

straits

Islam and freedom in the West

By Sean Foley

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THE recent debate over the construction of an Islamic centre in lower Manhattan in New York City brought into stark relief the ongoing tensions in the United States and in Europe over the place of Muslims and their faith in Western societies at the start of the 21st century. Unfortunately, much of the discussion over Islam has taken place in the realm of ignorance and fear, often directed by opportunists playing upon the worst elements of their audience. One thing few people noticed in these discussions was the positive role that Muslims played in Western conceptions of freedom, especially the thinking of Thomas Jefferson, a preeminent figure in America's constitutional and political tradition and the nation's third president.

Jefferson first became acquainted with Islam when he bought a Quran shortly after the passage of the Stamp Act in 1765 -- the first tax imposed by the English government on its North American colonies and a burden that would convince many Americans that they had to seek independence from England. Jefferson hoped that the sacred text and foundation of syariah would help him understand how religious beliefs are transferred across cultures.

He was furious with the Act, which he felt contradicted English constitutional law and the natural law specified in the Quran and other scripture. Inspired in part by his reading of the Quran, Jefferson developed a new and revolutionary conception of human rights in which Muslims played a critical role.

Jefferson's purchase of the Quran reflected the important place of Islam and Muslims in the political life of Anglo-Americans and their European forefathers. During the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, German theologian Martin Luther promoted knowledge of Muslims (whom he falsely called the "Turks") and the works of Europeans who had visited Muslim territories to demonstrate that the Catholic Church was unfit to lead Europe. In 1542, Luther had to use considerable political pressure to convince the city council of Basel, Switzerland, to lift its ban on publishing a Latin translation of the Quran.

Nor was Luther alone in recognising the power of Muslims and their faith. French kings and other Christian monarchs often allied with the Ottoman Empire to counter the power of neighbouring European states, while leading thinkers looked to Islamic power to create new national identities. The power of Muslim mariners helped to provoke the English civil wars in the 17th century, while references to Islam appear in works of Miguel Cervantes, William Shakespeare, and other leading Western writers.

In his landmark work on religious liberty, *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689), the English political philosopher John Locke argued that Muslims should not be excluded from enjoying civil rights solely because of their religion -- a right he did not extend to Christian Catholics. Significantly, Locke's words reflected his own acquaintance with Islam: he read Arabic, owned a Quran, and knew leading

English Islamic scholars of his day.

By the 18th century, accounts of Europeans and Americans enslaved in Muslim societies and other writings gave Anglo-Americans the misguided belief that they had sufficient knowledge of Islam to assert its inferiority to their own religious conceptions. For them, Protestant Christians were entitled to liberty, while Muslims lived in societies essentially defined by slavery. These beliefs allowed Anglo-Americans to maintain their prejudices, but even misinformation sometimes retains an element of truth -- of information.

Jefferson would not have purchased the Quran had he not read Freiherr von Pufendorf's *Of the Law and Nature of Nations*, which observes that Quranic teachings on a host of issues are consistent with natural law.

As Jefferson sought to respond to the Stamp Act, he expanded Locke's vision, and sought to educate himself about Islam. Jefferson learned Arabic and befriended leading scholars of Islam.

His *Notes on Religion* (1781) quotes Locke's assertion that Muslims should not be denied civil rights because of their religious beliefs. Jefferson later recalled in his memoirs that Virginia's statute on religious freedom (1779), which he drafted, was intended to protect the rights of Christians, Jews, Muslims and infidels "of every denomination".

Jefferson's universalistic vision of human rights challenged the Anglo-American principle that freedoms flowed from a specific group's identity. He did not believe that Americans were free simply because they were Americans or Protestant Christians. He could not claim that the values he promoted were universal unless he showed that they applied not only to Muslims but to all men. For him, it was "self-evident" (to quote the US Declaration of Independence) that "all men are created equal".

Nearly two centuries after Jefferson's death, Americans (and Europeans) continue to grapple with the implications of his vision. United States President Barack Obama exemplifies Jefferson's vision -- of a multi-religious society in which people of every creed and ancestry, including Islam, can hold elected office. It is "self-evident" that Muslims, their intellectual traditions, and descendants deserve an "equal" place in any vision of Western and, most importantly, American freedom.

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