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Muslims' Desired Inclusion in the Building of the American Nation



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Abstract

The post 9/11 events period witnessed the proliferation of prejudiced literature regarding the Muslim encounter with the American nation. The latter was dated back to the early days of the new republic and manifold publications misused the word piracy when privateering was more adequate. However, very few authors dealt with the American-Muslim encounter in a very professional and objective way as the renowned late American writer Richard Parker did. In an effort to counterbalance the writings stereotyping Muslims as the first foe the newly-independent United States had to face, this article seeks not only to uncover the often overlooked tolerance of the Founding Fathers' toward Muslims, but also their desire to include them in the building of the American nation. Moreover, there will be an attempt to highlight the role played by the Muslims in the early days of the emerging nation.

Keywords

Founding Fathers. Tolerance. Muslims. Encounter. American nation.

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Introduction :

In 1797, during John Adams' presidency the Senate ratified "The Treaty of Peace and Friendship between the United States and the Pasha and Subjects of Tripoli." It was signed and sealed in Algiers on the 4th day of Radjeb 1211 corresponding to the 3rd of January 1797 by Dey Hassan Bashaw and Joel Barlow. The twelve-article Treaty declares America's government as secular. Its eleventh article records:

As the government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian Religion -- as it has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion, or tranquillity of Musselmen -- and as the said States never have entered into any war or act of hostility against any Mehomitan nation, it is declared by the parties that no pretext arising from religious opinions shall ever produce an interruption of harmony existing

between the two countries. (The Avalon Project, 2006).

This treaty has been interpreted differently. (Pipes, 2006) exploited it to justify that the 'war on terror' undertaken by the United States at the beginning of the third millennium was not a war on Islam but rather a war on radical Islam. He indicated that the Founding Fathers held no hostility against the quietude or religion of Muslims.

On May 15, 1776, the Virginia Convention legislated a resolution to suggest that the General Congress announce the United Colonies as free independent states. This is how twenty-three days later, Richard Henry Lee stated his resolution (The Avalon Project, 2006). According to him, genuine freedom "embraces the Mohametan and the Gentoo (Hindi) as well as the Christian religion." (Huston, 2002). From Lee's assertion, it seems evident that there was a willingness to incorporate the Muslim 'ingredient' in the building of the new republic.

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1/ Thomas Jefferson's drafting of the American Declaration of Independence

The beginning of the American nation can be traced back to its Declaration of Independence that Thomas Jefferson drafted between June 11 and June 28, 1776. The models of individual liberty, which constituted its political philosophy, had already existed in John Locke's letter on Tolerance and in the Quran.

As an illustration, the point related to governments based on the assent of the people and the protection of their rights for life, liberty, and property reflects a principle already brought up in the Quran. The latter supports a prior consultation of people as well as a consultation among themselves before making a decision. People from different religions are allowed to live without any oppression in a Muslim country. There are several references in the Quran that provide us with principles as that of the freedom in the choice of religion that guarantees to everyone living in a Muslim country the right to

believe in anything without compulsion.as: in 2: 256: "There shall be no compulsion in religion: the right way is now distinct from the wrong way..." and, 2: 191: "...Oppression is worse than murder..." The sixth Surat also warns: 6: 151: "...You shall not kill - God has made life sacred -- except in the course of justice. These are His commandments to you that you may understand".

Such principles are ensured by the Declaration of Independence.

The existence of some common principles in the Quran and the American Declaration of Independence may lead us to think that Thomas Jefferson might have known or had access to the contents of the Holy book of Islam. One may even think that a possible inspiration from Quranic sources might have helped him draft the Declaration. A proof that Jefferson had access to such sources could reinforce the assumption of an allegeable influence.

The first Muslim democrat United States Congressman renders us with an answer: Keith (Hakim Mohamed) Ellison who served the 5th Congressional District of Minnesota from 2007 to

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2019. He was born in Detroit, Michigan. He moved to Minnesota in 1987 and graduated from the University of Minnesota Law School with a Juris Doctor degree in 1990. He converted to Islam in college. Ellison was the first Muslim to be elected to Congress and the first African American representative from Minnesota. His election scandalized many Americans, and his ceremonial pledge-in attracted media than ever witnessed in the history of the U.S. House. Keith Ellison found himself under heavy criticism because he took oath of office on the Quran on January 4, 2007. The Quran he used was no common book. It was the personal copy owned by Thomas Jefferson. In 1815, it was acquired by the Library of Congress with a collection of 6,400 volumes sold by Jefferson for \$ 24,000 in replacement of the congressional library that had been burned by the British troops during the war of 1812.

Even though there were earlier translations of the Qur'an, Jefferson was helped in his reading of the holy book by the translation of George Sale that was published in 1734 in London (Prange, 2011). Frank

Dewey, a scholar who studied the records of Jefferson orders of books, informs us that Jefferson bought this copy around 1765. In fact, it was the 1764 edition that Jefferson purchased. Even though Sale's translation was the first genuine English translation of the Arabic text, it was heavily rejected by the Muslim World because of its criticism of the Prophet and Islam in its supplementary notes. (English Translations of the Qur'an).

