

The Text of the Flushing Remonstrance

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The Flushing Remonstrance is without doubt an extraordinary document. Emanating from a time and place where we have very little direct information about peoples' beliefs, it is a powerful testament of local religiosity. Its language reveals the remarkable degree to which the inhabitants of Flushing were steeped in Biblical Protestantism. The passion of its argument touches us even today. Its boldness is striking: it openly proclaims to Governor Peter Stuyvesant that the people of Flushing cannot and will not obey the recent law passed against hosting Quaker missionaries. To an historian reading through the records of New Netherland, its words leap off the page and put a jolt in the spine. The Dutch colonial records contain some pretty wild material –drinking, fighting, name-calling, political scandals, Indian wars – but I have to say that the Flushing Remonstrance really does stand out.

I have been fascinated with the document ever since I came across it while doing research years ago on my doctoral dissertation about religious toleration in the seventeenth century middle colonies. Though it has been known about for some time now, and the incidents surrounding it have been discussed by a number of historians, I still don't think the text itself has gotten as much attention as it deserves. And that is what I want to talk about this evening, drawing our attention to what the Flushing Remonstrance actually says, and providing you with a sense of how it fit in within

debates over religious liberty, or liberty of conscience, at the time it was written, in 1657. So, if you have a copy of the text, take it out and look it over while I continue my talk.

First, I need to briefly set the scene. You'll notice that the remonstrance is not just a general statement of principals, but a response to a very particular set of circumstances. The men of Flushing, lead by their magistrates, were petitioning the governor of New Netherland for exemption from a law that had been passed a few months earlier, prohibiting anybody in the colony from hosting a Quaker on penalty of a fine. The law was passed because just that summer the first Quaker missionaries preaching the new message of the Society of Friends had entered the colony and created something of a storm. Quakerism was a new faith at this point, only a few years old. It had developed in the dramatic and disruptive religious and political climate of revolutionary England, where the king had recently been executed, the Church of England made illegal, and all sorts of new sects and faiths suddenly began to emerge and loudly challenge the social and religious status quo.

In New Netherland, only one religion – that of the Dutch Reformed Church – was allowed to be practiced publicly. Its laws did allow for what it called “liberty of conscience”, but this just meant that people could believe what they wanted and worship as they wished within the privacy of their own homes. They could not hold public services unless they conformed to the norms of the Dutch Reformed Church. Since the English towns on Long Island were inhabited primarily by puritans from New England who shared the Reformed Protestant beliefs of the Dutch, they could and did hire

ministers and worship freely. Everyone else had to stay quiet. If they wanted to worship, they had to go to one of the colony's Reformed churches.¹

The Quakers posed a radical challenge to this system. Their radicalism was most evident in the prominence they gave to women. Quaker women could preach and convert (or “convince”) people and played a leading role in the growth of the faith from its early years. Two of the three first Quakers to come to New Netherland were women. The colonists had never seen anything like it. After getting off the ship that brought them to New Amsterdam, they “began to quake and go into a frenzy, and cry out loudly in the middle of the street, that men should repent, for the day of judgment was at hand.” The Dutch soon threw them into jail for basically disturbing the peace, and then expelled them from the colony. The third missionary, Robert Hodgson, stayed on a while longer and made it out to Long Island, where he was caught in Hempstead and also expelled.

Clearly the Dutch authorities were disturbed by this new and disruptive religion. But the arrival of the Quakers was only the latest in a series of challenges to the colony's religious life. That same summer a Lutheran minister had arrived from the Netherlands in the hopes of setting up a Lutheran church. He managed to stay on in hiding for two years before he was caught and expelled. Just the year before he arrived, a Baptist had arrived on Long Island and started baptizing people in a river before he was expelled. Two years

¹ The closest English analogy to what Stuyvesant was doing may have been the Cromwellian church settlement, designed largely to favor Independents and supporting the Erastian involvement of the state in regulating church affairs. It allowed for liberty of conscience, but only to the restricted group of the “godly”. Everyone else had to conform outwardly, though not inwardly, and the magistrates enforced this. Jeffrey R. Collins, “The Church Settlement of Oliver Cromwell,” *History* 87 (2002): 18—40; Avihu Zakai, “Religious Toleration and its Enemies: The Independent Divines and the Issue of toleration during the English Civil War,” *Albion* 21 (1989): 1-33; Blair Worden, “Toleration and the Cromwellian Protectorate,” in Persecution and Toleration, ed. W. J. Sheils, SCH 21 (Oxford, 1984): 199-233.

before that, in 1654, a number of Jews had arrived, refugees from the failed Dutch colony in Brazil, which had granted them a notable amount of religious toleration. New Netherland never did, and under steady harassment from the governor and ministers of the Dutch Reformed Church, most of them would leave over the next decade.

