

“Why the Chicago History Museum Is Launching a Series on Religious Pluralism”

By Gary T. Johnson¹

I want to share with you some exciting news about a very important exhibition series that the Chicago History Museum is planning. Our exhibition, “Catholic Chicago,” opens March 8, 2008. This is the first in what we expect will be a series over the years that will explore Chicago’s religious groups. Discussions already have begun with the Jewish Federation and others about an exhibition in a few years on “Jewish Chicago.” Planning for “Muslim Chicago” is in its early stages.

This series call for an explanation because the subject matter is very unusual for a major museum in today’s world. Let me come at the explanation from three different vantage points: First, why **Chicago**? Second, why begin with **Catholic** Chicago? And third, why should our museum talk about **communities of faith** at all?

First: **why Chicago**?

Lest you think the answer is obvious, let me review our recent history.

The Chicago Historical Society closed its doors in December 2005 for almost a complete rebuilding of its facility. The City got the sense that something interesting was happening behind closed doors when L Car No. 1 made its way on a flatbed truck from a CTA barn in Skokie, to alongside our building, where a crane inserted it through a hole in the south wall. This treasure made its way to its current resting place on our second floor.

Then we announced that after 150 years, we were changing our name from the “Chicago Historical Society” to the “Chicago History Museum.” Gone were the days when people might guess that we were primarily a club of some kind. We are a museum. A destination. A place for all the people of Chicago and for visitors.

Along with our new name came our new focus. Yes, we have wonderful resources, too, on American history, and particularly exciting plans for the Lincoln bicentennial of 2009,

¹ Gary T. Johnson is the eighth President of the Chicago History Museum. This paper is adapted from an address given at Chicago’s Holy Name Cathedral on November 5, 2007.

but from the date of our reopening on September 30, 2006, our recurring theme is Chicago and its people – all its people.

We approach the story of Chicago from one angle after another. L Car No. 1 is the centerpiece of our new Exelon Wing, “Chicago: Crossroads of America.” There is twice as much gallery space on Chicago than ever before. And from my point of view, this new permanent exhibition, which explores Chicago history not chronologically but thematically, is definitive. We are very proud of it.

Our new lobby is a treasure chest of Chicago. Even when the museum is closed, people press their noses against the glass and wonder what’s going on in there, with all of kinds of electric signs and photos from Chicago communities. They may have seen low-rider cars in certain neighborhoods, and they wonder what a particularly fancy example of a low-rider is doing in the lobby of a museum. The answer is simple: cars like these are the pride and joy of some of Chicago’s Spanish-speaking neighborhoods, and they are very artistic. History isn’t just about Chicago 100 years ago, it’s also about the Chicago of today – and tomorrow.

Children, of course, have their own way of perceiving Chicago. With the generous help of Joseph and Judy Konen, we have our new award-winning Children’s Gallery exhibition – “Sensing Chicago.” It explores Chicago with the five senses, and, yes, young and old can become a wiener in a Chicago hot dog.

Our costume collection – the third largest in the country – allows us to explore the lives of Chicago from another angle. We now have a new gallery dedicated to our costume and textile collection. Drawn from the clothing of both rich and poor, this collection offers powerful insights into Chicago’s social history. Next year, we will offer a breathtaking treasure exhibition, drawn entirely from our costume collection. This show, “Chic Chicago,” opened at New York’s Fashion Institute of Technology, and will come home to Chicago in fall of 2008.

We are very proud of our KPMG and Paul and Katherine Snyder Community Gallery, where we showcase one Chicago community after another. The first was the Mexican community of the far Southeast Side. The second is Schaumburg, which at first might seem like a surprising choice. Visit the exhibit, and you will see a fascinating story of how a 100-year-old community of German farm families over a short few decades transformed itself into a suburban powerhouse.

Our special exhibitions usually have a Chicago focus. We draw on our vast collection of Chicago treasures in exhibitions such as “The Big Picture: A New View of Painting in Chicago.” Our contribution to the city-wide Festival of Maps is “Mapping Chicago: The Past and the Possible.” It includes everything from Fort Dearborn to the maps that helped Chicago to win America’s Olympics nomination.

