islamic tradition, he did not explicitly promote Islam. Inayat Khan was an Indian musician who came from a courtly musical family. He claimed to have been initiated into the Nizamiyya branch of the Chistiyya Sufi order by Muhammad Abu Hashim Madani (d. 1907). He arrived in New York on September 13, 1910 along with his brother and cousin. Soon after their arrival, Khan and his relatives gave a performance at Columbia University. In their audience was Ruth St. Denis (1877–1968), a founding figure in American dance, who was

known for her interpretations of Oriental dances. The Khans joined her troupe and accompanied her on a national tour as the Royal Musicians. Somewhere along his journey, Inayat Khan came to be regarded as a Sufi teacher, no doubt by the same “masses of intelligent people” Mohammed Alexander Webb hoped to convert and whom he described as “drifting away from the Christian churches and forming themselves into free-thought societies, ethical cultural societies, non-sectarians societies and numerous other organizations the purpose of which is to seek religious truth.”⁹⁸

At the end of his tour in San Francisco in 1911, Inayat Khan was invited by Swami Trigunatita and Swami Paramananda to lecture on Indian music at the Vedanta Society Hindu Temple. There he met Ada Martin (1871–1947), who concluded from the meeting that Inayat Khan fulfilled a vision she claimed to have had in the spring of 1910 of “a very great and illuminated intelligence.”⁹⁹ Khan is said to have noticed in her a “soul who was drinking in all I said.”¹⁰⁰ Later he had a vision of a room being filled with light that led him to believe that he was to initiate her as his first “Western” disciple into what eventually became the Sufi Order of the West. Inayat Khan gave her a new personal name, Rabi’a, after the famous eighth-century Sufi saint, Rabi’a al-Adawiyya (d. 801). Martin’s initiation was followed by others, but Martin became Inayat Khan’s favored disciple (*murid*), and when he left for Europe in 1912 she served as his representative in the United States. Inayat Khan returned briefly to the United States in 1923 to visit with his American disciples under the tutelage of Ada Martin. By that time he was the spiritual head of an international organization known as the Sufi Order of the West headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland. He died in 1927. Following Inayat Khan’s death there were a number of schisms among his followers, some of whom, like Samuel Lewis (also known as Sufi Sam), went on to found their own spiritual organizations. None of the groups founded upon Inayat Khan’s teachings consider themselves specifically Islamic, even though they call themselves Sufi and employ Sufi terminology and rituals. They focus on

⁹⁸ Webb, *The Three Lectures*, 51. Many of the individuals who joined Inayat Khan’s Order or listened to his lectures were involved in such societies. See Zia Inayat-Khan, “A Hybrid Sufi Order at the Crossroads of Modernity: The Sufi Order and Sufi Movement of Pir-o-Murshid Inayat Khan” (Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 2006) 22F and 63–81.

⁹⁹ *Notes for an Autobiography of Murshid Rabia Martin* (unpublished), cited in Andrew Rawlinson, *The Book of Enlightened Masters: Western Teachers in Eastern Traditions* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1997), 436.

¹⁰⁰ Inayat Khan et al., *Biography of Pir-o-Murshid Inayat Khan* (Madras: East-West Publications, 1979), 85.

what they regard as the universal wisdom found within the Sufi tradition, which they believe happened to be associated with Islam as a matter of historical accident. Initiates in these groups are not required to convert to Islam.¹⁰¹

Inayat Khan's spiritual message was informed by an enduring axiological division of the world into a spiritual, mystical, emotive "East" and a materialist, positivist, rational "West." Inayat Khan fashioned himself as a bridge between these worlds. In his redacted autobiography, he lauded the individual liberties and freedoms found in the United States and described America as "the sum-total of modern progress." "With all the modern spirit in America," he wrote, "I found among the people love for knowledge, search for truth, and tendency to unity."¹⁰² Clearly, the more inclusionary theologies and practices of liberal Protestantism and universalizing discourses on metaphysical unity of religions had paved the way for Inayat Khan in certain cosmopolitan circles in the United States. This road, however, was not without its bumps. Inayat Khan lamented that the "commercialism" and "the reign of materialism" in "the West" made working for a "spiritual Cause...like travelling in a hilly land, not like sailing in the sea, which is smooth and level."¹⁰³ Commercialism, however, was not the only difficulty he encountered. He also confronted the conflation of race, religion, and progress in the United States:

There is still to be found in America a prejudice against colour which is particularly shown to the Negroes.... They think Negroes are too backward in evolution to associate with.... An ordinary man in America confuses an Indian with brown skin with the Negro. Even if he does not think that he is a Negro, still he is accustomed to look with contempt at a dark skin, in spite of the many most unclean, ignorant and illmannered (sic) specimens of white people who are to be found there on the spot.¹⁰⁴

At one point in 1923, Inayat Khan was detained and questioned by immigration officials at Ellis Island because "the quota of Indians was completed for that month." He was freed after a few hours when one

¹⁰¹ I have relied on the following sources for my biography of Inayat Khan: Carl W. Ernst and Bruce B. Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love: The Chishti Order in South Asia and Beyond* (New York: Macmillan, 2002), 141–142; Zia Inayat-Khan, "A Hybrid Sufi Order," 64f; Inayat Khan, *Biography*, 83–88 and 106–119; and the entries on Sufi Order and Sufi Movement and on Rabi'a Martin in Rawlinson, *The Book of Enlightened Masters*, 543–553 and 436–438.

