

**Denise A. Spellberg. *Thomas Jefferson's Qur'an: Islam and the Founders*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013. 416 p. ISBN: 978-0307268228.**

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In 2007, Keith Ellison became the first Muslim congressperson in the United States. He swore his oath of office on a copy of the Qur'an once owned by Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), one of the most famous of America's founding fathers. A year later, another Muslim, André Carson, was also elected to congress. While greater Muslim participation and visibility in American political life would seem to attest to the inclusiveness of American society, this inclusiveness is belied by the often negative views most Americans have of Islam and Muslims, as evinced in the popular slander that President Barack Obama is secretly a Muslim (and, as a corollary, unfit for office).

This is the political climate in which Denise A. Spellberg, associate professor at the University of Texas, anchors her recent book *Thomas Jefferson's Qur'an*. In it, Spellberg attempts, as she says, to "write" Muslims back into the founding narrative of the United States, and in so doing to show the true basis and breadth of America's pluralistic spirit at a time when this very spirit is being called into question (p.11).

Tracing the history of the controversy surrounding the idea of Muslim participation in Western civil and political life from early-modern Europe through the early years of the American Republic, with a specific focus on the life and writings of Thomas Jefferson, her book offers an excellent summary of the development of and the major themes in the Western pluralist tradition, especially in regards to America. To those unfamiliar with the philosophical and historical background of religious freedom in the West, Spellberg lays out how numerous thinkers and activists in Renaissance Europe campaigned for toleration of religious difference, and often paid for it with their reputations or even their lives. She focuses more specifically on how this tradition reached its zenith in the thought of John Locke (1632-1704), and how early Americans, especially Thomas Jefferson, embraced it

in their own effort to move beyond mere toleration of religious difference to a full-fledged religious freedom in the form of a state policy of equal treatment of all religions.

Spellberg's account is a good one, but, at least as far as America is concerned, it relies quite heavily on the previous work in the field, including Kevin J. Hayes' "How Thomas Jefferson Read the Qur'an" (*Early American Literature* 39:2 (2004), pp.247-61) and Robert Allison's *The Crescent Obscured: The United States and the Muslim World, 1776-1815* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), along with Thomas S. Kidd's article "Is It Worse to Follow Mahomet than the Devil?: Early American Uses of Islam" (*Church History* 72:4 (2003), pp.766-790) and book *American Christians and Islam: Evangelical Culture and Muslims from the Colonial Period to the Age of Terrorism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), as well as Timothy Marr's *The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006). She does differ from these authors on certain points. For example, she differs from Hayes in her analysis of the significance of Thomas Jefferson's placement of his copy of the Qur'an in his library. The section on religion in Jefferson's library followed a generally chronological organization, beginning with books on Greek, Roman, and Zoroastrian polytheism and proceeding to Judaism and then Christianity. Jefferson placed his copy of the Qur'an between polytheism and Judaism, in violation of any sort of chronological order. Hayes' asserts that Jefferson's placement of the Qur'an in his library reflected the idea that it marked a midpoint, ideologically, between heathenism and the true faith of Christianity (Hayes, pp.254-55). Spellberg instead argues that Jefferson's placement of the Qur'an indicated that he appeared "to recognize an affinity between the Jewish and Muslim varieties of monotheism and that of the Deism and Unitarianism that he would espouse," meaning that Jefferson's placement of the Qur'an indicated an affinity for Islam perhaps greater than that which he felt for Christianity (p.236). But aside from a few such differences, the merits of which are debatable, most of what her book covers is as well covered in these other texts.

All of these works concern themselves with uncovering popular perceptions and treatment of Islam and Muslims in American discourse, from colonial times through to the 19th, 20th, or even 21st centuries. And they tend, more often than not, to focus on the generally unflattering images of Islam that have dominated this discourse. As Spellberg herself admits,

American treatment of Islam has been generally negative, frequently superficial, and often little more than a foil used to criticize existing American practices with little regard for the actual Islamic religion (p.4).

The reason why existing studies in the field have focused overwhelmingly on the negative images of Islam in the US is that American images of Islam have been overwhelmingly negative. Positive treatments of the religion are few and far between, with some exceptions. Timothy Marr, for example, notes how discussions of Islamic practice served as a foil against which Americans could critique the practice of slavery in the US, and Islamic prohibitions against alcohol were used to help advance the temperance cause in the country as well (Marr, p.135). But American use of Islam in these contexts was not necessarily flattering to the religion. More often than not, those who held up Islamic examples did so not to establish positive precedent for more enlightened practice, but rather to show just how benighted contemporary American was; the American practice of slavery was so bad that even the Turks treated their slaves better, and alcohol so evil that even the heathen nations forbade it.

