From Pan-Protestantism to Pluralism: Herman Wornom and the REA’s Journey toward Ecumenical and Interreligious Encounter, 1952-1970

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On September 14, 1970 as he was completing his tenure as general secretary of the REA, Herman Wornom found time to send a congratulatory note to Sr. Katherine Hargrove, RSCJ of Manhattanville College for receiving the Torch of Liberty Award from the Congregation Emanu-El in Rye, New York, adding, “I am winding up my official duties with REA today. This is probably the last letter I shall dictate as general secretary” (REA Archives, Record Group 74, Box 20, File 271). Perhaps, it is fitting that Wornom’s last official correspondence was written to a Catholic sister to congratulate her on an award she received from a Jewish congregation for promoting interreligious dialogue. Eighteen years earlier, when Wornom first took office, he promised to promote

Herman Wornom was borne in Dare, Virginia in 1902. He went to Randolph Macon College where he graduated from in 1923. He then went to Columbia University, where he studied religious education with George Albert Coe, graduating with his MA in 1924. In his early career as a religious educator, he served as minister of education for three parishes: Central Church in Worcester, MA, Congregational Church in Glen Ridge, NJ, and Chevy Chase Presbyterian Church, outside Washington, DC. In the 1930s he returned to New York to pursue further graduate studies in religious education at Union Theological Seminary and Columbia University, where he studied with Harrison Elliot (Kathan 1992, 492). Although he never completed his doctorate, Wornom maintained a life-long interest in higher education and its contribution to the field of religious education (Schmidt 1983, 151). Wornom was ordained in 1940, and served as Assistant Field Work Director at Union and later Assistant Professor and Director of Field Work at Pacific School of Religion in Berkley. He again returned to New York in 1946 and became Executive
Secretary of the Department of Christian Education for the Protestant Council of New York City. While there, he became involved with the National Council of Churches, as a member of the Board of Directors of the Geneva Point Center in New Hampshire (Kathan 1992).

“Though there is an abundance of data of primary records kept carefully by Herman Wornom during this period, there is hardly any evidence regarding the selection of the new general secretary after the death of Harrison Elliott. One small set of minutes labeled “confidential” included the names of several men who might be considered for the vacancy, but among the thirteen names suggested there is no mention of Herman Wornom. . . No other records indicate the remainder of the process, how or why Wornom came to be selected,” but the announcement of his election appears in the 1952 May-June issue of Religious Education (Schmidt 1983, 148-149).

Those who knew him described him as “tenacious, persistent, hard-working,” a “superb organizer” and having the gifts of “communication and persuasion” (Kathan 1992, 495). “His endless correspondence betrays a personal thoroughness rare in even intimate private communication. This quality of administrative thoroughness is most notable in Wornom’s care of budgetary detail” (Schmidt 1983, 149).

REA’s Pre-Wornom Efforts at Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue

William Rainey Harper’s founding vision for the REA was rooted in a broad, democratic vision of America as a Judeo-Christian nation. In practice, however, the REA

Personally, Harper retained some of the prejudices of his Protestant brethren toward Catholics, confiding in a letter to Henry Wade Rogers concerning representation of presidents of denominational colleges and universities, “For once I agree with the Catholics” (William Rainey Harper Papers, Box 4, Folder 14) or offering a qualified response to Father John Cavanagh of the University of Notre Dame, “I
think I appreciate the objectionable character of the word ‘Romish’” (William Rainey Harper Papers, Box 5, Folder 29).

As John Elias notes, “Evangelical Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Jews were not a prominent part of the early history of this association because of its stated aims and leadership.” However, “as time went on the religious education movement broadened its base by attempting to attract members who were other than liberal Protestants” (Elias 2003).

“The first meeting of the association was held in Chicago in 1903. In the official Bulletin of 1903 there is mention of Catholics and ‘Hebrew’ members, though they are not named. In Bulletin No. 4 there is mention of a Council of Religious Education of which the Roman Catholic Bishop John Lancaster Spalding of Peoria was among the elected members” (Elias 2003). “The first Roman Catholic addressed the third meeting in Boston in 1905. A second Catholic speaker did not address the convention until 1916. From 1906 to 1926 there were only two articles in the journal by Roman Catholics. Most articles by Catholics began to appear in the 1930s and 1940s” (Elias 2003).

A 1926 article by Laird Hites mentions that Catholics, Jews, and Evangelical Protestants are welcome in the REA since there is no theological position required for membership (1926).

