

WHOSE MIDDLE AGES?

**TEACHABLE MOMENTS
FOR AN ILL-USED PAST**

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Three Ways of Misreading Thomas Jefferson's Qur'an

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On January 4, 2007, the first Muslim to be elected to the United States Congress — Democratic representative from Minnesota Keith Ellison — was sworn in, but not without some controversy. In the press photos of such events in Washington, it is customary for public servants to choose if they want to place their hand on a Bible (or another text, or no text at all) while vowing to do their duty. Because Ellison is a convert to Islam, he opted to use the Qur'an rather than the Bible, laying his hand on no less than the personal copy of the Qur'an in English translation that once belonged to Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson's Qur'an, having surviving multiple fires in the Capitol, is now housed in the Library of Congress.

This use of the Qur'an was criticized by some, spurring Republican pundit Dennis Prager to declare in an editorial that "America, not Keith Ellison, decides what book a congressman takes his oath on." To allow Ellison to use the Qur'an, he claimed, "will embolden Islamic extremists" to pursue "their greatest goal — the Islamicization of America."

Although his remarks were denounced by the Anti-Defamation League as “intolerant, misinformed, and downright un-American,” Prager’s views fell on some sympathetic ears, and, possibly as a result, a rumor started circulating online a few years later alleging that U.S. president Barack Obama had similarly been sworn in on a Qur’an. This claim overlapped with conspiracy theories about Obama’s place of birth and citizenship, including later accusations by Donald Trump that Obama was not born in the United States, that he “founded ISIS,” and even the speculation that “maybe . . . he is a Muslim.” Such remarks might interest students of the Middle Ages because Trump has repeatedly asserted that the violent tactics used by ISIS are “medieval” in nature and “when we have a world where you have ISIS chopping off heads . . . this is like medieval times.” A closer look at Jefferson’s Qur’an — both at its medieval roots and its relevance to modern Muslims such as Ellison — can help us understand the logic of such facile contrasts between “the medieval” and “the modern,” and also help us develop a nuanced view of Islam’s complex role in American history, both in Jefferson’s day and in our own.

Ellison served in Congress until 2018, when he was elected as Minnesota Attorney General. While the story of his swearing-in to congress is well known — it resurfaced in the news in 2015 when a New York trial court judge, Carolyn Walker-Diallo, similarly took her oath of office on a Qur’an — what is less known is that Jefferson’s Qur’an, a 1764 printing of an English translation made by English orientalist George Sale in 1734, also contains an introduction and explanatory notes to help the reader understand the book in its historical context. Jefferson had a lasting curiosity about Islam, and he may have made use of his Qur’an during his law career as part of his comparative study of various law codes from different world civilizations. Jefferson’s Qur’an

has been interpreted by historians in the context of Enlightenment debates about religion in general and Islam in particular, and especially with respect to the place of Islam in Colonial America.

Yet less attention has been paid to Sale's medieval roots. As he explains, he made his translation as a response to medieval and early modern translations of the Qur'an. In particular, the introduction and notes in the 1734 Qur'an contain references to European Christian readers of the Islamic holy book as far back as the twelfth century. In his prologue, Sale refers to the first Latin Qur'an, translated by the Englishman Robert of Ketton in Toledo around 1143, as well as numerous later translations into Latin and various European vernaculars over subsequent centuries. Ketton's Qur'an was translated at the behest of Peter the Venerable, abbot of Cluny, for explicitly anti-Muslim purposes. In the twelfth century, Islamic civilization was at its zenith, spreading from southern Iberia to northern India and covering all of the southern shores of the Mediterranean and Middle East. Ketton and Peter were only two of numerous medieval Christians who began engaging more directly with Islamic writing in the wake of Christian-Muslim conflicts, including the Christian "re-conquest" of Iberia and the Christian conquest of Jerusalem and the Holy Land during the crusades. Demand for Latin translations of Arabic books grew in the twelfth century as students at Europe's earliest universities first encountered Arabic texts of science and philosophy, while Christian churchmen, working to define religious dogma (and infidelity) more explicitly, first translated Jewish and Muslim holy books in order to refute them.