That negative images of Islam have dominated the US since even before the nation's founding is not entirely surprising. America inherited much from Europe's broadly negative Orientalist discourse. Spellberg notes, following Hayes, that after independence, America's first foreign war was with a group of Muslim powers, the Barbary States, that offered a specifically religious justification for capturing American vessels and enslaving their crews.<sup>1</sup> The United States did not sign a treaty with the Ottoman Empire, the largest Muslim power of the day, until 1830, and did not establish a full embassy in the country until the 20th century.<sup>2</sup> These facts, combined with the lack of any significant Muslim population in the US, meant that negative stereotypes largely dominated public discourse. American missionary activity in the Middle East, coupled with periods of severe (though not necessarily always one-sided) violence against various Christian minorities in Muslim lands through the 19th and into the 20th

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<sup>1</sup> The Tripolitanian ambassador Abd al-Rahman's religious justification for the conflict, as recorded by Jefferson, was that the practice of piracy "was founded on the Laws of the Prophet, that it was written in their Koran, that all nations who should not have acknowledged their authority were sinners, that it was their right and duty to make war upon them wherever they could be found, and to make slaves of all they could take as prisoners, and that every Musselman who should be slain in battle was sure to go to Paradise." Cited in Hayes, "How Thomas Jefferson Read the Qur'an," p.257.

<sup>2</sup> Leland James Gordon, *American Relations with Turkey 1830-1930: An Economic Interpretation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1932), pp.8-12.

century meant that Americans tended then, as they continue to today, to hear more bad news than good about Islam and Muslims, leading naturally to a rather uncharitable view of the religion and its practitioners.

Though Americans have always held a more or less negative view of Muslims and Islam, there have been some exceptions to this general rule, and the originality of Spellberg's work lies in her effort to reveal a more unbiased and pluralistic treatment of Muslims in early American discourse. In contrast to the various other authors who have written on the subject, she delves deeply into a number of important American figures who spoke out in support of the rights of Muslims (though not necessarily their religion) in the period of America's founding. She shows how, for example, Thomas Jefferson refused to paint America's early conflict with the Barbary States in religious terms. A number of other authors also address this particular episode, but few go to such pains to show just how steadfast Jefferson was in refusing to cast the conflict as a religious one (p.237).<sup>3</sup> Her account of the lengthy journey of the anti-establishment clause of the first amendment to the US Constitution, from ideal to state and ultimately federal legislation, also shows that discussions of religious freedom often involved an overt defense of the rights of Muslim and other non-Christians as citizens in a secular republic (pp.117-120).

That being said, Spellberg's work suffers from a number of shortcomings. She frequently digresses from her main aim in her work to criticize and nitpick points that have no significant bearing on her argument. She devotes a good page to criticizing American and European spelling and syntactical conventions in relation to Islamic terms. For example, in reference to the Muslim holy book, she writes, "The exact transliteration of the Arabic characters into English should be rendered *Qur'an*, but this spelling was never used in Europe during the medieval or early modern period. More prevalent in both French and English in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was the term 'Alcoran,' which wrongly fused the Arabic definite article, *al-*, with the French spelling 'Coran.' So when Europeans called it 'the Alcoran,' they were effectively terming it 'the the Coran...'" (p.26). Devoting so much space to how people hundreds of years ago spelled, or misspelled, the term Qur'an seems a bit inappropriate, especially given the rather loose standards that obtained in English generally during the

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<sup>3</sup> For an example of a more traditional account of America's Barbary Wars, see Michael B. Oren, *Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East: 1776 to the Present* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), pp.17-100.

period, let alone in terms of the rules for proper Arabic to English transliteration. Her account would also seem to indict other such transliterations that still abound in the English language, from alchemy and algebra to alcohol and elixir, none of which, under her technical definition, should retain the definite article in their general English usage.

Her frequent asides go beyond correcting her subjects' grammar. She often pauses to correct their problematic views or interpretations of Islam. This, in and of itself, might occasionally be warranted. But the fact of the matter is that when one is dealing with an account some 200 years old if not older, one must expect some deviation from modern academic standards. More troubling is that her criticisms are sometimes unfair. Instead of merely correcting gross errors in these sources for the modern reader who lacks a background in Islamic history and thought, she occasionally finds herself beating up straw men on points of dubious merit, such as when she criticizes George Sale (1697-1736), who translated the Qur'an Thomas Jefferson would later buy for his library, for arguing that the Qur'anic verse "there is no compulsion in religion" (2/al-Baqara: 256) was only accepted during the Prophet's lifetime (p.86). She says that this is wrong, but this is far from the plain and simple truth she lays it out to be. The view that the verse was abrogated or otherwise lost its relevance has historically been far from a marginal one even in Muslim circles.<sup>4</sup>

Beyond her questionable asides, perhaps the most grating aspect of her account is her rather unjust criticism of Jefferson as a hypocrite for simultaneously defending Muslim rights while likely owning Muslim slaves. While it may be true that Jefferson was blind to the Muslims in slavery perhaps under his very nose, criticizing him for failing to recognize this and, as Spellberg seems to imply, free them, is rather unfair. They were slaves. Jefferson owned slaves, and, whether rightly or wrongly, he did not see anything particularly wrong with that, in line with the general opinion of his time. A slave's religion, be it Christianity, Islam, or some other, was not a concern for him. And while Spellberg's criticism of slavery is all well and good, criticizing Jefferson for being a hypocrite for advancing Muslim rights while possibly owning Muslim slaves seems a bit disingenuous. The real inconsistency, if there is one, is the fact that Jefferson owned slaves while

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<sup>4</sup> Patricia Crone, "'No Compulsion in Religion': Q. 2:256 in Mediaeval and Modern Interpretation," in Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, Meir. M. Bar-Asher & Simon Hopkins (eds.), *Le Shīisme Imāmīte Quarante Ans Après: Hommage à Etan Kohlberg* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 131-178, p.132.

talking about inalienable human rights. If the fundamental humanity of his slaves did not give him pause, then why should their religion have?

