



INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHRISTIANS AND JEWS

2016 INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE PHILADELPHIA

**“The Dynamics of Religious Pluralism in a Changing World:
The Philadelphia, United States, and International Contexts”**

July 10 – 13, 2016

In cooperation with:

Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations (CCJR)

C O N F E R E N C E T H E M E

Philadelphia, "the city of brotherly love and sisterly affection," is a major site in the history of religious tolerance and interreligious relations. Its story begins with William Penn (1644-1718), an English aristocrat who had become a member of the Religious Society of Friends – popularly known as the Quakers. Believing that all people are equal under God, they refused to bow or defer to social superiors. This led to their persecution in countries ruled by monarchs whose authority was held to be divinely appointed by God. Fortunately for Penn (who had himself been imprisoned for such views) a debt that the king owed his father resulted in 1681 with Penn being granted a royal charter for a colony to be called Pennsylvania ("Penn's Woods"). True to his convictions, Penn negotiated the first land-purchase survey with the native Lenape peoples and drafted a "Frame of Government" that assured freedom of religion, trial by jury, and free elections. Penn refused to require a Quaker majority in Pennsylvania, allowing it to develop into a successful "melting pot." His "Holy Experiment" appealed to other persecuted minorities from Germany, England, France, Holland, Sweden, Finland, Ireland, and Wales that included Huguenots, Mennonites, Amish, Catholics, Lutherans, and Jews.

Philadelphia, the chief city of Pennsylvania, was increasingly dominated by commerce, setting the stage for the important role it would play in the American Revolution. Representatives of the thirteen English colonies gathered in the city for the "Continental Congress" which issued the "Declaration of Independence" in 1776. Penn's theory of an amendable constitution and his vision that "all Persons are equal under God" were later influential when the "Constitution of the United States of America" was drafted in Philadelphia in 1787. The first amendment to the Constitution prohibited Congress from

establishing a state religion and guaranteed freedom from governmental interference in both private and public religious matters.

This does not mean that interreligious or intergroup harmony prevailed. The enslavement of African peoples from the start of the English colonial period resulted in the bloody Civil War of 1861-1865 and promoted systemic racism in American society. Waves of massive immigration in the 19th and 20th centuries triggered a backlash of isolationism and inter-ethnic rivalry that periodically erupted in rioting and destruction. Being one of the largest cities in the United States, Philadelphia saw these forces scar its own history and threaten the vision of its founder.

However, the "American Experiment" in religious tolerance also produced significant interreligious collaboration, especially in the 20th century. Portions of the majority Christian Protestant population were joined by Catholics and Jews, and more recently by Muslims, in major social movements in the United States, including abolitionism (to end slavery), women's suffrage, labor rights, child labor laws, and civil rights. As these campaigns unfolded, the bell that had hung in the old Pennsylvania State House building – later called Independence Hall – became a symbol of William Penn's axiom that "all Persons are equal under God." Inscribed with the biblical verse "Proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof" (Lev. 25:10), the renamed "Liberty Bell" also represents the history and climate that has enabled interreligious dialogue to prosper in the United States and in Philadelphia.

The ICCJ's 2016 Conference Theme: "The Dynamics of Religious Pluralism in a Changing World: The Philadelphia, United States, and International Contexts" explores the "American Experiment" and relates it to the experiences of religious majorities and minorities in many of the countries represented in the ICCJ family. Recent ICCJ conferences that addressed similar themes will also be recalled and discussed. In a world in which conflicts along religious lines continue to disrupt the lives of millions of people, our conversations about social structures and practices to promote interreligious respect and harmony are especially timely.

Come join us in the place that aspires to be the City of Brotherly Love and Sisterly Affection!

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