In keeping with this medieval polemical spirit, Sale next names one "Johannes Andraes, a native of Xativa, in the kingdom of Valencia, who from a Mohammedan doctor became a Christian priest, translated not only the Koran

but also its glosses.” This “Johannes Andraes” is none other than Juan Andrés, the purported fifteenth-century author of the Spanish anti-Muslim treatise *Confusion or Confutation of the Muhammadan Sect and of the Qur'an*, published in Valencia in 1515. Sale returns to Juan Andrés again in a comment on verse 16:103, which describes how Muhammad was accused of being told what to say not by God but by some clever mortal. Sale explains that “some Christian writers” even suggest he was instructed by a Jew, among whom he names Juan Andrés as well as the thirteenth-century Dominican friar Riccoldo da Monte di Croce (d. 1320). Riccoldo’s best-known work, *Against the Law of the Saracens* (“Saracen” was the common medieval Christian term for a Muslim) was one of numerous medieval treatises written to attack Islam and promote Christianity, using for that purpose quotations from Islamic sources about the Prophet Muhammad.

The fact that George Sale mentions these medieval names in the eighteenth century is not an anomaly, since such texts were widely available in Western Europe at that time. Ketton’s Qur’an was copied repeatedly and was printed at least twice in the sixteenth century (including one edition that even reproduced the angry marginal comments of a medieval Christian reader attacking Islam). Similarly, Riccoldo’s and Juan Andrés’s diatribes were among the most widely distributed Christian books written against Islam. Riccoldo’s Latin attack on the Qur’an was copied and printed many times, most famously in a German translation by Martin Luther from 1543. The text by Juan Andrés also circulated widely throughout Europe, being printed over a dozen times in at least six languages. These books were, by the standards of the day, veritable best sellers.

And so they remained for centuries. Juan Andrés and Riccoldo were not only printed and sold widely all the way to

the end of the eighteenth century, but they were even cited on occasion in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. For example, in 1931, the *Islamic Review*, the official magazine of the UK-based Woking Muslim Mission, copied Sale's description of Juan Andrés as part of a history of Qur'an translation in the West. In 1939, the American missionary (and Princeton professor) Samuel Marinus Zwemer copied the same description in his history of Christian missionaries in Islamic lands over the ages. In 2002, in the wake of the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, a Lutheran minister in Missouri, Thomas Pfothenhauer, published an English translation of Luther's German version of Riccoldo's book (under the title *Islam in the Crucible: Can It Pass the Test?*). And in 2007, the same year as Keith Ellison's historic election to Congress, another translation of the Latin original appeared in print, translated by one Londini Ensis, a charged Latin pun meaning both "Londoner" and "The Sword of London." The legacies of Riccoldo and Juan Andrés span centuries and reach all the way to the present.

Sale's use of these texts in his day was thus unsurprising not only because of their widespread popularity but also because of their anti-Muslim views. In comparison to medieval and early modern Qur'an translations, Sale's version — translated directly from Arabic, following the original text closely, and including comments on grammar and interpretation — has been lauded as fair minded and even "scholarly." However, Dennis Prager and his readers might be pleased to know that Sale himself also reveals some sympathies with his medieval precursors. To be sure, Sale does seek to correct numerous misunderstandings about Islam (such as the widespread misconception that it was spread by coercion), and he also affirms that Muhammad, as a leader and lawgiver, deserves his readers' respect. Yet in expressing such favorable views, Sale talks out of both sides of his mouth, making it very clear that he considered Muhammad, as a

prophet and religious leader, to be fraudulent and worthy of condemnation. How are we to understand him when he remarks, “For how criminal soever Mohammad may have been in imposing a false religion on mankind, the praises due to his real virtues ought not to be denied him”? As for the Qur’an itself, although Sale recognizes its elegance, he also affirms that “it is absolutely necessary to undeceive those who, from the ignorant or unfair translations [of the Qur’an] which have appeared, have entertained too favourable an opinion of the original, and also to enable us effectually to expose the imposture.”

