

**Denise A. Spellberg, Thomas Jefferson's Qur'an: Islam and the Founders. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, a Division of Random House, Inc., 2013. 394 pages. Indexed. ISBN: 978-0-307-26822-8 (Hardcover)**

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The Holy Books are sacred texts that God sent down to His prophets who were commanded to use them as guides for human beings. The Books contain the "Words of God" and messengers are persons God appoints to explain them to their peoples for the sole purpose of practicing all of their contents. In human history, revolutions are staged to change the minds and lives of people, and are planned and carried out by using written ideas, either in the form of manifestoes or some type of axiom. The secular books are used as guides for those leading the revolution and their followers or supporters. As a Pakistani scholar Sayyid Abdul A'la Maududi states: "Conversely, human nature demands an authentic guidebook together with its teacher and guide, whether it is in written form or is preserved in the memory of people...[T]he principles are the basis of thoughts and practices, morality and culture."<sup>1</sup> God sent his prophets as messengers with the Books of revelation, that is, the Torah, the Bible, and the Qur'an so that all of mankind may have knowledge about Him, their mission on earth and their final destination.<sup>2</sup> In Hadith Sahih Al-Bukhari, Prophet Muhammed is reported to have said: Before me, every prophet was given a miracle and they practice it during their life time, i.e. ...., Jesus [Issa, the son of Mary or Maryam] used to cure the sick and made the dead alive...., Moses [Musa] was given the stick...and I have been given the permanent miracle of the Qur'an till the Day of Resurrections, and it is a Glorious Book...<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, Islam has given two reliable pathways for the guidance of mankind. The first is the verses of the Qur'an, while the second is used as a supplement to the Qur'an and is called *Sunnah* or *Hadith*, which deals with the legal or lawful ways of Prophet Muhammed.<sup>4</sup> The Qur'an itself was revealed to the Arabs in classical Arabic, a human language. They were the first to listen to it. By then the Arab society was in moral decadence. It was an "ignorant society, full of confused beliefs and concepts, where erring ways and practices abounded; ...[it was a] greedy materialistic society in which the weak, who could not defend their own rights, were not catered for, Islam came to reform the society with God's law which established equity, justice and good will."<sup>5</sup> The book under review is the final product of a rigorous research that seeks to give fresh historical and contemporary interpretative analysis of Islam and Muslims in the United States, and the role of Thomas Jefferson and his co-founding fathers in the national debates over the legal status of Islam and the problems as well as the prospects of granting civil rights to its adherents in the "new nation's nascent [democratic] ideals" P. xi). The author uses Jefferson as the central figure whose insights into the link between civil rights and religious toleration was received with mixed reactions from some members of the government and the society at large, who wanted America to remain wholly and solely a protestant christian nation.

However, what remains to be clarified in the book is the distinction between civil rights and human rights. The latter is higher than the former. In his work, How Far the Promised Land (2006), Jonathan Rosanberg enlightens us that: "Civil rights keep [us] under restrictions."<sup>6</sup> It is a legal system constructed by man. While human rights, on the other hand, are something every individual was born with. They were "God-given and recognized by all nations."<sup>7</sup> Every man and woman was born with his or her limited freedoms of choice, action, and will. The human society usually change these natural endowments. The late civil rights activist, Malcolm X of the United States is quoted to have said, "[Human being] are truly all the same, linked by a shared belief in God...the Oneness of God...in reality [is] the Oneness of Man."<sup>8</sup>

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The United Nations ratified the human rights charter in 1948, which subsequently became part of global affairs. Our "shared belief" in God is one of the commonalities in human relationships which a statesman like Jefferson recognized when he called for the institutionalization of religious and civil rights for all believers in the United States. The author, Denise A. Spellberg, describes Jefferson as a foresighted statesman, for his prediction that Muslims may well become permanent members of American society in years to come. This prediction became a reality as centuries evolved. Spellberg informs us that Jefferson had bought a copy of the Qur'an "eleven years before he wrote the Declaration of Independence" (P.3). The author goes on to tell us about how the founding fathers had engaged in national debates as to whether the United States should institutionalize religious plurality beyond the confines of Protestant denominational communities. While some Americans supported Muslim citizenship with "full and equal rights" (P.4), others were resentful to the idea. As it turned out to be, even the rights of Jews and Catholics were at stake. Ironically, most of them and their forefathers had escaped Europe's religious intolerance and persecutions, and had come to America in search of freedom of worship. Their predicament is reminiscent of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's famous saying: "Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains,"<sup>9</sup> as espoused in his social contract theory. The 1783-Paris Treaty marked the official recognition of America as a free nation. In the following year (1784), according to Spellberg, George Washington unveiled his thoughts by declaring that Muslims were part of America's "religious pluralism." Jefferson made a follow-up by insisting that the rights of all believers be respected. It is reported that "God and politics were on Jefferson's mind on New Year's Day 1802 [when] he offered a testament to freedom of conscience. Believing...that religion is a matter which lies solely between Man and his God, that he owes account none other for his faith or his worship..."<sup>10</sup> according to Jon Meacham's analysis. Despite their concern with spiritual matters, they were determined to make America a secular nation. In fact, we learn in Michael B. Oran's study *Power, Faith and Fantasy: America in the Middle East 1776 to the Present* (2007) that, all the founding fathers were "virtually unanimous in their commitment to America's secular, civic faith,"<sup>11</sup> Americans themselves were divided on the issue of religious toleration., as said earlier. Spellberg reports that those Americans who supported Jefferson's views on that subject matter came from the Anglicans, as well as dissenting Presbyterians and Baptists." (P.7)

