

## **In the name of Jefferson. Critical review of Denise Spellberg's book *Thomas Jefferson's Qur'an*<sup>1</sup>**

Antonio de Diego González  
Universidad de Sevilla (España)

---

[He] sais “neither Pagan nor Mahamedan [Muslim] nor Jew ought to be excluded from the civil rights of the Commonwealth because of his religion” (T. Jefferson quoting John Locke, 1776).

With this quotation begins the book, which studies for the first time the relationship between Islam and the Founders of the United States of America. Denise A. Spellberg, Assistant Professor at University of Texas at Austin, has written an amazing book about the polemics of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century concerning Islam. Being Jefferson the focus of her research, then she conceptualizes the before and the after of the strange relationship between Islam and western thought.

Islam is, still for many people, a strange belief in the western world. It is commonly associated with an obscurantist vision developed traditionally by western Christian authorities and recently with neo-conservative movements. Also, since 9/11 the image of Islam has suffered an aggressive rally against it, regardless of the important role, which Islam played to develop the right of religious freedom in the States. So, this book is necessary in order to exorcise ghosts and prejudices against legitimate Muslims, which profess Islam in the States. It also generates the debate about the drift of religious tolerance in America.

The core of the book is devoted to express how and why Thomas Jefferson chose Islam to fight against the Protestant idea of the religious test. Through Spellberg's research, we discover the strong influence of Jefferson's hero: John Locke. So, the author offers in the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapters the in-

---

[1] Spellberg, D. A., *Thomas Jefferson's Qur'an. Islam and the Founders*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013. 397 pp.

tellektual frame, from which developed Jefferson's ideas. This frame included two point of view: Locke's or Stube's tolerance to Voltaire's or Prideaux's Islamophobia. This frame is one of the strengths of the book, *i.e.* the ideological reconstruction of the intellectual discussion about Islam. After that, the author begins to explain the (virtual) tolerance of the Muslims in Colonial America. We can highlight the study about the forgotten names like Sebastian Frank or the Baptist preacher Thomas Helwys, who defended the rights of minorities.

Jefferson's reading of George Sale's translation of the *Qur'an* played a considerable role in his understanding the learning of Islam. The analysis of the context, in which Sale works on the holy book of the Muslims, is very interesting, because Spellberg analyzes the ideological discourse of the translator. He exposes that the *Qur'an* is not a holy book; rather, it is a legal book. This view of the *Qur'an* as legal work is the interpretation that Jefferson will internalize. Another polemic at the time that influenced Jefferson's thinking was the partial disavowal of the Islam, because Islam had been spread by violence, one of the most prevalent topics in the Christian anti-Islamic stands. In spite of the intellectual flirt between Jefferson and Voltaire, Jefferson borrowed in 1776 Locke's ideas about the defense of religious freedom and the access to non-Protestant people to citizenship. After that, Jefferson's surpassed in the Commonwealth Locke's limits on toleration, and this was expressed in Jefferson's critique in *Coercion in Religion*:

*Compulsion in religion is distinguished peculiarly from compulsion in every other thing. I may grow rich by art I am compelled to follow, I may recover health by medicines I am compelled to take against my own judgment, but I cannot be saved by a worship I disbelieve & abhor.* (Notes on Religion (October 1776), published in *The Works of Thomas Jefferson in Twelve Volumes*, Federal Edition, Paul Leicester Ford, ed., New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1904, Vol. 2, p. 266.)

This quote is the climax of Spellberg's study. After that, she explains why this happens and which was the shady part of Jefferson's strategy. Probably, the Jeffersonian defense of Muslims was only a virtual strategy to achieve universal rights. In fact, Muslims were a virtual subject used to establish a precedent which would save the States from European religious wars. The future of United States must contemplate the possibility of having Muslim citizens. However, Spellberg's final epigraph in the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter exposes the case of the Afro-American Muslims enslaved in the States, which Jefferson had not considered at all. For Jefferson, Muslims never existed in the constituent process, but they were there. To further complicate matters, for him Muslims were Turks or Arabs not black Africans. This is a curious misunderstanding that generates great confusion nowadays.

