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DEMOCRACY & DIVERSITY
A PROJECT OF INTERFAITH ALLIANCE

Voices of Reason: The Flushing Remonstrance

In 1645, what is today, Flushing, Queens was a part of the Dutch colony of New Netherlands though it was mainly settled by English families. At that time, the first known Quaker in America, Richard Smith was living in nearby Southampton, Long Island. He with other Quakers, visited Boston in 1656, but all were put in jail as soon as they arrived and were sent back to England. But religious persecution in Massachusetts only encouraged more Quakers to feel the call to move to the New World. Quakers settled in Flushing and Oyster Bay and their religious teaching was widely accepted throughout these areas despite the opposition of the colonial government and the Reformed Dutch Church. Peter Stuyvesant, governor of New Netherlands issued an order forbidding anyone in the colony to entertain a Quaker or allow a Quaker meeting to be held in his or her home under the penalty of a fine of fifty pounds.

A respected Flushing colonist, Henry Townsend, held a Quaker meeting in his house and was fined and banished. Other Flushing residents responded by drawing up a document arguing the cause of religious freedom. It was written and signed by Edward Hart, the Town Clerk, and Tobias Feake, the Schout (sheriff) and 28 other colonists. This document, known as the Flushing Remonstrance (protest) is perhaps the earliest demand for religious freedom made in what would become the United States:

You have been pleased to send unto us a certain prohibition or command that we should not receive or entertain any of those people called Quakers because they are supposed to be, by some, seducers of the people. For our part, we cannot condemn them in case, neither can we stretch out our hands against them, for out of Christ God is a consuming fire, and it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Wee desire therefore in this case not to judge least we be judged, neither to condemn, least we be condemned, but rather let every man stand or fall to his own Master. Wee are bounde by the law to do good unto all men, especially for those of the household faith. And though for the present we seem insensible for the law and the Law giver, yet when death and the Law assault us, if wee have our advocate to seeke, who shall plead for us in this case of conscience betwixt God and our souls: the powers of this world can neither attach us, neither excuse us for God justifie who can command and if God there is none can justifie...

The law of love, peace and liberty in the states extending to Jews, Turks and Egyptians, as they are considered sones of Adam, which is the glory of the outward state of Holland, soe love, peace and liberty, extending to all in Christ, Jesus, condemns hatred, war, and bondage. And because our Savior saith it is impossible but that offences will come, but woe unto him by whom they cometh, our desire is not to offend one of his little ones, in whatever form, name or title hee appears in whether Presbyterian, Independent, Baptist or Quaker, but shall be glad to see anything of God in any of them, desiring to doe unto all men as we desire all men should doe unto us, which is the true law both of the Church and the State, for our Savior saith this is the law and the prophets. Therefore, if any of these said persons come in love unto us, wee cannot in conscience lay violent hands upon them, but give them egresses and regresse unto our town, and houses, as God shall persuade our consciences. And in this we are true subjects both of Church and State for we are bounde by the law of God and man to doe good unto all men and evil to noe man. And this is according to the patent and charter of our Towne, given us in the name of the States General, which we are not willing to infringe and violate, but shall houle to our patent and shall remaine, your humble subjects, the inhabitants of Vlishin (Flushing).

*Written the 27th day of December, in the year 1657, by mee
Edward Heat Clericus*

Source: <http://www.nyym.org/flushing/remons.html>

Directions: Be prepared to discuss the following questions:

1. Describe the person(s) and historical context of the individual who is promoting the idea of religious liberty.
2. What arguments does the individual make for religious liberty?
3. What limits, if any, does this person place on the practice of religious liberty?