In brief, the leaders of a number of other religious groups had been challenging the hegemony of the Dutch Reformed Church, and the government's response had always been the same: kick them out of the colony. It did not expel everyone who lived in the colony who happened to agree with them – there were Lutherans, Baptists, Catholics, Anglicans, and others in the colony throughout its existence. There were not enough Dutch Reformed around to do all of the work and colonizing that the Dutch wanted to do, so they happily let in people of different faiths. But they were not allowed to form their own churches and worship as they wanted. As in the Netherlands itself, only one faith could be officially recognized. The Dutch did not believe in forcing peoples' consciences, but their government agreed with the prevailing wisdom of Europe at the time that to openly tolerate more than one religion was to risk the wrath of god as well as social and political chaos. Liberty of conscience meant that it was okay to worship as one wished at home, alone with one's family. In cities like Amsterdam this could even extend to small "hidden churches" (*schuilkerken*). But even there the worshippers could be harassed if they drew too much attention to themselves.²

Quakerism could not be accommodated into traditional Dutch practice because it was new and evangelical. It was trying to make converts, not maintain itself. And the drama and energy of its missionaries seemed to confirm the authorities fears about the

² Benjamin J. Kaplan, Divided by Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 2007), 177-183.

anarchy of radical religion. What was particularly disturbing was that a number of people in the English towns liked what they were saying. Thus the law against hosting Quakers was aimed not at the Quakers themselves, but at the local colonists who might want to join them. This is what prompted the men of Flushing to take a stand and draw up the Remonstrance.

And this gets me to my first point. The Flushing Remonstrance is not so much a statement about religious freedom in general so much as a refusal to condemn Quakers as dangerous and malicious people deserving punishment. On the contrary, they might have something useful and important to say. This is a very pro-Quaker text. It includes Quakers along with Presbyterians, Independents (Congregationalists), and Baptists as one of Jesus's "little ones". They are of the "household of faith". The men of Flushing believe that Quakers come to them "in love". They are not "seducers of the people" who are "destructive to Magistracy and Ministerye".

In fact, so friendly to Quakers is the text that it almost reads as a Quaker text. Scholars who've read a lot of Quaker writings from this period recognize certain similarities between its language and other Quaker documents. Note, for example, the idea that one can see whether they have something "of God" in them, as well as the stress on "love, peace and liberty, extending to all in Christ Jesus" which "condemns hatred, war and bondage". These echo themes of Quaker preaching at the time.

That a number of the men who signed the document, along with their neighbors, later became Quakers themselves is not all that surprising.³ Whoever wrote this had clearly been in dialogue with the Quaker missionaries as well as the Bible, the main

³ Mildred Murphy DeRiggi, "Quakerism on Long Island: The First Fifty Years, 1657-1707," PhD SUNY Stony Brook.

source of Quaker belief. In an impressive little piece of Scriptural research, R. Ward Harrington has found Scriptural correspondences for many passages in the remonstrance.⁴ Traditional accounts of the rise of religious toleration which stress the role of philosophers and enlightenment thinkers, but here there are only two sources used to justify tolerance: the Bible and the laws of Holland, with most of the material coming from the Bible.

The Flushing Remonstrance is clearly the product of much religious thought and feeling. But is not a spiritual tract. It is a statement about religious toleration – about both the nature of persecution and the role of the state in regulating people’s beliefs. And in both these areas the Flushing Remonstrance stands out as exceptional for the times. While there were probably some people in the Netherlands who would agree with it, it is more a product of English radical Protestantism than a reflection of Dutch tolerationist practices.

Although it appeals to the liberty of religion in Holland, it misunderstands the workings of those laws. It is true that liberty of conscience was enshrined in the 1579 Union of Utrecht, the basic constitutional document of the Dutch Republic. This is what the men of Flushing were referring to.⁵ But by then Catholic worship had been outlawed already. And over the next forty or so years the definition of that liberty of conscience became increasingly restricted until only Reformed Calvinism could be practiced publicly. Everything else (Catholicism, Lutheranism, Anabaptism) was banned to

⁴ R. Ward Harrington, “Speaking Scripture: The Flushing Remonstrance of 1657,” *Quaker History* 1993 82(2): 104-109.