We offer programs on Chicago, such as our on-going “Chicago Treasures” series that features the reflections of important Chicagoans. Our tours explore the City. From school children to family historians to professors – researchers use our collection to explore Chicago history.

Chicago is our marquee attraction. It helps us to get front-page attention in the press. Our attendance is up. Our membership has soared. Our tours sell out.

Seen in this context – “If it’s Chicago, you’ll find it at the Chicago History Museum” – you will understand that religion is yet another fascinating angle on our City.

Catholic Chicago is the logical place for our projected series to begin, because the French explorers brought the faith to the shores of Lake Michigan as long ago as the 1600s. Chicago’s first permanent settler – Jean Baptiste Pointe du Sable – was Catholic. Catholic Chicago includes towering figures, such as George Cardinal Mundelein, and educational achievements, such as universities and parish schools. There is architecture. Social action. Times of discrimination, such as the anti-Catholic period of the 19th-century Know Nothing Party. Catholicism is the largest religion of today’s leading immigrant group – the Hispanics. Such stories will be included in our upcoming exhibition. As with all of our richest exhibition subjects, our biggest challenge is how to do a very large subject justice in one exhibition, when there is so much to say.

Now let me address the third and most difficult question – ***Why explore communities of faith at all in today’s world?***

First some personal background. I am a relative new-comer to museum management. I was a lawyer for 28 years before I made a career change two years ago. One of the ideas that I inherited was the idea of an exhibition on Catholic Chicago. I embraced the idea, but when word got out, there was some puzzlement. Didn’t I understand that religion is the “third rail” in today’s culture wars? The answer, I believe, tells us where

we have been as a country and where we need to go. It also says a lot about the Chicago History Museum.

Take another look at the first two exhibitions in our Chicago community gallery. Note that in the exhibition on the Mexican community on the far Southeast Side, one of the stories told is that of the Catholic parish of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The parish was founded in 1923 as the first Mexican parish in Chicago, and it served the families of workers in near-by steel mills. 1,500 families still belong to this parish. You simply cannot understand the story of that community without acknowledging that parish.

Now travel from 3200 E. 91st Street to the northwest suburb of Schaumburg. Once again, there is a church: Founded in 1847, St. Peter Lutheran Church (Missouri Synod Lutheran) is a key institution that spans the periods from farm village to modern suburb, with everything in between. It loaned us important artifacts from its collection, and this church figures in our exhibition.

We could not have told those stories if we had written religion out of the storyline. Right now, we are planning an exhibition on Chinatown, and community religious leaders are part of the discussion. When we do our 2009 exhibition on Lincoln Park, you will, of course, hear something about DePaul University, which is an anchor in that community. An exhibition on Rogers Park or on Maxwell Street, naturally, would include Jewish voices. Telling the story of Devon Avenue would call on Muslim communities, and on many other groups.

But maybe that's where faith belongs, as **a part** of exhibitions, when appropriate, but not **the subject** of exhibitions. Why dedicate a special series to faith communities, as such? Why offer Catholic Chicago, Jewish Chicago or Muslim Chicago?

Let's step back, and talk about the nation we live in and the world we live in.

The role of religion in American life always has been one of our democracy's key questions. Consider the early stories of the Puritans and their errand into the wilderness, or Lord Baltimore and the Catholics of Maryland, or Roger Williams, and toleration in Rhode Island, which was the site of America's first synagogue.

Religion in America always has been a subject of fascination to foreign observers. Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States in the 1830s, commenting on everything from small-town life to the halls of Congress. He wrote:

“The religious atmosphere of the country was the first thing that struck me on arrival in the United States. The longer I stayed in the country, the more conscious I became of the important political consequences resulting from this novel situation.

“In France I had seen the spirits of religion and of freedom almost always marching in opposite directions. In America I found them intimately linked together in joint reign over the same land.

“My longing to understand the reason for this phenomenon increased daily.”²

The flourishing of religion in a country that drew its political inspiration from the Enlightenment was one of the greatest puzzles for this French aristocrat. Then, as today, many are puzzled by the continuing strength of religious life in America. He wrote:

“Eighteenth-century philosophers had a very simple explanation for the gradual weakening of beliefs. Religious zeal, they said, was bound to die down as enlightenment and freedom spread. It is tiresome that the facts do not fit this theory at all.”³

Now our world. It is a world that is riven with religious strife – often, militant religious strife. This comes as a shock to many, who, once again, might have believed that religion by now would be a diminishing force on the world’s stage.