However, the fact also remains that the advocates of equality, liberty and religious toleration had slaves. For instance, George Washington had among his many slaves, Muslims from West Africa and had used them as "tax property." They were "Fatimer" [[Fatima] and "little Fatimer" [Fatimah]. Spellberg identified them as mother and daughter, respectively. As the author correctly notes, these African Muslims were named after Fatimah, the daughter of Prophet Muhammed (a human being, not god). Their family lineage names (surnames) were omitted. Without these kinship names African slaves would no longer be able to identify with certainty, their place of origin in Africa. Ironically, George Washington "advocated Muslim rights, [while]...he denied Muslims in his own [household] their rights, including the right to practice their faith" (P.7). On this premise, this reviewer concurs with William D. Hitt when he asserts in his book *Ethics and Leadership: Putting Theory into Practice* (1990) that: "Our values are so much an intrinsic part of our lives and behavior that we are often unaware of them..."<sup>12</sup> Thus, on the issues of liberty, equality, and religious freedom and toleration in connection to black "Muslim" slaves, Washington's position on these matters was morally ambivalent. Man is not only judged by his words but also by his action, an ultimate reality.

According to Spellberg, hundreds of West African Muslim slaves "may have served in the Continental Army," (P.7) during the War of Independence. She reports about Jefferson's public career as ambassador, secretary of state, vice-president, and then president. As a statesman, Jefferson had the opportunity to meet world dignitaries, including North Africans, Turkish and the Middle Eastern Arabs. Through diplomatic contacts, he was able to assure his Muslim counterparts that America was not anti-Islam, since Christians and Muslims believe in the same God. The author further reveals that because of Jefferson's "insistence" on making Islam an inclusive part of the American society, made him the first "in the history of American politics to suffer the false charge of being a Muslim, an accusation considered the ultimate Protestant slur in the eighteenth century." (P.9) To this reviewer, his support to the course of Islam in America did not make him a renegade Christian, rather he was exercising his beliefs based on personal conscience. Jefferson himself was a deist, a euphemism of the term agnostic. In chapter one, the author talks about John Leland of Massachusetts, a prominent church leader who supported Jefferson's bid to grant equality to Muslims in the United States. In Europe, Martin Luther (1483-1546) supported "Rome's anti-Islamic polemic" (P.15). Christian-Muslim relationships became volatile when the Ottoman Turks defeated the Byzantium forces and took over Constantinople (now Istanbul) in 1453, the old seat of power of the Eastern Roman Empire.

Surprisingly, Martin Luther reacted to the defeat as a “punishment” from God against the Catholics for their “sinful beliefs.” Luther was anti-Islam just as how he was anti-heliocentric. His contemporary John Calvin of Geneva was also anti-Islam. Both of them had no clue that “religious mixture<sup>13</sup> is a fact in faiths. For instance, in The African Condition (1980), a Kenyan scholar Ali A. Mazrui informs us that Islam was “stimulated by the non-Arab ideas from Judaism and Christianity.”<sup>14</sup> In Islam, the Qur’an teaches us that a Muslim should be useful to all human beings, irrespective of religion or social status (Qur’an 49:13). The Qur’an also makes it categorically clear that “there is no compulsion in religion.” (Qur’an 2:256) These are some of the salient points Spellberg highlights in chapter one of the book under review. Thus, Islam is a religion of tolerance. Further, the author points out that the first translation of the Qur’an in Latin was done by Ibn Tufayl. His work on Islamic treaties “had earlier influenced” the English political theorist John Locke, the author of Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1690), a major text of the Enlightenment and The Second Treaties of Government (1690) The latter book “was a main source of the ideas of the American Revolution of 1776.”<sup>15</sup> To carry the argument further, the Enlightenment was meant to change the human condition in Europe by calling for equality and liberty predicated on hope and progress in human life. Among Locke’s remarkable works is A Letter Concerning Toleration (1685). This predates his studies mentioned above. The publication of this work coincided with the expulsion of the French Huguenots (Protestants) from France by King Louis XIV (1643-1715). In the same seventeenth century, Locke urged the English government to grant legal rights to all religions in England, including Islam and Judaism. This is the very work that influenced Jefferson to develop interest in Muslims’ civil rights in America, according to Spellberg. Nevertheless, the American and European use of “Muhammadanism” as a Muslim faith was a sheer ignorance and falsehood. No Muslim worships a man. The Prophet of Islam was a man with blood and flesh and was not therefore god to merit any unique exaltation beyond his role as God’s messenger, in the words of this reviewer.