Perhaps Spellberg's biggest problem, though, is the lack of material she has to draw upon. While Jefferson wrote plenty, the fact that Spellberg is forced to reuse his few mentions of Islam or Muslims again and again leaves her reader with the impression that she is stretching Jefferson's words to their limits. She uses a quote of his to the effect that "it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods or no God" a total of three times to show just how pluralistic Jefferson was, and uses another's paraphrase of the same words two additional times. She uses Jefferson's words from the Virginia Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom, to the effect that the bill protected "the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and Mahometan," another three times for the same purpose. If Jefferson was really so forward thinking on the matter of religious pluralism, one would think she could have found other quotes to underline the point rather than reusing the same ones again and again.

In addition to overusing her quotes, Spellberg also reads more into them and the other facts she arrays to support her argument than she probably should. It seems that the greater portion of her argument rests on "Jefferson may, might, and could have" rather than on definitive proof. One example is her treatment of Jefferson's ownership of Sale's Qur'an. After a lengthy account of Sale's 200-page "Preliminary Discourse" to his translation of the book, and noting when, how, and why Jefferson bought it, she asks the question, "But is there evidence that Jefferson gleaned anything from Sale's work to enhance his own knowledge and judgment?" Her answer? No. This is unfortunate, given the fact that she just spent an entire chapter building up to this anticlimactic point. But more troubling is where she goes from there. "In the absence of any notes of Jefferson's on Sale's translation of the Qur'an, we can only speculate how Sale's views would have struck him" (p.92).

The net effect of all of this is to cause her reader to question how much of her argument rests on such speculation and guesswork and how much actually rests on historical fact. This is unfortunate, since her effort to highlight the pluralistic nature of early American history is truly a worthwhile one. Her readers will be aware of the usual vitriol that marked American discourse on Islam and Muslims in the country's early years, and to some extent this trend continues today. If she could have cast her net wider, going beyond Jefferson and further into the 19th century, she could

and would have found many more examples of precisely the sort of pluralist attitude she wished to highlight in her book.

There have been many positive treatments of Islam in American history. To note but one example, the editor of the Protestant missionary periodical the *Missionary Herald*, writing in 1882, discussed the fact that Muslims were increasingly falling into the sphere of Western political influence. In other words, there were Muslim citizens in non-Muslim states (or, rather, colonies). Regarding this situation, the editor wrote, "Shall we not be as generous in dealing with them [Muslims] as the founder of their system [the Prophet Muhammad] was with Christians?" The editor then offers a quote from the Qur'an by way of illustration: "And contend not with the people of The Book but in a generous manner, excepting those of them who act wickedly; and say 'We believe in that which hath been revealed to us, and in that which hath been revealed to you; and your God and our God is one [29/al-'Ankabūt:46].'"<sup>5</sup> The American Christian editor of the monthly journal of an organization dedicated to converting non-Protestants thus argued, not just for equal treatment of Muslims, but also recognition of the Qur'an as a divinely revealed scripture, noting both that the Prophet Muhammad treated Christians justly and that Muslims and Christians worshipped the same God. This is telling, inasmuch as it shows that, despite the negative ways in which Islam was no doubt often portrayed, Islam was not regarded as an evil religion by all Americans, and even some of those seemingly least likely to do so actually held a rather enlightened view of the religion and respected the civil and political rights of its adherents.

This example from the *Missionary Herald* is representative of just the sort of pluralistic spirit that Spellberg seeks to highlight for her readers. In contrast to the contemporary, predominately conservative political rhetoric she holds up to criticism in the final chapter of her book, it turns out that there has been an American tradition of respect for Muslims and non-Christians in general that goes right back to the founding of the nation. While examples of this tradition are no doubt rarer than those depicting Muslims and their religion in a negative light, they are by no means uncommon, especially as one moves from the early years of the US to later periods, when Americans had greater contact with Muslim peoples in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. Rather than focusing narrowly on the late

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<sup>5</sup> "The Position of Islam," *The Missionary Herald: Containing the Proceedings of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions with a View of Other Benevolent Operations* 78:1 (1882), pp.11-13.

18th and early 19th century, and thus stretching her sources to their limits and grounding her analysis on the shaky foundation of speculation, Spellberg could have shortened her account of this period to something more in keeping with the sources she had available, while adding another chapter to focus on positive instances of American pluralism vis-à-vis Muslims in the 19th century and beyond. While Spellberg's new book remains a worthwhile read, she could have made a stronger case than she ultimately did for the pluralistic and inclusive nature of the US political system.