

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Understanding, tolerance practiced by country's founding fathers

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We are all aware of the important freedom of religion clause which was written into our Bill of Rights as a part of the First Amendment to the Constitution.

It has been an important principle from the beginning of our nation.

But how many of us are aware of the early American leaders who not only supported this principle, but practiced interfaith understanding from the beginning?

Many of the colonies were actively anti-Catholic in those early days and a popular celebration called Guy Fawkes Day often included burning an effigy of the pope.

As the commander of the Continental Army, George

Washington in 1775 banned this practice by officers and soldiers in the army.

In reference to the Catholics he said, "to be insulting to their Religion, is so monstrous, as not to be suffered or excused; indeed instead of offering the most remote insult, it is our duty to address public thanks to these our Brethren."

As our first president, Washington continued this openness to other religious expressions.

On a visit in 1790 to Newport, Rhode Island, he was greeted by the leaders of the community, as well as by various religious representatives.

An official of Yeshuat Israel,

the first Jewish congregation established in Newport, was one of those welcoming Washington and his party.

Moses Seixas in his welcoming address said: "Deprived as we heretofore have been of the invaluable rights of free Citizens, we now (with a deep sense of gratitude to the Almighty disposer of all events) behold a Government, erected by the Majesty of the People — a Government, which to bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance — but generously affording to All liberty of conscience, and immunities of Citizenship: deeming every one, of whatever Nation, tongue, or language, equal parts."

Upon returning to the capital, Washington wrote back what is known as the Letter to the Hebrew Congregations of Newport.



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It included the following:

"The citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy — a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of as if it were the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights, for, happily, the Government of the United States ... gives to bigotry no sanction, and to persecution no assistance."

And then referring to the Hebrew prophet Micah, he added: "May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in this land continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants — while everyone

shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid.

"May the father of all mercies scatter light, and not darkness, upon our paths, and make us all in our several vocations useful here, and in His own due time and way everlastingly happy."

Why do we teach school children silly stories about Washington chopping down the cherry tree when we have such a clear and forceful example of interfaith understanding at the beginning of our country and by our first president?

As our country becomes more and more diverse, we must reaffirm the openness to all religions as expressed by our founding fathers, and join George Washington in going beyond tolerance by seeking the goodwill, safety, and happiness of all citizens.

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