

New York: Beacon of Tolerance

ACCORDING TO THE CENSUS of 2010, more than 8 million people from across the world, speaking more than 800 languages, live together, work, play, argue, and reconcile within a space of just 305 square miles, called New York City.



Dutch "Manatus" map, 1670

They worship in more than 6,000 churches, 1,000 synagogues, 100 mosques, in Buddhist temples, Hindu temples, Shinto shrines, and many others, as they practice their ancient faiths in a new land. The population is 33% white, 29% Hispanic, 23% Black, and 13% Asian, creating an extraordinary mix of ethnicities, of cultural and religious traditions all coexisting in this, the most densely populated city in the United States.

Given such amazing diversity, it is surprising there is not more friction. Admittedly, racial tensions have periodically erupted into violence—Bensonhurst, Crown Heights and Howard Beach have had their share in recent decades—but local community leaders have managed to restore calm through dialogue, and gradually the wounds are healing. The latest furor over Park 51, the Islamic Community Center being built near Ground Zero, has abated after a heated, though healthy, public debate.

Considering the history of New York since its founding days, it may not be too far-fetched to say that tolerance has been scripted into its DNA. In 1624, when the Dutch founded their first settlement on Noten Eylandt—today's Governors Island—they brought with them from Amsterdam a charter mandating that *"Everyone shall remain free in religion and no one may be persecuted or investigated because of religion,"* and that the settlers should manifest this ethos of toleration *"through attitude and by example."*¹

A year later, in 1625, Dutch settlers founded New Amsterdam at the tip of Manhattan, where, by 1643, more than 18 languages were spoken, and Calvinists lived side by side with "Catholics, Puritans, Lutherans, Anabaptists, etc." The so-called "Flushing Remonstrance," codifying the settlement of Flushing within New Amsterdam, states clearly that *"the law of love, peace and liberty in the state extends to Jews, Turks [Muslims] and Egyptians [Gyp-*

sies] which is the glory of the outward state of Holland... We are bound by the law of God and man to do good to all men, and evil to no man, according to the Patent and Charter of our Towne given unto us in the name of the States General." When Petrus [Peter] Stuyvesant tried to deny permanent residency in New Amsterdam to a group of Sephardic Jews in 1655, he was overruled on the basis of "reason and equity."

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When New Netherland was ceded by the Dutch to the British in 1664, Article VIII of the Articles of Transfer specified explicitly that New Netherlanders—renamed New Yorkers the following year—*"shall keep and enjoy the liberty of their consciences in religion."* New York's governor Thomas Dongan described the rich religious diversity of the settlement in 1686: "Here be

not many of the Church of England; few Roman Catholics; abundance of Quakers; preachers, men and women especially; singing Quakers; ranting Quakers; Sabatarians; Anti-sabatarians; some Anabaptists; some Independents; some Jews [both Ashkenazim and Sephardim]; in short of all sorts of opinion there are some, and the most of none at all."

From this fertile historical ground, New York has flourished and grown into the vibrantly diverse city it is today, in keeping with the principles of pluralism and toleration present at its inception. More recently, the New York State Senate and Assembly have recognized Governors Island as the place where the "legal-political guaranty of tolerance onto the North American Continent" was planted [Resolutions No. 5476 and No. 2708]. When 150 acres of the island were transferred to New York State by the US Government in 2003, many plans were offered for the redevelopment of this historic site as a public and civic resource. Among the most meaningful was the suggestion by the Tolerance Park Alliance to create a 50 acre park dedicated as a monument to tolerance at the very site, where freedom of conscience and religious practice were first codified in the New World.²

New York truly has become "The Island at the Center of the World," vibrant and diverse. Waves of immigrants have flocked here to be free: to work, to worship, to seek their fortune, and in the process they have become part of the tapestry of this remarkably rich city. In acknowledgement of New York's extraordinary ability to harbor human diversity in all its forms, the United Nations were headquartered here in 1948; its *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* enshrines "tolerance among all nations, racial or religious groups" [Article 26-2], harking back to the very ideals of the original code of conduct for the Dutch settlers on Governors Island and in New Amsterdam. Tolerance is the mortar that holds the residents of this teeming city together, a beacon to those seeking to live in liberty. ■

This article has been compiled by the Editor.

1 Koning, Joep de, "Governors Island: Lifeblood of American Liberty." I am indebted to Mr. de Koning, President of the Tolerance Park Foundation, for all historical references to Governors Island in this article, as well as to the Dutch contribution to American ideals of liberty and toleration.

2 The Tolerance Park Foundation is a non-profit organization seeking to establish a National Heritage Triangle in New York Harbor.

www.NationalHeritageTriangle.com and
www.GovernorsIslandToleranceMonument.com

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