Providence and Interreligious Encounter

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Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant leaders gathered for a two-day conference in Providence, Rhode Island, called the "Seminar on Human Relationships" to discuss intolerance, theological differences, and religious freedom.

Among the participants were national interfaith leaders, local Jewish and Christian clergy, civic leaders, members of the Dominican Order, the editor-in-chief of a major U.S. Catholic publication, and over one thousand attendees. Small group discussions addressed intermarriage, theologies of revelation, racism, and discrimination against Jews and Catholics in higher education. One of the speakers and principal organizers, Rabbi Samuel Gup, made this plea:

> "Catholics, Protestants, and Jews live together and work together. Our destiny in America is that we are together. While we are close to each other in the flesh, we are still far apart spiritually. We must draw closer to each other, we must look each other more squarely in the eye. We must take each other more firmly by the hand, that we may understand each other better, trust each other more, and be more just and considerate."

Since the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate* in 1965, great progress has been made in interreligious relations in the U.S. and around the world. But this Providence gathering took place three decades earlier on the campuses of Brown University and Providence College, on May 3 and 4, 1932. Herbert Hoover was president. Americans struggled through the Great Depression. Jim Crow laws defined the lives of Black people. The rise of Adolf Hitler was underway in Germany. Immigrants to the U.S. faced crushing restrictions and discrimination. The antisemitic and xenophobic voices of Henry Ford and Fr. Charles Coughlin held sway. The Ivy League instituted quotas on Jewish admissions. A resurgent Ku Klux Klan in Rhode Island burned a cross in front of Providence College in 1924, a message to a school that served the local Catholic immigrant population that they were not welcome.

This extraordinary interreligious gathering was one of forty such events planned across the country in 1932, part of a national effort spearheaded by the newly formed National Conference of Christians and Jews (NCCJ) to promote "intergroup" relations. The founder of the NCCJ, Everett Clinchy, participated in the Providence gathering.

Providence was founded by Roger Williams as a colony built upon the principle of religious freedom. The early ethnic and religious diversity of Native, enslaved, and Christian colonist populations increased at the beginning of the twentieth century when Providence became a major port. The arrival of Irish, Italian, Cape Verdean, Armenian, Jewish, and other immigrants brought even more diversity, which, in turn, was met with bigotry and nativism. By the early 1900s, one third of the Providence population was "foreign born" and the city had the third largest urban Native population in the country. By the 1920s and 30s, first generation immigrant children were trying to assimilate into American culture and society. Many wanted to attend college but faced exclusion from the region's most prestigious schools. This unusual collaboration between Brown and Providence College was significant. Brown, one of the nation's oldest universities, with quotas limiting Jewish enrollment, represented an old, White, elite, Protestant America. Providence, newly chartered in 1917, was expressly conceived by Bishop Matthew Harkins as an alternative for

Catholic young men to secular Brown. It represented a new working-class, immigrant, and Catholic America, still in the process of attaining the privileges of Whiteness. The arrival of Jews on the Catholic campus (accounting at times for as much as 20% of the student body), was met with a mostly welcoming climate, cultivated by the Dominican Order. Here Jews could acquire an affordable liberal arts education and contribute to student life on campus, something they were explicitly denied in the Ivy League.

The Providence event was the brainchild of Rabbi Samuel Gup of Temple Beth-El in Providence, inspired by a similar event at Wellesley College. An executive committee of local leaders, including Rabbi Gup, local Jewish philanthropist Max Grant, Msgr. Peter Foley, Chancellor of the Diocese of Providence (who represented Bishop William Hickey), Fr. Lorenzo McCarthy, O.P., president of Providence College, Albert Mead, acting president of Brown University, Rev. Arthur Bradford, pastor of Central Congregational Church, and Joseph Gainer, former mayor of Providence, planned the events.

The Vatican frowned upon, even forbade, Catholic participation in such efforts. Just four years earlier, Pope Pius XI wrote in his encyclical *Mortalium animos* that it was not "lawful for Catholics either to support or to work for" such ecumenical enterprises. He also dissolved the Opus Sacerdotale Amici Israel, an international organization of cardinals, bishops, and priests, which, while it had the express goal of converting Jews to Catholicism, also sought to promote respect for the Jewish people.

The participation of Fr. McCarthy and the enthusiastic blessing of Bishop Hickey, relayed through Msgr. Foley, were quite remarkable, even risky. The local diocesan newspaper, *The Providence Visitor*, carried extensive reporting on the Seminar in its May 6 issue, including transcripts of speeches, snippets from round-table discussions, and a section of lighter moments entitled "Seminar Sidelights," which noted that about three-quarters of the attendees were women, "many of whom made notes of the proceedings." Rabbi Isaac Landman, a national leader in Jewish-Christian dialogue, praised Bishop Hickey and Fr. McCarthy for making a "forward step in American inter-religious comity." He noted the remarkable nature of the event:

> "This is an historic day in the history of religions. So far as I know the record, this is the first time in history that Protestants, Catholics and Jews have met under communal auspices in a Catholic college at the invitation of a Bishop of the Church, for a friendly discussion of those divisive elements that destroy proper human relations."