“A survey of the association done in 1925-1926 by Professor H.N. Shelton and Hugh Harrie for the Institute of Social and Religious Research reported that though the association did not note denomination of membership, it was determined that in the membership there were 130 Methodists, 96 Presbyterians, 95 Congregationalists, 75 Baptists, 56 Unitarians, 3 Catholics, and 18 Jews along with 1719 members who had unknown denominational affiliations” (Elias 2003).

Despite efforts by the association to get Catholics to join throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Catholic participation was limited in large part because of the Catholic hierarchy’s ongoing suspicion of the REA’s
“decidedly liberal theology and a commitment to progressive education, which Catholics largely rejected” (Elias 2003).

In an analysis of the journal Religious Education, Elizabeth Glick Reiman observes that Catholics received less attention in the journal than did Judaism from its beginning in 1903 to 1953 (Reiman 1953).

A 1912 article on “The Jewish Child and the American Public” by Abram Simon offers an apologetic for American Jews as Americans: “What rights of the Jewish child in the American public school? There is only one answer to this question. He has no more rights and should have none less than any other child there. He would be guilty of an unpatriotic act were he, in the excess of zeal, to request any preferential treatment. There is no greater friend of the American public school system than the Jew” (Simon 1912, 527). Other early articles with specifically Jewish themes include “The Cultivation of the Social Spirit in Jewish Sunday School” also by Rabbi Abram Simon (1914) and “Jewish Religious Education” by Rabbi Louis Grossman (1911).

One article on “Hindu Religious Education” appeared in the journal in 1908 (Row 1908).

Letter from chair of Central Planning Committee dated Jan 6, 1950 to Dr. Samuel Freehof of Rodef Shalom Temple in Pittsburg inviting him to speak at a meeting of the local chapter of the REA on “some crucial issues in current religious education” (REA Archives, Record Group 74, Box 16, File 228).

Letter to Emmanuel Gamoran of the Commission on Jewish Education inviting him to become chair of the Cincinnati REA chapter, Jan 30, 1950 (REA Archives, Record Group 74, Box 16, File 228).

One of the most prominent Jews in the REA prior to Wornom’s time as general secretary was Leo Honor who joined the REA in the early 1920s when he was registrar of the Teachers’ Institute at Jewish Theological Seminary. As Judah Pilch notes, “He saw in the REA an excellent means to bring together men and women engaged in religious education for an exchange of views and opinions” (1957, 49). He
later joined the REA board in the late 1930s and continued to be an active member up until his death in 1956. His presence helped raise awareness of ecumenical and interreligious concerns within REA. The minutes for the first meeting of the Committee on Relations to Other Organizations of which Leo Honor was a participant, for example, indicates “how a better cooperative relationship could be established with Catholic groups was discussed at length.” It was further suggested “to have the meetings of the REA, Jewish Educational Society, and International Council of Religious Education about the same time to make it possible for more of the leaders of each organization to meet and work out some of their common issues. . . Dr. Honor agreed to bring this matter before the next meeting of the Executive Committee of the Jewish Council of Education (REA Archives, Record Group 74, Box 14, File 182). And, the minutes for the Committee on Relations in 1940 mentions “Dr. Israel Chipkin of the Jewish Education Association suggested the desirability of REA membership to the Board of Directors of his organization, and as a result of his efforts and those of Dr. Leo Honor, 17 new members were enrolled” (REA Archives, Record Group 74, Box 14, File 187).

50th Anniversary Convention

Members of the Planning Committee for the Observance of the 50th Anniversary of the Religious Education Association intentionally included several representatives from the Jewish and Catholic faiths. These included Dr. Israel Chipkin, editor of Jewish Education and Vice-President for research for the Jewish Education Committee of New York, Dr. Emanuel Gamoran, Director of Jewish Education for the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, Dr. Simon Greenberg, Vice Chancellor of Jewish Theological Seminary, Professor Leo Honor of Drepais College for Hebrew, Dr. Abraham Millgram, Director of the United Synagogue Commission on Jewish Education, Dr. William Genley, Vice-President of Seton Hall, Dr. Francis Crowley, Dean of the School of Education at Fordham University, Fr. Cyril Meyer, Vice-President of St. John’s University, and Fr. George Ford, pastor of Corpus Christi Church in Manhattan (REA Archives, Record Group 74, Box 14, File 192).
An address on “The Crisis of Religion in Education” by Abba Hillel Silver, Rabbi of Congregation Tifereth Israel in Cleveland, Ohio as part of the opening assembly of the 50th anniversary convention echoes the broadly inclusive theme of a common faith in an American way of life, “A new religious orientation is required for the preservation of the American way of life and for the preservation of our civilization. Much of our thought in recent years has centered overseas. We have been concerned with world reconstruction, with relief of the peoples abroad, with saving mankind from Communism. We have considered many ways of how to strengthen democracy abroad, but it is well to take stock of conditions at home. How sound is the American way of life? A critical barometer of the American way of life is the American home” (Silver 1954, 67). Note, Silver does not mention anything explicitly Jewish in his talk but appeals to a broader audience.