As God says in the Qur’an: “Say [ O Muhammad] I am only a man like you. It has been inspired to me that your Ilah (God) is One Ilah [God—i.e. Allah]. So whoever hopes for the meeting with his Lord, let him work righteousness and associated none as a partner in the worship of his Lord” (Qur’an 18:110). Moreover, the author identifies George Sale (c. 1696-1736) as one of the Englishmen who translated the Qur’an to English, a copy of the work which Thomas Jefferson “acquired for his library” (P.26) According to Spellberg, “the first play about Islam, performed in America was written by” (P. 27) Francois-Marie Arouet (1694-1778), who was known by his penname as Voltaire. He used the Prophet Muhammad as a central character, and their play was staged in different European nations. Voltaire “distorted Islam” (P. 27). To this reviewer, the deliberate fabrication or misinterpretation of the true nature of the prophet and the real message of Islam was of no surprise. Voltaire himself was a deist who didn’t believe in organized religion. His agnostic notion even degenerated to atheism. In addition, he stood “against democracy as well as social and economic equality,”<sup>16</sup> when he was a member of the Enlightenment school. Also, his “relationship with the church was ambivalent, involving both love and hate.”<sup>17</sup> Unlike Voltaire, one European thinker named Tyler attacked European orientalist religious commentators in his novel The Algerine Captive (1799) for their “bigotry against Islam” (P.27) and lashed out the Church of Rome and its “merciless inquisitors” (P.36).

Chapter two of Spellberg’s study begin by talking about an Italian thinker Domenico Scandella (d.1601) who took the daunting task to enlighten his fellow Europeans about his religious “cosmology,” pertaining to the equality of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. But the Catholic church dismissed his cosmic scheme as “heretic”, on the pretext that no salvation was possible outside the Catholic institution. The point to be emphasized here is that the Western world has always perceived Islam as the most difficult religion to understand,<sup>18</sup> according to a non-Muslim analysts, Houston Smith. Spellberg raises an important point in this chapter (two) when she points out that the Qur’an depicts Jesus (Issa) as a “human prophet who had never been crucified but ascended into heaven while another person [in his resemblance] died in his place” (Qur’an 4:157-158) and (page 46 of the book under review). A non-Muslim thinker Domenico Scandella (pennamed Menocchio) concurred with the Islamic version of Jesus in this manner.: “[I]t seemed a strange thing to me that a lord would allow himself to be taken in this way, and so I suspected that since he was crucified he was not God, but some prophet.” (P. 46) To the Catholic authorities, this was a blasphemy and Scandella subsequently faced the deadly wrath of the official inquisition. The author goes on to talk about the final expulsion of Muslims from Spain and Portugal between 1609 and 1614, even though Islam recognizes Jews and Christians as People of the Book. As the author states: the Torah and Gospel are “divinely revealed scriptures, but humans had corrupted the true messages over time” (P.49).