I am not qualified to offer views on the origins of terrorism, or what sustains hatred in the modern world, but I will say this. Our museum’s Exelon Wing speaks of Chicago as a crossroads, a place where very different kinds of people rub shoulders – for better or for worse. A crossroads is a place where diversity brings great opportunity, but only if conflict can be resolved. In its past, Chicago was known both for violence at the crossroads and as an example to the world in terms of social services among different peoples. We can be proud that Nobel Peace Prize winner, Jane Addams, lived in Chicago and that Chicago was the home of Hull House, a real beacon to the rest of the world.

² De Tocqueville, Alexis (ed. P. Mayer). *Democracy in America*. Doubleday & Company, Inc.; Garden City, N.Y. (1969; vol. I, p. 295).

³ *Ibid.*

Now today, with so much global migration and with global communications, the whole world has become a crossroads. People from different backgrounds, including religious backgrounds, are thrown together in new and complex ways. Once again, diversity brings opportunity, but only if conflict can be resolved.

Someone, I believe, who has profound insights into this world is a Muslim who lives in Chicago and serves on the Board of Trustees of the Chicago History Museum. Eboo Patel is the founder of an organization called the Interfaith Youth Core. It brings young people from different backgrounds together to work side-by-side on social projects as a way to promote religious understanding and toleration.

Patel recalls the great African-American scholar, W.E.B. DuBois, who said, “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.” One hundred years later, I am afraid, the color line still is with us, but Patel goes on to say this:

“I believe that the twenty-first century will be shaped by the question of the faith line. On one side of the faith line are the religious totalitarians.... On the other side of the faith line are the religious pluralists, who hold that people believing in different creeds and belonging to different communities need to learn to live together. Religious pluralism is neither mere coexistence nor forced consensus. It is a form of proactive cooperation that affirms the identity of the constituent communities while emphasizing that the well-being of each and all depends on the health of the whole. It is the belief that the common good is best served when each community has a chance to make its unique contribution.”⁴

How did Patel develop these insights? If you read his autobiography, you will see that this young man came from a family from India, grew up in Glen Ellyn, and was powerfully influenced by a wide variety of sources, such as the local YMCA and Catholic workers leader Dorothy Day. This is a quintessential Chicago story!

Patel counsels a new age of religious pluralism – one not based on ignoring religion, but instead, one that is grounded in understanding and toleration. With people from all over the world living together at the crossroads, and with religion such an important force for so many, we must learn how to respect each other’s beliefs. Maybe now, as during the time of Jane Addams, Chicago has a special role to play.

⁴ Patel, Eboo. *Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation*. Boston; Beacon Press. (2007) (page xv).

Maybe the Chicago History Museum also has a special role to play. Museums leave ideology and dogma to others. Museums leave investigative reporting to the journalists. Museums use the tools of history. Museums are interested in context. Museums are interested in long-term forces, but also in stories.

The Chicago History Museum tells stories with respect. Respect demands that we not write religion out of the multi-faceted story of Chicago. So, we will offer a series on faith communities in Chicago, beginning with Catholic Chicago. Over the years, we plan to move on to Jewish Chicago and Muslim Chicago. And whenever we find religious group as an important element of **any** story, we will not hesitate to say so.

During a 1952 presidential campaign speech, the Governor of Illinois, Adlai E. Stevenson II, said the following of those who came from many backgrounds to become Americans: “They were of every racial stock and every religious faith, and each brought something of the old country to the new country. And different though they were, they became one. This is our heritage, and this is our true glory. We are a people, I tell you, that is just beginning its high adventure on this continent.”⁵

The high adventure of America, and the high adventure of the City of Chicago, is now taking place in a dangerous period when the faith line may divide us. We must not let that happen. In telling the story of Chicago, it is my personal belief that understanding the unique contributions of all will help us to become one. “This is our heritage, and this is our true glory.”

⁵ “Gov. Adlai E. Stevenson, Presidential Campaign Address (September 1952)”, included in *Great Speeches of the 20th Century* (boxed set CD; vol. I). Santa Monica, CA; Rhino Word Beat (1991).