¹⁰² Inayat Khan, *Biography*, 84.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 87–88.

of his disciples, Marya Gushing, interceded on his behalf. "I was glad to have had that experience," he later wrote, "to see to what extent materialism has affected nations."¹⁰⁵

Inayat Khan was also keenly aware of the prejudice against Islam in the early 1900s:

The prejudice against Islam that exists in the West was another difficulty for me. Many think Sufism to be a mystical side of Islam, and the thought was supported by the encyclopedias, which speak of Sufism as having sprung from Islam, and they were confirmed in this by knowing that I am Moslim (sic) by birth. Naturally I could not tell them that it is a Universal Message of the time, for every man is not ready to understand this.¹⁰⁶

Inayat Khan deliberately disassociated his teachings from Islam and framed his message in the context of the more acceptable discourse of "universal religion," shaped by liberal Protestant theology and metaphysical interpretations of religion. By adopting the discourse of "universal religion," he was able to transcend his race and the stigma of Islam, which by now he no longer regarded as *his* religion but the accidental religion of his birth. In one of the earliest biographies of him, he was portrayed as a man who outgrew the legalism of his Islamic heritage and discovered the "inner truth" of existence through esoteric Sufism.¹⁰⁷ Inayat Khan and his followers carefully guarded the liminal status the concept of "universal religion" attributed to him. He eschewed, for example, any political activity at a time when, as I discussed earlier, there was a growing call for Muslim nationalism and discontent with British colonial rule in his homeland:

When Gandhi proclaimed non-cooperation I heard its silent echo in the heart of Great Britain. Besides, the Khilafet Movement¹⁰⁸ had stirred up the minds of the people there. I felt a hidden influence coming from every corner, resenting against any activity which had a sympathetic connection with the East. I then felt that

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 106.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 113.

¹⁰⁷ See "Biography of the Author" in Inayat Khan, *Sufi Message of Spiritual Liberty* (London: The Theosophical Publishing Society, 1914), 7–15.

¹⁰⁸ The Khilafat Movement was a pan-Islamic, nationalist movement organized in British India in the late 1910s by Indian Muslims concerned on the one hand about their own fate in the British Empire in a Hindu-majority society and on the other about the status of the Ottoman Caliphate and their guardianship of Muslim holy sites, such as Mecca and Medina, following World War I. See Gail Minault, *The Khilafat Movement: Religious Symbolism and Political Mobilization in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) and Naem Qureshi, *Pan-Islam in British Indian Politics: A Study of the Khilafat Movement, 1918–1924* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

the hour had come to remove the seat of our [Sufi] Movement to a place such as Geneva, which has been chosen as an international centre by all.... I have always refrained from taking the side of any particular nation in my work, and have tried to keep my Movement free from any political shadows. Vast fields of political activity were laid open before me, during an after the war [World War I], in which I was quite capable of working at the time when there was a great demand for work of the kind, at the time of great upheaval in India and in the Near East. And if I hesitated to take interest in such activities, it was only that my heart was all taken by the need of a universal brotherhood in the world.¹⁰⁹

Because the political activity that Inayat Khan mentions was against colonial rule and the achievement of sociopolitical equality, one has to assume that he was not preoccupied with attaining “universal brotherhood” in the here and now. He substituted sociopolitical equality for a message of metaphysical equality, which theoretically opposed racism and imperialism as manifestations of materialism and nationalism, but never called for getting one’s hands dirty. The course Inayat Khan’s mission took reveals the stakes embedded in the seemingly axiological division between a spiritual, emotive “East” and a materialist, rational “West” in the first half of the twentieth century. For “Eastern” religions to gain acceptance in the United States, they had to be depoliticized and privatized. Given the association that was made at the turn of the twentieth century between Protestantism and the imperial successes of the Anglo-Saxon race, Inayat Khan’s decision to eschew politics in order to further his mission illustrates that the notion often associated with “Western” modernity, that religion is essentially a private affair, did not apply to all religions equally. Rather, the privatization of religion was a prerequisite for the participation of non-Protestants in American public life.

Inayat Khan’s experiences in the United States demonstrate personally how the inclusionary theologies and practices of the late nineteenth century may have left the gate of religious pluralism ajar, but the non-Protestant religions that slipped in did not challenge Americans’ triumphalist conflation of race, religion, and progress. Muslim newcomers, such as Inayat Khan, had to color their teachings with unspecific metaphysical claims of universality in order to cloak their stigmatized racial and religious backgrounds, and in the process they helped maintain the status quo.