In such statements, Sale shows himself—his occasional favorable observations notwithstanding—to share the view of his medieval sources that only one religion—Christianity—can claim to teach the whole truth. Despite this, modern commentators have stressed the ecumenical value of Jefferson’s Qur’an in helping to forge common ground between Christians and Muslims, being apparently unaware of its polemical pedigree. President Obama himself, in a 2009 speech at Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt, made reference to Ellison’s use of Sale’s translation, citing it as an example of how “Islam is a part of America.” Ellison too, in responding to his critics (*Washington Post*, January 4, 2007), affirmed “a new politics of generosity and inclusion.”

It is ironic that Jefferson’s copy of Sale’s translation has come to symbolize inclusivity for some when it carries within it the indelible marks of a medieval polemical tradition at odds with the modern notion of religious pluralism. The juxtaposition of Sale’s remarks about Islam with the remarks of Ellison’s defenders and critics presents us with three distinct sorts of misreading. First, the view that Jefferson’s Qur’an was simply an interesting and largely unproblematic example of how, in Obama’s words, “Islam has always been part of America’s story,” conveniently ignores disturbing facts about the West’s engagement with Islam in

the eighteenth century. Such a view glosses over the sobering reality that some of America's first Muslims were, in fact, slaves brought to the New World against their will and, at times, pressured to convert to Christianity. It also implies that the act of translating Islam's holy book into English was simply a project of scholarly interest or cultural curiosity without also serving Western economic and cultural interests. To claim this about a translation made during a period of active British expansion in India and Asia, as Sale's translation was, is either misleading or naïve. Such a reading forgets that the modern linguistic and historical study of "the East" by "the West" is not only a product of modern European colonialism, but also is built directly upon pre-modern engagement with the foreign and "other"—Jews, Muslims, and various other groups—as subjects of conversion or objects of polemical animosity.

Alternatively, Sale's text might be seen to reflect a rational Enlightenment view of religion like that cultivated by Jefferson himself. In this view, which also seems to me to be a misreading, Sale can be seen to take stock of medieval polemical arguments against Islam without himself adopting them, replacing them instead with a more scholarly and detached view of Islam. Sale's restrained praise for Muhammad and the Qur'an might seem to part ways with Juan Andrés's acerbic anti-Islamic polemic and Riccoldo's harsh condemnation of the Qur'an. Yet this interpretation gives in too readily to a facile narrative of the neutrality of Enlightenment scholarship in contradistinction to the prejudice and hatred of medieval and early modern polemics. Just as it is misleading to overlook the colonial and political interests of early modern engagement with Arabic and Hebrew, so too would it be an error to maintain that seventeenth-century Enlightenment readers, including Thomas Jefferson, completely broke with precedent to achieve a more reasoned

and disinterested study of other cultures and other epochs. Such a reading ignores both Sale's reliance on medieval anti-Islamic sources and his endorsement of polemical views about the illegitimacy of Islam's claim to divine revelation. A third, slightly different, view — a variation of the second — might reject Sale as a reader while maintaining the myth of the Enlightenment intact. In this understanding, Sale is personally weighed down by his medieval sources, and his antagonistic engagement with the Qur'an and Islam is simply out of keeping with his rational and fair-minded age. However, such a view would still succumb to a caricatured narrative of the intolerant Middle Ages finally overcome by a tolerant and pluralistic modernity. One need only recall Dennis Prager's comments on Keith Ellison to see that polemical rhetoric over religion has yet to go out of style in our own enlightened day.