At the same time, both Foley and McCarthy were aware of the specter of "indifferentism"—the idea condemned by the Church that all religions are equally true—which hung over the proceedings. They also recognized the urgent threat that bigotry posed in 1930s American society. McCarthy expressed his opposition to any indifferentism and expressed hope that participants in the Seminar would "come away not only with a greater respect for their own faith, but with a greater respect for the religious beliefs of others."

Msgr. Foley also seemed to be aware of the theological tightrope. "Good-will among Catholics, Protestants and Jews constitutes a bulwark against indifferentism and atheism," he told the audience gathered at the opening session. This "lively experiment for the purposes of better mutual understanding" was "justifiable." Foley's characterization of the proceedings as a "lively experiment" was a nod to Providence's founding story. It would be a "serious mistake" not to take part, "in view of the fact that these differences actually exist in this land which guarantees to all freedom of religious worship." He explained that he and the priests of the Diocese were participating to give an explanation, rather than "argumentation" of Catholic beliefs, and to learn about other religions. Perhaps the extensive coverage provided by the *Visitor*, whose content was overseen by the bishop, was meant to deflect any charge of indifferentism.

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The American context and American identity loomed large. As Victoria Barnett has argued, these early Jewish-Christian encounters marked "the emergence of a specifically American approach to understanding the relationships between different religious groups and the ways in which they expressed their values and faith in the public square." Interreligious relationships were to be founded in the "common ground" of shared American values as participants navigated the "fault lines" between their communities. Several of the speakers evoked the guarantee of religious freedom afforded by the Constitution. Rabbi Gup called attention to intolerance towards Jews in the U.S., rooted in ancient prejudices. He expressed a vision of a pluralistic society: "Ours is the task to remember that every group has the right to their differences." Unity was to be founded upon a "platform of ethical behavior." George Shuster, then editor of *Commonweal,* offered a theological grounding for "tolerance" in the Gospel, together with a historical overview of the tradition of religious freedom in America. Fr. Michael Ahern, S.J., spoke of the First Amendment "right to religious freedom" as both rational and divinely sanctioned. Former Mayor Gainer noted the bicentennial celebrations of the birth of George Washington: "No American abhorred religious discrimination more than he and no American appreciated the necessity for religion as the basis for citizenship more than he." Washington, too, had historic ties to Rhode Island. His letter to the Jews of Newport assured that the new government of the United States "gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance."

But the Seminar did not take a simple common denominator approach; theological discussion was not off limits. There was lively back and forth about Catholic and Protestant understandings of marriage. Fr. McCarthy engaged with several rabbis on doctrines of revelation. After presenting the Catholic doctrine, he was asked by Rabbi Gup if the Catholic Church believed revelation was given to any other groups. McCarthy replied, "If Rabbi Gup believes in the Old Testament as a supernatural document, we believe he has a part of the divine revelation, not all."

The *Visitor* also reported some lighter moments. There was a delightful exchange between Rabbi Louis Wolsey who referred to Fr. McCarthy as "Rabbi McCarthy" and then, amid the laughter of the audience, suggested the priest call him "Cardinal Wolsey." Participants also toured several houses of worship in Providence, including the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul, Temple Emanu-El, Temple Beth-El, Central Congregational Church, and the historic First Baptist Meeting House, founded by Roger Williams—extraordinary for 1932, considering it would be another 54 years until Pope John Paul II's groundbreaking visit to Rome's synagogue.

The Seminar on Human Relationships continued its activities through the 1940s. After the war, the shape of interreligious and ecumenical relations in Providence took various forms with new successes and challenges, new collaborations and tensions.

There are ways in which this long-forgotten conference anticipated the ecumenical and interreligious movements that would emerge three decades later with the promulgation of documents like *Nostra Aetate* and Unitatis Redintegratio. Its approach was experimental, at times naïve, exhibiting a raw simplicity—what we would expect at the embryonic stages of a new movement. The *Visitor*'s transcripts and reports are a valuable resource for researchers, because they do not simply summarize but offer us a seat at the table, preserving often verbatim the discussions among participants as they explored this new way of relating interreligiously. They came to an unfamiliar table, spoke, listened, challenged each other, acknowledged their non-negotiable convictions, and most importantly, respected each other.

There are also ways in which the speakers, both Christian and Jewish, anticipated the social vision Pope Francis described in his 2020 encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*: "The process of building fraternity, be it local or universal, can only be undertaken by spirits that are free and open to authentic encounters." Like Francis, the Seminar participants had a sense of the fragmenting of the human family and hoped that it could be repaired, through encounter, openness to others, sincere dialogue, and respect for each person's dignity. Perhaps remembering the Seminar ninety years

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later should remind us that dialogue is local. While ecumenical and interreligious dialogue have become more sophisticated and a regular facet of the Church's life at the highest levels, I'm often asked by students, fellow Catholics, and Jews, why awareness of these important achievements has not made its way down to the pews. The Seminar reminds us of the importance of relationship-building, interreligious learning, and collaboration in shared causes across traditions at the local level. At a time when our society is prone to retreating into comfortable echo chambers, it's even more urgent for Catholic parishes and individuals to be agents of a "culture of encounter" with their neighbors of different religious traditions, even, and especially, when it is difficult. As Pope Francis writes, it is through a "creative openness to others" that we become "fruitful and productive," a blessing to a troubled world.

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