It is reported that in 1290 the English expelled “four thousand Jews” from England about seventy—five years after they had enshrined the principles of democracy and human rights in the text of the Great Magna Carta in 1215, to be precise. Also, we learn in chapter two that John Locke studied history, astronomy, mathematics, Arabic and Hebrew. The most sensitive point of contention in the West about Islam is the question of Women. As the author correctly states: “God will make no distinction of sexes” (P.90). Several chapters and verses of the Qur’an address the equality of women to their male counterparts, including the various aspects of their rights. For instance, see (Qur’an 2:223-240 and Qur’an 19:1-98). Chapter three begins by discussing the debate among Muslim scholars as to whether or not coffee and tobacco were lawful items for Muslims to use and were cleared lawful. In terms of the sectarian divide between the Sunni majority and the Shiites, the matter is much more political than religious. Both follow the same prophet, recite the same Qur’an and turn their faces to the same Makkah (Qibla) to pray, etc. However, there are slight variations of rituals and institution (such as the Shiites notion of imamate). From this subject, the author proceeds to talk about Benedict Spinoza (1632-1677), a philosopher and a member of the early European Enlightenment school. To carry the discussion further than the author, the Jewish community in Amsterdam, Holland, resented his monist philosophical ideas and controversial religious bigotry. His unorthodox beliefs resulted in his expulsion or excommunication from the Jewish community by his synagogue in Amsterdam. He felt alienated and in protest, he abandoned his Jewish name Baruch.<sup>19</sup> From Spinoza the author turns her focus on the central character Thomas Jefferson by describing him as a “meticulous reader and note taker [and] was also a politician [who] knew what his audience would respond to and how to sway them” (p. 105). This political character, in the view of this reviewer, portrays him as a manipulative demagogue. History teaches us that Jefferson’s love for knowledge-gathering was indisputable. He acknowledged the role of Muslims in scientific development, particularly in the areas of mathematics, medicines, “diagnostics, surgery and pharmacology. They transmitted these ideas to Christian Europe” (P.98), including chemistry a particular field “unknown to Europe” (P.98). These “backdrops” of Islamic achievements benefitted European philosophers, natural scientists, architects and others<sup>20</sup> Reportedly, however, by 1774 Jefferson, the leading advocate for Muslim civil rights, had 187 slaves in his estate, another classic example of moral ambivalence in human affairs.

The discussions in chapter four include the stand-off between the United States and the North African nations over the issue of piracy in the Mediterranean. American commercial ships had become targets of Muslim and Christian pirates for lucrative ransom payments. These pirates who were called “corsairs” “captured thousands of Europeans” (P. 131) and defined them as slaves for sale. Peter Von Sivers defines the “corsairs” as Muslim and Christian pirates who boarded ships, confiscated the cargoes and held the crews and travelers for ransom.”<sup>21</sup> They “nominally” operated under the auspices of the Ottoman Sultan and the Pope of Rome, but they also operated with some autonomy. A Muslim thinker Hassan Ibn Muhammad al-Wazzan (ca. 1465-1550) became a victim of corsairs’ piracy. Hassan and his parents had left Spain because of the fear of forced conversion as the Spanish monarchs had enacted in 1492. Upon their arrival in Fez, Morocco, the educated young man served the sultan of Morocco as an emissary. Unfortunately, in 1517 while returning home from a mission to Istanbul, Turkey, a group of Christian abducted him from the ship he was on board.<sup>22</sup> He was taken to Rome and sold to Pope Leo X (1513-152). The Pope converted him to Catholicism and renamed him Giovanni Leone de Medici. In public, he became known in Rome as Leo Africanus, meaning Leo the African. He became Arabic instructor in Rome<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, a man who left Spain for fear of conversion faced the same fate in another European nation. This saga teaches us about the fragile nature of human destiny. In her final remarks in chapter four, Spellberg discloses President John Adams’ interest in the Qur’an and bought a copy in 1806 and is deposited in Boston Public Library’s collection of his works.

Chapter five begins with an interesting question, that is, is it possible for a Muslim to become president of the United States? Only time will tell, for there is nothing impossible to God. Blacks all over the world never imagine that a black man would be in the White House in the first quarters of the twenty-first century. President Barak Hussein Obama is a Christian with a Muslim name. This dual religious identify in American presidency is not a miracle but fate ordained from the above, then, and the support of the American voters who stood firm for a change by affirming, as an example, the democracy of equality in the United States. The prospect of a future Muslim president was not only the focus of debates in the 1787 and 1788 Constitutional ratification, but also the status of Jews and Catholics in the future of American politics. By then, as the author reports, “the three most despised religious practitioners [in America] were Muslims, Jews, and Catholics.” (P. 167) So imagine the anxiety when John F. Kennedy, an Irish Catholic, announced his bid for the American presidency in the early 1960s. Of course, time and space differ in his situation.