If we reject these readings of Jefferson's Qur'an — an overly positive one, an overly negative one, or an overly presentist and self-championing one — what options remain? Perhaps we can find guidance in the idea that the real misreading here is one that sees past historical periods — any historical periods, including our own — in overly simple terms. To view the past in black and white terms is to forget that medieval Christian polemics, for all their bile, are also at times ambivalent about other religions, displaying mixed opinions and pursuing mixed agendas. An apt lens for understanding these mixed intentions is the one that was proposed by Thomas Burman in his history of Christian Qur'an translation, from Robert of Ketton in the twelfth century to Juan Andrés in the sixteenth and George Sale in the eighteenth. As Burman explains, "Christian Qur'ān reading in this long period is characterized as much by what I will be calling philology — the laborious study of the meaning of Arabic words and grammar, of the historic Muslim under-

standing of the Qur'ān, and of its textual problems in both Arabic and Latin translation — as it is by polemic . . . these two modes of reading often existed side by side in the mind of the same reader.” Jefferson’s Qur’an, expressing both polemical rejection of Islam and also humanist admiration of the civilizations to which it gave rise, encapsulates this double intention, and it came to do so not because of its supposed modernity but, on the contrary, because it inherited this mode of maintaining two contrary things at once from the very medieval texts that strike us now as single mindedly polemical and vitriolic. As it has become caught in the modern polemical crossfire between Keith Ellison and Dennis Prager and all of its messy aftershocks, Jefferson’s Qur’an is also a fitting embodiment of the mixed intentions and patent contradictions at the heart of our own modern engagement with the medieval past.

Further Reading

For Prager’s comments, see his article “America, Not Keith Ellison, Decides What Book a Congressman Takes His Oath On,” Townhall.com (November 28, 2006). On the Anti-Defamation League’s response, see “ADL Statement on Dennis Prager’s Attack on Muslim Congressman for Taking Oath of Office on Koran” (December 1, 2006), available at https://web.archive.org/web/20061230040601/https://www.adl.org/presrele/dirab_41/4934_41.htm. Ellison responded in “Choose Generosity, Not Exclusion,” *The Washington Post* (January 4, 2007). On the claims about Obama’s use of a Qur’an, see Angie D. Holan, “Obama Used a Koran? No, He Didn’t,” Politifact.com (December 20, 2007). Trump repeated his “medieval times” comment on numerous occasions, including in the second presidential debate (October 9, 2016), available from CQ Transcriptions and reprinted

by the *New York Times*. For Trump's claim at a campaign rally that Obama "founded ISIS," see Nick Corsaniti, "Donald Trump Calls Obama 'Founder of ISIS'" (also in the *New York Times*). For his suggestion that his birth certificate possibly "says he is a Muslim," see Chris Moody and Kristen Holmes, "Donald Trump's History of Suggesting Obama Is a Muslim," available on CNN.com.

Thomas Jefferson's Qur'an was published as *The Koran: Commonly Called the Alcoran of Mohammed*, trans. George Sale, 2 vols. (London: L. Hawes, W. Clarke, R. Collins, and T. Wilcox, 1764), a reprint of Sale's first edition (London: C. Ackers for J. Wilcox, London, 1734). A history of Jefferson's Qur'an in the context of early American writing on religious freedom can be found in Denise A. Spellberg, *Thomas Jefferson's Qur'an: Islam and the Founders* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013). A study of Sale's translation in the context of other eighteenth-century writings about Islam is available in Ziad Elmarsafy, *The Enlightenment Qur'an: The Politics of Translation and the Construction of Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009). Two detailed overviews of medieval Christian polemics against Islam include Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), and John Tolan, *Saracens* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002). A history of the earliest European translations of the Qur'an (into Latin) is Thomas E. Burman, *Reading the Qur'an in Latin Christendom, 1140–1560* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

My thanks to Kate Waggoner-Karchner for bringing Pfothauer's book to my attention. See her 2019 dissertation, "Europe, Islam, and the Role of the Church in the Afterlife of a Medieval Polemic, 1301–1543."