

CHRISTIANITY AND JUDAISM—CONSULTATION

Topic: Judaism in Puerto Rico (not included in program book)
Convener: John T. Pawlikowski, Catholic Theological Union
Moderator: Carol Ann Martinelli, Independent Scholar
Presenter: Jean-Pierre Ruiz, St. John's University, New York
Respondent: Carmen Nanko-Fernandez, Catholic Theological Union

Papers had been prepared in advance by the presenter and respondent. Professor Ruiz titled his presentation "An Almost Unbearable Destiny of Stories: Puerto Rico and the Intricacies of Identity." Dr. Nanko-Fernandez titled her response "Complicating Diasporas: To, Not From La Isla Del Encanto."

In their respective presentations both speakers stressed the complex, hybrid nature of Puerto Rican identity. It has been forged both on the island and in mainland cities such as New York. Add in a Jewish dimension, and the picture becomes even more complicated. In addition there is the Cuban component of Puerto Rican society, a component created by Fidel Castro's successful revolution, which led many Cubans to Puerto Rico. The Cuban factor has been especially important with regard to the Jewish community on the island as a significant part of that community joined the exodus to Puerto Rico following Castro's takeover of their country.

Ruiz began his paper with a brief account of his own experience in Queens, New York. He then turned his attention to the writings of Aurora Levins Morales. She has poignantly described her personal heritage forged in the countryside of Puerto Rico with connections to New York and incorporating a largely secular Jewish perception inherited from her father to a noted academic and political activist. She described her self-identity as "a child of two cultures of resistance." She and her mother exhibited a considerable comfortability living in a situation of multiple belonging. Unlike her parents, Aurora Levins Morales became interested in prayer. When her father died in early 2016 she felt it important to recite a kaddish (the traditional Jewish prayer remembering the dead) for him. But given his atheistic orientation she decided to compose a kaddish prayer of her own rather than rely on the classical wording.

By relating this story of Aurora Levins Morales, Ruiz has captured the unique identity of a specifically Puerto Rican Jew, considerably different from a Jewish identity forged in a mainland American context. The challenge of integrating this Puerto Rican Jewish identity with the experiences of Cuban Jews and Jews from the mainland remains a challenge for the current Jewish community on the island.

In her response Carmen Nanko-Fernandez repeated the complexity of Puerto Rican identity and how Jews who came to the island have integrated into that identity, if at all. The Puerto Rican Jewish presence has been framed by two colonizations, an ancient one and one emerging after 1898. The Puerto Rican Jewish community is the largest associated with the Chabad Lubavitch movement. Only now is the first building designed specifically as a synagogue under construction. One also sees some movement to greater reliance on Spanish in worship in contrast to the widespread use of English.

Nanko-Fernandez then goes on to discuss possible Jewish involvement with the expedition led by Columbus and possible Jewish settlements at that time. People known as "Conversos," outwardly Christian but still maintaining many Jewish rituals in secret, in fact funded to a significant extent the voyage of Columbus. The shrouded

Consultation: Christianity and Judaism

history of Luis de Torres is one of the most intriguing aspects of this Jewish connection to initial colonization in Puerto Rico, a history still discussed by scholars.

More recent activities related to Jews in Puerto Rico is the Lod Massacre Memorial Day established by the legislature to commemorate the twenty-six Puerto Rican pilgrims killed in a terrorist attack on Lod Airport in Tel Aviv, which connects this act with antisemitism. And in December 2015, to connect with Pope Francis' proclamation of a Holy Year, Archbishop Roberto Gonzalez Nieves, the Archbishop of San Juan, invited local Jewish leaders to the Cathedral to share in the ceremonies.

The two papers developed into a lively discussion among the participants. Many issues were pursued including how the Jewish community may continue to develop in Puerto Rico and share in the island's identity.

JOHN T. PAWLIKOWSKI
Catholic Theological Union
Chicago, Illinois