In chapter 4 Spellberg researches the conflict between North Africa piracy and their implications with Jefferson's opinion about Muslims. The problem with the enslaved Americans by the pirates became an internal debate

between Jefferson on the one hand and Martha Jefferson and the Marquis of Lafayette on the other hand. Moreover, the negotiation with the Tripolitan ambassador supposed the first time that Jefferson had met a real Muslim.

With the Constitution of 1788 the panorama changed, and once again Muslims were necessary to abolish the Test Oaths or the Religious Test. Spellberg entitled very well this chapter: *Could a Muslim be President?* With the Protestant fear of the Pope and the Great Turk—in the past the two heads of the Antichrist—, the Test Oaths were considered a protection. Jefferson and others see in this attitude a problem to break with the religious policy of the *Ancient Regime*. Muslims were converted in a weapon to argued the *pro* and the *contra* of the reformation. Spellberg transmits the inner sense of the debate in this chapter. The chapter concludes with an epigraph about well know Afro-American Muslims: Ibrahima Abd Al-Rahman and Omar Ibn Said. Their lives and their adventures contrast with the intense political debate, being both—in words of Michael Gomez— “Founding Fathers of a different sort”.

Jefferson, now as president of the States, signed in 1806 a treaty with Tripoli receiving in Washington the first Muslim ambassador. He was the Tunisian ambassador, Suleymân Mellimelli. After that, Jefferson was very impressed about with the Muslim culture, which he had defended years ago, and he claimed for a common justice, equality, and mutual forbearance. Spellberg ends chapter 6 with the consideration that President Jefferson had a double vision of Islam. On the one hand Islam supposed the key to open the States to all faiths, but on the other hand Jefferson saw privately its a tyrannical government and fanaticism. A Spellberg writes Jefferson’s ambiguities are the product of the paradox of his own life. This is the other negative point of Jefferson with his paradoxical point of view on slavery. Finally, Jefferson’s political attitude served to abolish the *Ancient Regime* policies in the young Republic and helped to develop another rhetoric for other important political and religious leaders.

In chapter 7 Spellberg explores the figure of the Baptist Preacher John Leeland. He advocated for the rights of Muslims (and other faiths), after the Constitutional debate. He broke the traditional discourse against the Muslims, in order to legitimate that religion must be founded on personal conviction. Leeland’s proposals are inherited from Jefferson, Madison and Locke’s ideas. However he went further than they when he opposed openly slavery.

Spellberg’s book ends with an interesting afterword that actualizes the debate of the Founding Fathers: *Why can’t a Muslim be president?* Probably this afterword converts the book into a valuable source for other fields such as Philosophy, Ethics and Religious Studies. It is not only an historical research. In my opinion, the subsequent discussion and the occultation/misunderstanding in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries of no-religious policies is the real *quid* of the question in this book. Spellberg collected the attacks against Jefferson accu-

sing him of being a hidden Muslim. Also in the afterword several candescence topics appear: the role of the civil rights after 9/11, the anti-sharia movement, the polemic with the congressman Ellison (the first Muslim elected to be a representative in the States) and the false accusation against President Obama a being a hidden Muslim, like Jefferson. As we see, all the debate is complete current as in Jefferson's times.

The book is important, because Spellberg offers solid research on Islam in the foundation of the States, with its lights and its shadows. In this sense, Spellberg's has not written a pamphlet but a very well-documented book. She is not afraid to state the facts clearly. The demythologization of Founding Fathers and the history of United States open the way to analyze their contradictions and their success in the polemic on religious freedom.

The author's interdisciplinary approach results in an extraordinary archeology of intellectual history. This book will become a classic, a very useful instrument to understand Islam's fundamental role —albeit virtual— in the history of the Civil Rights movement in the United States of America.