

FINAL PAPER

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“Exploring Shared Values: The Role of the Individual”

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The mission and perceptions of the American Interfaith Institute is reaching out to the diverse fellowship of this nation’s citizens...Muslims, Christians, and Jews...who enjoy the blessings of this great and diverse society; who understand that democracy is forever a work in progress; who realize that the Constitution of the United States is a document created by human beings and is, therefore, subject to the developing thought patterns, experiences and hopes of our citizens. These are the issues upon which I founded the American Interfaith Institute.

For over 22 years, the Institute and our associated organization, the National Liberty Museum, have been creating meaningful dialogue among people of faith within a framework of education and exhibits, programming and research. Initially, our work involved building bridges to connect Christians and Jews, but for some time now we have reached out to include all the children of Abraham.

The violence in today’s world has taught us that, for any hope of peace, we must face these pressing challenges:

- The *willingness* to leave the hatred of the past behind
- The *courage* to bury ethnic and cultural bigotry and politics
- The commitment to have an open mind; to review new information without prejudice.

Cooperation among different cultures and religious groups requires a proactive effort to understand, to accept and, finally, to celebrate one another. Americans are fortunate to live in a creative democracy that separates religion and state, while still placing a high value on spiritual faith. Religion is the most powerful and persuasive force in society. Thoughtful people of faith must not be caught in stifling patterns of fear, laziness and arrogance.

- Fear - that shrinks from *new truths*.
- Laziness - that is content with *half-truths* and
- Arrogance - that thinks it knows *all truths*.

The American Interfaith Institute developed its Tent of Abraham program in the spirit of the first president of the United States. George Washington declined an early invitation to become King of America, and instead,

challenged fellow leaders to make the United States one of the greatest experiments in the history of civilization; a nation where people from different backgrounds and religious faiths share the same land, laws and values.

America is the first nation to separate government and religion. Clearly, it has not always been a peaceful process. But we do have a rich and worthy tradition of religious tolerance in America. Indeed, in many ways, our reverence for religious practice is why there is an America.

We are grateful that, although it is not the law of the land, religion is woven into the American sense of self. It is, in fact, part of the American experience. Clearly, democracy is creative. But it is also very fragile. It needs protection. Our challenge is not to fall into patterns of old prejudices. As children of Abraham, let us stay true to the vision of faith and hope upon which this country was founded. We share a core history that connects us.

Somewhere out of time ... Somewhere in the mystery of time ... we have - all of us - been enormously touched by Abraham. His is the portrait of ultimate faith. It is his reflection in the mirror of life that we so eagerly seek.

- The Qur'an proclaims that Abraham, the prophet, left his native land for another place, to give birth to a community of followers.
- The Christian Gospels and letters emphasize Abraham as an unconditional believer...a vessel of God's grace.
- The Torah teaches that Abraham received recognition in the eyes of God because he believed God and was willing to do what God asked.

The echo of Abraham's call for Muslims, Jews and Christians is unmistakable: It is not the seeking of God that divides humankind, but the claim to have discovered the only proper way of communicating with God. The key to ensuring our own equal rights is a commitment to protect the rights of Americans of every ethnic and religious heritage. And this is what the Tent of Abraham is about: reaching out to one another with knowledge based on historical truth; with compassion based on understanding.

No religion is an island. Each is touched by the others. We cannot merely pray to end war, for we must find our own path of peace within ourselves and with our neighbors. We cannot merely pray to end prejudice for we already have eyes with which to see God in all people. Therefore, we pray instead for strength, determination and willpower to do instead of merely to pray. The Qur'an, the Torah, the New Testament—those magnificent instruments of faith - can set us on the path if only we heed their vision; if only we recognize that in the eyes of God, we are woven together as in a tapestry.

I founded the National Liberty Museum to celebrate America's heritage of freedom by honoring 2,000 heroes of liberty representing all faiths and nationalities. Our exhibitions reflect an approach to America that encourages visitors to understand the challenges of immigrants who seek to establish their families as peaceful members of the community and to reject bigotry and violence in all forms. The unique exhibitions and educational programs of the National Liberty Museum have already been seen and experienced by one hundred and fifty thousand visitors. The presentations clarify appreciation of all faiths and teach that there are no superior people and no inferior religions. Recently, groups of students from Muslim and Jewish schools have come to experience the national Liberty Museum together. They share daylong sessions that teach about similarities among cultures and tradition; that encourage pride in one's heritage without prejudice to others; that acknowledge respect as a key factor in the achievement of peace. These sessions are incredibly successful and enriching encounters.

Located in the heart of Philadelphia's historic district, just steps away from the Liberty Bell and Independence Hall, the National Liberty Museum represents a portrait of America's promise. Interactive exhibits invite young citizens to vote on current events and express their concerns about issues that lead to prejudice and

school violence. Encouragement and enthusiastic response from thousands of visitors affirm the effectiveness of the Museum's programs.

It is appropriate that the American Interfaith Institute and the National Liberty Museum embrace the Tent of Abraham, just as the lessons of Abraham teach us to embrace one another. We have in common, prophets, scriptures and good works. We share religious values—Oneness, Compassion and Justice all rooted in the perspective of the three Abrahamic faiths.

The Tent, like the American Interfaith Institute and America itself, is intended to be a work in progress for the ages; a beacon of hope as we discover and deepen the relationships that connect us, one to the other.

So, how may we envision this country we love? Let it be a land where the mind is without fear; where words come out of the depth of truth; where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way. In closing, I invite you to visit our Museum with your families. We welcome your suggestions and ideas. Come as our guests, there will be no charge. The key words for guest admission are "Salaam," "Shalom," "Peace." Thank you.