⁵ Point made by David William Voorhees, “The 1657 Flushing Remonstrance in Historical Perspective,” (unpublished paper).

secrecy, even if people were not persecuted for holding those beliefs.⁶ For this reason, scholars familiar with the Dutch practice of law and toleration agree that Stuyvesant was in the right to punish the magistrates who presented him with this petition. And they emphasize that it was only the magistrates who were punished, and it was for failing to uphold Dutch law properly. It was not for their beliefs. No one in Flushing was persecuted for their beliefs, only when they practiced those beliefs in public ways that defied Dutch law (as in the case of John Bowne).⁷

The remonstrance makes the dramatic claim that the “law of love, peace and liberty in the states” (that is, the States, or Assembly, of Holland) extends to “Jews, Turks, and Egyptians, as they are considered sons of Adam”. There are several things to be said about this. First, of all, it was not true. There was no Muslim community in the Netherlands. Only Venice had a permanent community of Muslims, all merchants, who were allowed to worship as they saw fit within a particular space, not unlike the Jewish ghetto. Occasionally a Muslim visited the Netherlands and was generally well treated, but no permanent community existed or practiced Islam in the Netherlands at the time.⁸

There was a growing Jewish community, but it was a community of immigrants, foreigners, usually called Portuguese because that is where most of them initially came from in the 1590s. As they were foreigners, valued for their trade and political contacts, they were granted greater rights than native Dutch Christians who did not belong to the

⁶ Kaplan, Divided by Faith, 107-110, 135-136, 177-178.

⁷ Martha Shattuck, “Heemstede: An English Town under Dutch Rule,” in The Roots and Heritage of Hempstead Town, ed. Natalie A. Naylor (Interlaken, NY: Heart of the Lakes Publishing, 1994), 31-33; Dennis J. Maika, “Commemoration and Context: The Flushing Remonstrance Then and Now,” presented at the Annual Meeting of the New York Historical Association, 19 July 2007.

⁸ Kaplan, Divided by Faith, 303-306.

Reformed Church. By 1639 they had built a public synagogue, and in 1675 they would build an even bigger one (which still stands today). Paradoxically, it was precisely because they were regarded as strangers, outside of the traditional Dutch community, that they could be granted greater religious freedom than native Dutch Christians.⁹

The real give-away is the inclusion of “Egyptians”. It is not clear exactly what they meant when they wrote that. David Voorhees has suggested it is a reference to Gypsies.¹⁰ I do not think that is what they meant. To me it is reminiscent of a common phrase used by radical English tolerationists. When they spoke of religious freedom, they would assert that toleration should be extended to “Jews, Turks, and pagans” or “Heathens and Pagans, Turkes and Jews” or “Turckes, Jewes, Pagans, and Infidels”.¹¹ I haven’t yet found any other reference to “Egyptians,” but for such biblically steeped folk as those of Flushing, it seems likely that the Egyptians they had in mind were the pagans of the Old Testament, not seventeenth century Egyptians, who at the time were part of the Ottoman Empire and overwhelmingly Muslim, hence generally included in the category of “Turk”. The Quaker leader George Fox would later advocate religious liberty even for pagans “such as worship sun or moon or stocks and stones.”¹² As you can see, this was something of a stock phrase used when advocating toleration for all sorts of religions.

⁹ Kaplan, *Divided by Faith*, 321-322.

¹⁰ Voorhees, “Historical Perspective,” 4.

¹¹ Quotes in John Coffey, “Puritanism and Liberty Revisited: The Case for Toleration in the English Revolution,” *The Historical Journal* 41 (1998): 964-970.

¹² Alexandra Walsham, *Charitable Hatred: Tolerance and Intolerance in England, 1500-1700* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 235.

