



Outreach – The New Truth

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For over 23 years, the American Interfaith Institute and our associate organization, the National Liberty Museum, have been creating meaningful dialogue among people of faith within a framework of educational initiatives, exhibits, programming and research.

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

- the willingness to leave the hatred of the past behind.
- the courage to bury ethnic, cultural and political bias.
- the commitment to have an open mind; to review new information without prejudice.

Cooperation between different cultures and religious groups requires a proactive effort to understand, to accept, and finally, to appreciate 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 causes people to shrink from new truth.
- laziness that makes people content with half-truths.
- arrogance that convinces people that they know all truth.

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.

But it is also a fact that many of the country's early immigrants from Europe brought with them deep-seated bigotry towards others. Today, we can be thankful that the children of America's immigrants are learning to be more accepting of the "other" than their ancestors.

Clearly, democracy is a strong and creative form of government, but it is also very fragile. It needs protection. Our challenge is not to fall into patterns of old prejudices that cause democracy to shatter. As children of Abraham, we must stay true to the vision of faith and hope upon which this country was founded.

We share a core history that connects us. Somewhere in the deep recesses of time, we have all 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 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 participating scholars of the American Interfaith Institute are all distinguished leaders in their field. From time to time, the Institute has been pleased to sponsor and publish their research. Tashbih Sayyed, a prominent editor and publisher has written extensively about Muslims in American. This excerpt from his featured article in a recent issue of *Muslim World Today* addresses the issue well:

If one has to look for one basic, elementary cause of terrorism engulfing civilization today; it is religious absolutism. Religious absolutism results from a belief that a particular faith represents the absolute truth and therefore must be accepted by everyone else without question. Such an absolutist theology encourages bigotry of the highest order and promotes extreme hatred of all other faiths.

No one is more threatened by radical Islam than the Muslims themselves. That's why some of us, who have somehow escaped the Islamist control and influence, have taken upon ourselves to expose the scourge and by doing so, exterminate it.

This viewpoint has been the catalyst for a number of positive responses from Muslims, Christians, and Jews alike. It expresses well the tenets of the *Tent of Abraham* – reaching out to one another with knowledge based on historical truth, with compassion based on understanding.

The key to ensuring our own equal rights is a commitment to protect the rights of Americans of every ethnic and religious heritage.

No religion is an island. Each is touched by the others. There are too many misconceptions about immigrants that must be challenged, that must be changed. 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 will power, so that we have the ability to effect change.

The Qur'an, the Torah, and the New Testament are magnificent instruments of faith. They can set us on the right path if only we heed their vision; if only we recognize that in the eyes of God we are all woven together as one people .

The outreach of the *Tent of Abraham* is augmented through its affiliation with the National Liberty Museum. The Museum was founded to celebrate America's heritage of freedom by honoring 2,000 heroes of liberty representing all faiths and nationalities. Exhibitions reflect an approach to democracy in America that encourage visitors to understand the responsibilities of citizenship; to reject bigotry and violence in all its forms; and to respect the diverse traditions that are key to the vitality of this nation.

The unique exhibitions and educational programs of the National Liberty Museum have already been seen and experienced by one hundred and seventy-five 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, Christian and Jewish schools joined together to visit the National Liberty Museum. They shared day-long sessions about the similarities of their cultures and traditions, so that they would have pride in themselves without prejudice to others. At the conclusion of the program, they acknowledged that respect is a key factor in the achievement of peace.

The concept of liberty comes alive for young citizens at the Museum, because it is a hands-on experience. They are invited to use our interactive exhibits to vote on current events and express their concerns about issues that lead to prejudice and violence.

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. The enormous response from thousands of visitors is profoundly moving.

The *Tent of Abraham* program, like the National Liberty Museum and America itself, is intended to be a work in progress; a beacon of hope as we discover and deepen the relationships that connect us, one to the other.

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. Salaam, Shalom, Peace.

Irvin J. Borowsky is the founder and Chairman of the American Interfaith Institute. This article is from Mr. Borowsky's presentation at the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy's fifth annual conference in Washington, D.C.