

Quran is a part of our heritage



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When Keith Ellison, the first Muslim member of Congress and the first African-American from Minnesota elected to Congress, requested that he be sworn into office on the Quran, he rekindled the debate about Islam in American life. One thing few people noticed in all this was the fact that Islam was central to the thinking of Thomas Jefferson, whose Quran Ellison used to take the oath of office.

Jefferson purchased his Quran in 1765, shortly after the passage of the Stamp Act. He hoped that the sacred text and foundation of Islamic law would help him understand how religious beliefs are transferred across cultures. In his eyes, the Stamp Act undermined not only English constitutional law but the natural law specified in the Quran and other scripture. Inspired in part by his reading, Jefferson developed a revolutionary conception of human rights.

Jefferson's purchase of the Quran reflected the importance of Islam to 18th-century Anglo-Americans. 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 "Orientalist" beliefs allowed Anglo-Americans to maintain their prejudices, but even misinformation sometimes retains an element of truth. Jefferson would not have purchased the Quran had he not read Friherr 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. Indeed, in *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, John Locke, who read Arabic, had already argued that Muslims should not be excluded from enjoying civil rights because of their religion.

As Jefferson sought to respond to the Stamp Act, he embraced Locke's vision. Jefferson learned Arabic, purchased a Quran, and befriended leading scholars of Islam. His *Notes on Religion* 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, 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.

Two centuries after Jefferson's death, we continue to grapple with his vision. Despite the importance of individual rights to U.S. law, some Americans retain the conviction that their freedoms are the result of their status as Christians.

Ellison exemplifies Jefferson's vision — a vision of a multi-religious society in which people of every creed, including Islam, can hold elected office. If we look for the roots of what African-American author and Tennessee native Ishmael Reed calls "MultiAmerica," we can find them in the works of Thomas Jefferson.

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