

Rashida Tlaib and Jefferson's Qur'an

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Rashida Tlaib, the newly-elected Democratic congresswoman from Michigan, was sworn in yesterday on the Qur'an once owned by Thomas Jefferson. She claims this Qur'an shows that "Muslims were there at the beginning." The only thing that Jefferson's Qur'an shows is that he was curious about all sorts of things, and that, among those things, was Islam. He apparently bought the Qur'an, in the 1734 translation by George Sale, when he was a young man studying law. We do not know when, or even if, he read the book. Rashida Tlaib may think Jefferson's owning of the Qur'an was a sign of his respect for the faith. The facts suggest otherwise.

We do know that in March 1786, Jefferson and John Adams met in London with the ambassador from Tripoli, Sidi Haji Abdrahaman, to discuss Triopolitanian attacks on American shipping. When they inquired "concerning the ground of the pretensions to make war upon nations who had done them no injury," the

ambassador replied:

“It was written in their Koran, (that all nations which had not acknowledged the Prophet were sinners, whom it was the right and duty of the faithful to plunder and enslave; and that every mussulman who was slain in this warfare was sure to go to paradise. He said, also, that the man who was the first to board a vessel had one slave over and above his share, and that when they sprang to the deck of an enemy’s ship, every sailor held a dagger in each hand and a third in his mouth; which usually struck such terror into the foe that they cried out for quarter at once.”

Jefferson came away from that encounter convinced that the only language these Muslims understood was force, and that any payment to Tripoli, as Abdrarahman had demanded, in order to stop attacks on American shipping, would not work. Jefferson argued that paying tribute would only encourage more attacks. However, even those who agreed with Jefferson thought the American navy was ill-prepared to engage the ships of the Bashaw of Tripoli, and it was not until 1801, when Jefferson had become President, and turned down a demand from the Bashaw for tribute in order to exempt American shipping from Tripolitanian attacks, that the first Barbary War began.

Ever since his encounter in London with Abdrarahman in 1786, Jefferson had taken a dim, and realistic view, of Muslims. He understood that they attacked Christian shipping because they were convinced that they had both a right and a duty to do so. Possibly Rashida Tlaib does not know about his encounter with the envoy from Tripoli. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if among the reporters covering her swearing-in – and with many no doubt gushing over this “first Palestinian-American” member of Congress – there will be at least one intrepid reporter who will remind readers that the Qur’an Jefferson owned was one of 6,487 books his library ultimately included, that he had bought it as a young law student, and that there is no indication that he ever read it, much less ever mentioned it

respectfully. Further, Jefferson's own pugnacity toward the Muslim rulers of North Africa, and his refusal to countenance the payment of tribute to the Bashaw of Tripoli, which led to the First Barbary War, have their roots in his first encounter with a Muslim, the Tripolitanian envoy in London, Sidi Hajj Abdrarahman, who, when Jefferson asked him the reason why Tripoli's sailors attacked Americans who had done nothing to them, coolly explained that: "It was written in their Koran, that all nations which had not acknowledged the Prophet were sinners, whom it was the right and duty of the faithful to plunder and enslave; and that every mussulman who was slain in this warfare was sure to go to paradise."

Let's hope that that important part of Jefferson's own education in Islam is faithfully reported, especially because of the tendentious political use to which his Qur'an is being put, and not for the first time – Keith Ellison also made a big deal about being sworn in on "Jefferson's Qur'an." Americans deserve to know what Jefferson thought both of Islam as a creed, and of Muslims as self-declared enemies ("it was written in their Koran, that all nations which had not acknowledged the Prophet were sinners...") of the young Republic. Even Rashida Tlaib could benefit from such a history lesson. It might just dampen her enthusiasm for Jefferson, as she finds out more about our third President.

Finally, it is pleasant to think that among Congressional islamocritics, there might be one who will be bold enough to ask to be sworn in on the Bible that once belonged to John Quincy Adams, in order, that islamocritic could explain, "to pay tribute to the acuity of our most learned President, John Quincy Adams, the defender of the Amistad slaves, and a formidable student of Islam whose views on the faith deserve to be better known among Americans today."

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