When the English spoke like this, there were no Jews, Muslims, or pagans living in Britain.¹³

There were, however, Catholics. And I think some of you may have noticed by now the noticeable absence of Roman Catholicism in Flushing's call for toleration. The remonstrance names a number of different faiths, but it says absolutely nothing about Catholics. In this they were not alone, even among the radical Protestants. Only a few dared go so far as to advocate toleration for Catholics (or "papists" as they generally called them) along with Jews, Muslims, Pagans, and other Protestants. George Fox eventually would, at least in the abstract, but particularly in the early years Quakers, like most other Protestants, did not trust Catholics much.¹⁴ Protestants who could imagine toleration for all sorts of beliefs no matter how heathenish, almost always excluded three groups: Roman Catholics, Unitarians (Socinians, Anti-Trinitarians) and atheists. Roman Catholics, because of their presumed political allegiance to the pope, were believed to be politically unreliable. Atheists, since they disavowed God, the presumed source of all morality, were believed to be beyond the pale. It was not until the end of the seventeenth century that Pierre Bayle first raised the possibility that one could be an atheist and moral at the same time. Even then he kind of hedged his language, because he knew it could get him into a lot of trouble if he openly advocated tolerance for atheists.¹⁵

This was a sentiment Roman Catholics generally shared. Since the Middle Ages, Catholics had often been able to justify the toleration of Jews and Muslims, because they

¹³ See also the discussion in John Marshall, John Locke, Toleration and early Enlightenment Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 593-617.

¹⁴ For examples of those willing to tolerate Catholics, at least in the abstract, see Coffey, "Toleration in the English Revolution," 970. On Fox, see Walsham, Charitable Hatred, 235.

¹⁵ Walsham, Charitable Hatred, 235; Marshall, Locke, Toleration, 244-263, 680-719.

had never converted. But Protestant “heretics” and atheists were people who had belonged to the Church and then willfully abandoned it. They were considered legitimate targets for persecution.¹⁶ This counted for Jewish and Muslims who had been forced to convert as well. Once they were at least nominally Christian, then they could be coerced into believing the right thing. The history of Catholic advocacy of religious toleration in England has not yet been studied. But I think it is telling that when you had a Catholic King of England openly advocating religious toleration for everyone, namely James II, very few people believed he really meant it. Most Protestants thought he was just using this as an excuse to convert England back to Catholicism and rather than put up with that, they invited a Dutch army to invade and chased him out of the country.

To get back to the idea of tolerating “Jews, Turks, and Egyptians,” I want to emphasize that this is a very English argument. One does not see the Dutch arguing for this at this time, but it was something of a fascination for the English, who had nothing like the degree of religious diversity of Holland. Some thought it was a good thing; others used it to criticize the Dutch, especially during the wars against the Dutch in the 1650s and 1660s.¹⁷

In England itself, it was rare to find advocates of Christians and non-Christians living together before 1640s. But I think it very telling that when the idea was put forward, it was put forward by Baptists. In 1612 and 1614 Baptists published tracts arguing that religious liberty should be extended to “Jews, Turks, and pagans, so long as

¹⁶ Walsham, Charitable Hatred, 235; Marshall, Locke, Toleration, 197-223, 244-263, 371-417.

¹⁷ See Steven C.A. Pincus, Protestantism and Patriotism: Ideologies and the Making of English Foreign Policy, 1650-1668, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

they are peaceable, and no malefactors.”¹⁸ Baptists and radical Protestants would be the primary advocates of this sort of toleration during the English Revolution in the 1640s and 1650s.¹⁹ This is telling for our story of Flushing because it is probably through these Baptist ideas, which Roger Williams would also advocate in the 1640s, that the men who signed the remonstrance got the idea of tolerating “Jews, Turks, and Egyptians”. A number of the migrants to the English towns on Long Island had a familiarity with, if they had not actually embraced, Baptist ideas. Remember that a year before the Quakers had shown up a Baptist preacher had been in the area baptizing people.

It is very hard to prove exactly where and how people got their ideas in this time and place since we have so little evidence. Some claim that the idea was from Roger Williams. But there’s no evidence that Williams had been to Flushing or told them about his ideas of toleration. He had been arguing for at least thirteen years before the Flushing Remonstrance was written, so it is certainly possible that they knew what he stood for. But I think it just as important to note that this idea of universal toleration (albeit not for Catholics) had been circulating in England for about thirty years before the English colonists came to Flushing. It is very likely that at least some of them had encountered the idea in England and brought it with them. In this they shared the intellectual and religious heritage of Roger Williams, and could easily come to similar conclusion, whether or not he directly persuaded them to it. And since Williams occasionally

¹⁸ Leonard Busher, Religious peace or a plea for liberty of conscience (London, 1646 edn) in Edward Bean Underhill, ed. Tracts on Liberty of Conscience and Persecution, 1614-1661 (London, 1846), 33. But not all Baptists agreed. Cited in Walsham, Charitable Hatred, 234. Also John Coffey, “Puritanism and Liberty Revisited: The Case for Toleration in the English Revolution,” *The Historical Journal* 1998 41(4): 961-985.