Inayat Khan’s experiences also draw attention to the role of gender in the conflation of the white race with Protestantism and civilizational

¹⁰⁹ Inayat Khan, *Biography*, 71.

progress. It is important to note that the conflation of race, religion, and progress left white, Protestant women in an ambiguous place. The World's Parliament of Religions, for example, sought to represent the religious accomplishment of women¹¹⁰ as did the Columbian Exposition more generally with its Board of Lady Managers and Woman's Building. In both cases, however, women's participation, unlike men's participation, was marked by sex and thus marginal to the fair as a whole. There was, for example, no Men's Building nor a Men's Committee. Metaphysical interpretations of religion created a space of equality that allowed women to transcend the mark of gender in society just as they allowed individuals, such as Inayat Khan, to transcend race. It is thus not surprising that many of the founders of metaphysical religions (e.g., Helena Balvatsky and Mary Baker Eddy) and many of the most prominent disciples of spiritual teachers from "the East" were women.¹¹¹ Inayat Khan wrote, "Destiny made women understand my message and sympathize with me more readily than men, whose lives are absorbed in their daily occupations, and whose ideal and devotion is almost lost in the modern way of living. This made my life and work most difficult. I found on one hand a ditch, and on the other hand water."¹¹² Rationalism, modernity, and progress were not only seen as the domain of whites and Protestants but also of men. From the above citation, it appears that Inayat Khan begrudged the feminine appeal of his teachings in the West, but the success of his movement among white American and European women suggests that he reconciled himself to it.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ John Henry Barrows, who chaired the Parliament, wrote in his history of the Parliament, "The Parliament of Religions gratefully recognized the supreme and splendid offices which woman has performed in the history of humanity's holiest development. The gracious lady, who is so worthy of her place in the fore-front of this gathering of the Nations, has said that, as Columbus discovered America, the Columbian Exposition discovered woman." Barrows, *World's Parliament of Religions: An Illustrated and Popular Story of the World's First Parliament of Religions, Held in Chicago in Connection with the Columbian Exposition of 1893* (Chicago, IL: The Parliament Publishing Company, 1893), vii–viii.

¹¹¹ For further discussion of this issue, see Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-century America*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001).

¹¹² Inayat Khan, *Biography*, 119. While in the United States, Inayat Khan married a cousin of the founder of Christian Science Mary Baker Eddy, Ora Ray Baker (later known as Amina Begum), who at times practiced spiritual healing herself. See Inayat Khan, *Biography*, 116.

¹¹³ For a discussion of the later development of his movement, see Karin Jironet, *The Image of Spiritual Liberty in the Western Sufi Movement Following Hazrat Inayat Khan* (Leeuven: Peeters, 2002).

SUMMARY

Post-Civil War America was a time of great social change, which raised many questions about the nature of American society and identity. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as Americans came increasingly into contact with racial, ethnic, and religious diversity as a result of emancipation, territorial expansion, increased immigration, and urbanization, a powerful conflation of race, religion, and progress emerged. Through this conflation, Anglo-American, liberal Protestants triumphantly claimed America's industrial, cultural, political, and commercial achievements as the product of their particular racial and religious heritage. This conflation of the white race, Protestant Christianity, and progress allowed white native-born Protestants to define America as a white, Protestant nation thus maintaining their cultural and sociopolitical hegemony even as the nation itself became more racially, ethnically, and religiously diverse.

It was argued that the unique universality of Protestantism coupled with the military, scientific, and technological advancements of the so-called white race in the modern era proved the veracity of white Americans' religious beliefs and the superiority of their race. Race, religion, and progress thus came to constitute a matrix through which a triumphant American national identity was articulated. Ironically, insofar as this identity matrix was founded upon the concept of "universal religion," it left open the possibility for adherents of other religions to argue for theirs as the true universal religion, uniquely committed to modernity and progress. Indeed many representatives of "Eastern" religions at the World's Parliament of Religions in 1893, including the Muslim missionary Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb, made this precise claim, and some of them went on to found alternative religious movements among middle and upper-middle class white Americans. Prejudice against Islam, however, ran deep at this time. Webb faced grave difficulties gaining followers. His efforts to educate Americans about the rationality and universality of Islam were for the most part met with ridicule at worst and resentful tolerance at best. Another missionary, Inayat Khan, quickly realized that he faced a great deal of racial and religious prejudices as an Indian Muslim and opted to divorce his message of Sufi universalism from Islam. He adapted his teaching to the discourse of "universal religion" in order to gain acceptance. In the end, his relative success hinged upon his disavowal of any explicit connections between his Sufi inspired teachings and Islam.

In sum, given the general lack of recognition of the polyvalence of Islam, Webb's praise of Islam appeared as willful self-deception to most non-Muslim Americans and Khan's teachings had to be de-Islamicized. Both could only get their foot in the door as outsiders by contextualizing their teachings within a larger discourse of a universal, spiritual religion that emerged in nineteenth-century liberal Protestant thought. This "universal religion," as explained by James Freeman Clarke, was believed to encompass *essentially* the positive teachings of all other "ethnic religions." If African Muslims, as discussed in [Chapter 2](#), drew on commonalities between Islam and Christianity to establish a common ground through which they could make sense of their new world and hold their white masters accountable for their behavior before God, the discourse on "universal religion" aimed at a higher ground through which it could establish the hierarchical relation between different religious beliefs and practices and to identify the "true religion," the religion most suited for "progress."