In chapter six, Spellberg reiterates Jefferson's unwavering support for Muslim rights, from 1790 to 1823. However, in the midst of this commitment, he equally condemned North Africans leaderships for their cooperation with the pirates against American commercial interests in the Mediterranean. To Jefferson, "[G]reed...was a universal human motive, not particular to the followers of any religion" (P. 199). On several occasions, Jefferson had suggested the use of coercion to contain piracy, since diplomatic channels had failed to yield acceptable results. But when the United States Constitution was adopted on March 4, 1789 it mandated Congress to declare war and to establish a naval force. President Jefferson decided to ignore the Constitutional ruling and ordered American frigates to go to "the shores of North Africa to sink, burn, and destroy their ships. Thus, when Jefferson by-passed Congress and "personally" ordered military confrontation with the Arabs, this established a "precedent" for future American presidents.<sup>24</sup> However, in the early 1970s, Congress revisited the War Powers Act. Jefferson is again credited in American history as the first American president to "entertain a Muslim ambassador in the nation's capital" (P.198), according to Spellberg. For this protocol, Jefferson's critics "defamed him of being a Muslim" (P. 198). But the author did not identify the name of the diplomat, nor the country he represented. Spellberg, however, reports that Jefferson hailed Thomas Paine's work The Rights of Man (1791) as a "rebuttal" to Edmund Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France. The first of his piece on modern political theory. Burke was among the severest critics of the French Revolution. Chapter seven talks much about the Massachusetts Baptist Minister John Leland (d. 1841). He supported political and religious liberty for Catholics, Jews, and Muslims. He believed that "religious liberty is a right not a favor" (P. 141). He entertained the idea of separation of church and state. Leland exposed the hypocrisy of southern states in that they introduced Christianity to blacks, yet denied them equality and freedom.

In the final chapter, Spellberg discloses that Thomas Jefferson's "political opponents" had called him the "first Muslim president, as the United States Constitution affirmed the possibility in theory" (P. 271) for future Muslim aspirants. The Fourteenth Amendment "ratified in 1868 granted citizenship status to American-born former slaves of African descent" (P. 273), and among them were former black Muslim slaves who had continued to practice Islam discreetly or covertly. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 terminated all forms of discrimination and segregation, but did not end prejudice, an internal matter in the human flesh. The Ku Klux Klan targeted blacks, Jews, and Catholics, as well as Muslims and other minorities. In the midst of racial and religious uncertainty or tensions, the Jews, Protestants, and Catholics joined forces and created a Judeo-Christian organization in the 1920s, according to Spellberg. Henceforth, the Muslims were on their own. The event of 9/11 placed Muslims from all walks of life under siege and radar. This is the event when passenger airplanes were used as weapons for the purpose of "mass destruction,"<sup>25</sup> an unprecedented use of noncombat planes in modern warfare. Hostilities were mounted against Muslims nation-wide. The author proceeds to talk about Democrat Keith Ellison, the first Muslim Congressman who used Jefferson's copy of the Qur'an to take the oath of office. During the 9/11 crisis President George W. Bush declared that "the United States was not at war with Islam but with violent fanatics" (P. 294). To this reviewer, the American fear that Muslims would introduce Sharia law in the United States is a ridiculous assumption without basis. To institute Sharia law, "the beginning is the rights of the people.

There is no punishment in Islam which has no corresponding right."<sup>26</sup> As noted by the Egyptian scholar Sayyid Qutb, "[M]an's humanity must be respected and safeguarded; none of these fundamental rights or values should for any reason be violated or abused."<sup>27</sup> Islam is a practical and realist way of life. It is not a rigid idealistic dogma. Thus, Islamic Sharia, in essence, "is neither rigid nor inflexible, and since it is meant to be implemented in all ages and in all social environment, it can accommodate all social changes arising from the patterns of social evolution,"<sup>28</sup> according to a South Asian scholar Mazheruddin Siddiqi. Fanatics are self-serving renegades who will not hesitate to violate the true message of Islam. The Qur'an is the definitive and timeless Book. It is a guiding light, the source of strength and security meant for everyone to recite and understand. Thomas Jefferson, a "visionary" understood the fact that Islamic monotheism transcends kinship lineage and class distinction, as it seeks to treat all human beings constituting one nation, their sole distinction being the fear of and obedience to God Almighty. Islam in America has come from a long way through evolution of time and space. Muslims and their counterpart Christians have learned to accept each other's cultural and religious experiences as integrated members of society sharing the same territorial space. Islam, as the founding fathers of America's Independence had envisioned, is now a permanent reality in the United States.

Thomas Jefferson's Qur'an: Islam and the Founders (2013) is a well researched work, documented with primary and secondary data and well indexed. The book exposes the reader to Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, including their adherents. The study also addresses the intricacies of politics and diplomacy, as well as economics and human greed. The work contains overlapping chapters and many subtitles which require patience in reading it. It has numerous repetitions and some disjointed information. Yet the book provides fresh ways of thinking about Islam and about Muslims in a modern pluralist society. Overall, it is a classic work on religion and social science. One would recommend it to those interested in comparative religion, American national politics and world affairs, in both historic and contemporary perspectives.

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