¹⁹ See Coffey, “Toleration in the English Revolution”; B. S. Capp, *The Fifth Monarchy Men: A Study in Seventeenth-Century English Millenarianism* (London, 1972), 181-4 on millenarian tolerance of Turks and Infidels.

included Catholics in his idea of toleration and the men in Flushing did not, I would say that they were putting their own spin on things.

So much for liberty of conscience in the Flushing Remonstrance. Now I want to move onto the second main theme of the remonstrance, which is just as remarkable. And that is the resistance to persecution. Nowadays, when most of us accept religious freedom and tolerance as an important part of our freedom as Americans, it is hard to appreciate how special this part of the Remonstrance is. But look at it again. It clearly comes out against religious persecution – but why?

“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.” They are afraid to condemn the Quakers as heretics because they believe they might be carrying some of the divine truth. They are more afraid to persecute people they think might be right than they are of being punished by the Dutch for not obeying their law.

This is another element that comes out of the English radical tradition. Across Europe since the Middle Ages and into the eighteenth century, there was a general agreement that there was a single religious truth (even if they couldn't agree on what that truth was) and that God expected the community to respect that truth. If it did not, then terrible things would happen – plagues, famines, floods, wars – acts of God, in other words. Back then, people believed that these things were not accidents. They were punishments from God for their sins. (Note Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson blaming 9/11 on America's toleration of gays). This was one of the main arguments in favor of religious persecution: it was necessary to protect the community from God's anger. They

believed God wanted religious unity and harmony, and they felt they had to maintain that as best they could. This was even the case in the Netherlands, and was one of the reasons for allowing just one religion to be practiced publicly. More than that would be risky. Heresy and religious diversity made God unhappy. Or so many people claimed.

Notice what the Flushing remonstrance is saying. On the contrary, it's not heresy or religious diversity that is the problem. It's persecution that angers God. This was a new argument. Quakers and others would advance it in later years, but in 1657 there were very few people who made this case. Not only was persecution bad because it was cruel and ineffective (the usual argument) but it actually caused the wrath of God.²⁰

In justifying this, the men of Flushing go on to lay out a strict separation of Church and State – much as Roger Williams and others would do. The “Magistrate hath his sword in his hand and the Minister hath the sword in his had, as witness those two great examples, which all Magistrates and Ministers are to follow, Moses and Christ.” This was something very different from what was happening in England at the time, where Cromwell was presiding over a church dominated by the state. It's true that it did not persecute people for their consciences, but it did control how they could worship. And it had a pretty strict idea of who worshipped correctly – namely Congregationalists and other Calvinists.²¹ The separation of Church and State they advocated was also different from that proposed by others, such as the Scots Presbyterians, who also wanted a separation of church from the state. But that was so that the Church would have absolute authority over all religious matters and be better able to determine and enforce

²⁰ For Charles Wolsely the argument in the 1660s, see Gary S. De Krey, “Rethinking the Restoration Crisis: Dissenting Cases for Conscience, 1667-1672,” *The Historical Journal* 38 (1995): 66.

²¹ Collins, “The Church Settlement of Oliver Cromwell.”

its idea of orthodoxy. The men in Flushing clearly feel that no one should enforce any single orthodoxy, but that instead they should be open to a variety of possible truths. This also set them apart from Roger Williams, who advocated separation of church and state not because he wanted a free market for religious beliefs, but because he believed that true religion was spoiled as soon as the state got involved. He wanted to keep the state out so as to keep his religion pure. In Flushing, on the other hand, they clearly are not sure what the true faith is or who is the real messenger from God. They claim it could be almost anybody – certainly a Quaker. And that the best thing to do was to let them come and go freely and speak their mind and see if it accorded with their own conscience, “for we are bounde by the law of God and man to doe good unto all men and evil to noe man.”

And that, I think, is not a bad sentiment to end on.