Although he has been fiercely condemned, Ellison justified his choice of Jefferson's Quran by stating that it showed that a visionary like Jefferson believed that wisdom could be gleaned from many sources. Ellison sought to bring a new insight on American history (Sampley, 2007) by avowing that the Founding Fathers were influenced by the Quran. Further information can be found in (Warikoo, 2007). Ellison defended his decision by affirming that Jefferson's Quran "shows that from the earliest times of the American Republic, the Quran was in the consciousness of people who brought about democracy." (West, 2007).

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Running for religious freedom in Virginia, Thomas Jefferson called for the acknowledgement of the religious rights of the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and the Muslim (Jefferson, 2007). The Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom became a law on January 16, 1786. Its value lies in the fact that it generated the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution that corresponds to the first section of the Bill of Rights as well. The First Amendment records: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances." It was approved by the House of Representatives on September 24, 1789 and by the Senate the following day. In 1791, it was ratified by the States.

The Founding Fathers must have been influenced by Islam through the early tolerance they showed toward Muslims. This tolerance is seriously menaced

these days by the misunderstanding of the Islamic religion and the vision of the American Founding Fathers.

2/ The first nation to recognise the new- born America

During his visit to Boston and Cambridge, Morocco's ambassador to the United States, Aziz Mekaour, boasted about Morocco's free Trade Agreement with the United States that went into effect on January 1, 2006. (Benaim, 2006). He declared that Morocco was the first country to acknowledge the independent United States as a sovereign nation in 1777. Some claims affirm that the Netherlands was the first country to recognize the newly born United States of America back in 1776. This assertion is sustained by the fact that a small Dutch Caribbean colony gave a 21-gun greeting to an American ship. Such salute was given to independent states. In fact, in 1776, the Netherlands was the first country to salute the American flag. However, Morocco was the first

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country to recognize the infant United States as a new political entity back in 1777.

In a paper - - read to the Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum -- (Oren, 2007), the author explained that the American presence in the Middle East focused on three themes, namely: power, faith, and fantasy. As for the first, it concerned the concrete American interests in the Middle East. The pursuit of this power, according to Oren, started just after the birth of the independent country in 1777, he also mentions that one of the first treaties of the United States was with Morocco. (The History of U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East, 2007).

A large amount of what has been written on the Muslim American encounter over the recent years emphasized that America had to face terror and piracy from the Muslim world in its early years after independence. However, most of the material hardly mentions the episode of its recognition as a free independent country. When it was the most fragile, the United States needed a powerful hand to welcome her to the family of

Independent nations. That helpful hand was from a North African State. This very link ought not to be subject to oblivion.

3/ Muslims' desired inclusion in the building of the American Nation

A group of common people of Chesterfield County, Virginia, petitioned the State assembly on November 14, 1785 to express their opinion with regard to the inclusion of Muslims, amid other people to partake in the growth of the United States:

Let Jews, Mohametans and Christians of every denomination enjoy religious liberty.. thrust them not out now by establishing the Christian religion lest thereby we become our own enemies and weaken this infant state. It is men's labour in our manufactories, their services by sea and land that aggrandize our Country and not their creeds. Chain your citizens to the state by their Interest. Let the Jews, Mohametans and

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Christians of every denomination find their advantage in living under your laws. (Huston, 2002).

This inclusion, according to the people of Chesterfield County can operate fully with the establishment of religious freedom. They did not advocate the institution of the Christian religion because they considered it as a restrictive parameter. They rather promoted religious diversity since they regarded this latter as a strength that would allow the involvement of citizens from different religions in the construction of the new independent state.

Even though there were few people belonging to the founding generation who argued against Islam, it is necessary to mention those who had a favourable attitude toward it. The Pennsylvanian philosopher of the American Revolution and subscriber of the Declaration of independence, Benjamin Rush, praised the Islamic principles and expressed their positive impact on young American people. He avowed that he had: "rather see the opinions of Confucius or

Mohammed inculcated upon our youth than see them grow up fully devoid of a system of religious principles." (Huston, 2002). A positive opinion on Muslims was also stated by the president of Yale College, Ezra Stiles. In 1780, he gave the priority to the Near Eastern Languages. In 1842, Arabic was first taught at Yale College before any course in English or American literature or most modern languages. In fact, the study of Arabic commenced in Europe in the 10th century A.D. It reached its climax two or three centuries later and knew a revival in the 16th and 17th centuries. Ezra Stiles mentioned, back in 1783, an analysis that evidenced that the Muslim principles could be useful to the different people of the new nation. Muslims were thought to exercise good principles because they knew they would be paid back in their second life. For the Founding Fathers, such a responsible and sane conduct was needed to ensure a respectable social behaviour. In attempting to arrange for workmen at Mount Vermont in 1784, George Washington made it

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clear that he would receive Muslims: “If they are good workmen, they may be of Asia, Africa, or Europe. They may be Mohometans, Jews or Christians of any Sect, or they may be Atheists.” (George Washington (1732-1799). Some of his quotations, 2007) At the time of America’s making, there were a lot of Muslims living there. There were early Muslim communities in South Carolina and Florida back to the pre-Revolutionary era at least. Even though there were earlier translations of the Quran, the first American edition of the Quran did not appear until 1806. (Brewer, 1806)

From the quotations presented above, it seems evident that the Founding generation showed an early tolerance with regard to Muslims. Furthermore, the incorporation of Muslims in the building of the new nation was not only accepted, but it was hoped for as well.

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