In 1953 Wornom corresponded with Fr. Theodore Hesburgh, President of the University of Notre Dame, who, though unable to attend, sent an endorsement of the work of the association. Wornom also sent an invitation to Bishop Edwin O’Hara of Kansas City, who accepted the invitation to present at paper at the meeting on “Roman Catholic approaches to providing religious education for its children and young people” (REA Archives, Record Group 74, Box 34, File 433).

Wornom describes the convention in these terms in a letter dated July 31, 1953 to the Pitcairn-Crabbs Foundation: “I know of no other convention in recent times dealing with religious education

Wornom’s Efforts with Catholics

“Before he talked to Catholics he talked to Cardinals. He received what other ecumenical efforts had been unable to achieve” Chicago Catholics could not attend the 1954 gathering of the World Council of Churches in Evanston, Illinois. However, they could attend the REA with the hierarchy’s blessing (Schmidt 1992, 498).
In 1954 Wornom contacted Fr. Gerard Sloyan of Catholic University of America and requested he attend the first meeting of the REA’s newly formed Committee on Research as a temporary replacement for Fr. John Kelly, Director of the National Center of the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine. Sloyan was already a member of the REA’s Editorial Committee and Wornom hastened to add “We had thought of asking you to serve as a regular member, but we felt it would be imposing on you” (REA Archives, Record Group 74, Box 90, File 1062). Wornom also invited several Jews to join the Committee, including Rabbi Sylvan Swartzman of Hebrew Union College of Cincinnati whom he saw as “the person for Reformed Judaism to be on the committee.” Wornom was concerned about finding a day to meet that would be acceptable to all members. He pointed out that “Some persons say we should not meet again on Sundays, others object to Saturdays. We are wondering if Saturday afternoon and evening would be feasible. If neither Saturday nor Sunday are any good then we will have to select some other day during the week. Please, therefore, let us know what days during the week are impossible for you, as well as about Saturday and Sunday.” Wornom ended by reassuring Rabbi Schwartzman, “You will be interested to know that other Jewish members of the committee are Dr. Leo Honor of Philadelphia, Dr. Jacob Hartstein, Dean of the Graduate School, Long Island University, and Professor Oscar Janowsky of City College,” adding “There will probably be yet other Jewish members” (REA Archives, Record Group 74, Box 90, File 1062).

He was able to utilize REA’s “historical genius,” namely that the REA is a collection of individuals not church bodies (Schmidt 1992, 498).

In a letter to Sophia Lyon Fahs in 1957, Wornom notes that although the association had attempted to become more inclusive between 1930 and 1952, there were only 6 Catholic members in 1952. However, by 1957 the REA had 200 Catholic members out of 2500, adding, “the Catholics who have joined are not of the reactionary type, but persons who are eager for a broader intellectual fellowship” (REA Archives, Record Group 74).
In a 1962 letter to Bishop John Wright of Pittsburg, Wornom writes, “I am pleased to enclose a program of the National Convention of the Religious Education Association to be held in Chicago, November 18-20. I know how busy you must be getting ready for the Vatican Council, but I trust you may have a few moments to see the program . . . There are several persons who have been added to the personnel since [its printing], including Father Dunne of NCEA in the seminar on “The College,” and Professor Dickinson of Loyola University in the seminar on “Art, Drama, and Literature. . . I would hope that several of the priests and laity of the Diocese of Pittsburgh will attend the Convention. . . It is our hope that the Convention will result in stimulating the efforts of all religious and character education agencies to improve the moral climate of America, in line with ethical standards and sanctions which stem from the Judaic and Christian faiths” (REA Archives, Record Group 74, Box 22, File 301).

Wornom granted wide editorial freedom to the editor of the REA’s official journal, Religious Education. However, he did make a special effort to encourage the inclusion of Catholic and Jewish authors. For example, in a letter to acting editor Paul Vieth, Wornom mentions “Thanks for sending me the reviews of Research in Religious Education by Campbell Wycoff and Albert Broaderick . . . I am wondering if we should not get some other Catholics to write a review such as Fr. Neil McCluskey. Also, we should get a Jewish reviewer” (REA Archives, Record Group 74, Box 22, File 300).

In a 1967 letter to the Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, Wornom requests copies of a booklet, Guidelines for Catholic-Jewish Relations “for all members of the Board of the Religious Education Association” (REA Archives, Record Group 74, Box 22, File 305).

Wornom’s Efforts with Jews

Daedalus. At the end I was reminded of a remark you made several years ago, ‘I can understand Protestants and I can understand Catholics, but I cannot make head or tails of the Jews’” (REA Archives, Record Group 74, Box 20, File 271). Hardon goes on to explain that he thinks “Christianity is very adaptable outside the purely religious sphere. Judaism is not. The only way to transform a culture, for Jews, is to convert the population to Judaism.”


A 1969 list of “Jewish Groups to Receive Programs” of the REA’s National Convention included the Commission on Jewish Education of the National Association of Temple Educators, the National Council for Jewish Education, and the National Association of Hebrew Day Schools (REA Archives, Record Group 74, Box 49, File 555).

1969 Convention

In December 1969, Wornom corresponded with Donald Landon, Director of the Department of Religious Education for the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. In November of that year the REA held its annual convention in Chicago. Landon indicated “ten staff members from our World Headquarters attended the sessions and all spoke appreciatively of the benefits gained from the conference” (REA Archives, Record Group 74, Box 49, File 555). In March of the following year, Wornom wrote to the Director of Curriculum Development of the Mennonite Publishing House: “Mennonites were well represented at our convention in Chicago in November. Our tally seems to show there were 10 Mennonites. . .You may be interested in attendance from other denominations: Episcopalians-39, United Church of Christ-67, Presbyterian USA-58, United Methodist-62, Disciples of Christ-22. The overall attendance at the convention was approximately 1500. Of this number there were 900 Roman Catholics. As you suggested, it is good to have so many Catholics, but in the future we should certainly
try to get a larger Protestant attendance. Roman Catholic professional religious educators do well outnumber Protestants, but when the Catholic attendance reaches 900, we should certainly have 700 or 800 Protestants to maintain a good balance” (REA Archives, Record Group 74, Box 49, File 555).

Conclusion

After retirement as general secretary of the REA, Wornom served as visiting member of the faculty of Andover Newton Seminary and traveled extensively including trips to Mexico, India, and Iran (Kathan 1992, 495).

At the bottom of the last page of Barney Kathan’s 1992 memorial to Herman Wornom in the journal Religious Education there is an advertisement for a 1993 conference sponsored by Auburn Theological Seminary. The title of the conference is “Multi-faith Dialogue in a Multicultural Society” which promised “to deepen awareness of one’s own cultural and religious heritage, to understand other cultures and religious traditions, and to use enhanced understanding in becoming a better citizen of the world” (1992, 495).

Kathan describes Wornom as a “second founder” of REA (1992, 491).

In his 1992 memorial, speaking of Wornom’s ecumenical and interreligious efforts on behalf of the REA, Stephen Schmidt asks, “Could we rekindle that fervor? With Muslims, Eastern religions, Buddhists, Hindus, Evangelical sectarianism, and every other form of contemporary religious experience?” He adds, “Herman’s story and style sere as motivation and critique for our current ecumenical apathy” (1992, 499).

Under Wornom’s tenure, the REA grew to its largest number in its history. “At the end of the period, Herman Wornom would end his career as leader of the REA with the most appropriate public success,
the largest convention [1969] in the recent history of the REA, attended by more than 1500 members” (Schmidt 1983, 148).

“What is less visible but equally true was another reality, that somewhere during these successful years the association strayed from its larger ideal—that of public pedagogy and a significant commitment to the solution of social ills. The public democratic ideal of the founders became a strategy for internal affairs, a way to organize conventions and workshops” and “a way to pursue ecumenical goals and not alienate anyone in the process” (Schmidt 1983, 148).

“While he

References


REA Archives. Special Collections. Yale University Divinity Library. New Haven, CT.


