Taking oath of office using Koran is far from un-American, I swear

by Charita M. Goshay

Some people are apoplectic that Keith Ellison of Minnesota, the nation's first Muslim elected to Congress, would take the oath of office by swearing on the Koran.

The rhetoric is piling up like Denver snow, with some pundits calling it the first thread toward the unraveling of our nation as we now know it; a warning shot toward the eventual "Islamization" of America.

At least one columnist has argued that if Ellison wants to be a public servant in this country, he should swear upon a Bible.

Fine. Which one? Catholic, Scofield, King James or the New International Version?

Does the Torah qualify, or should it also contain the New Testament?

Could you skate by using the Book of Mormon?

Critics say Ellison's action will further embolden Islamic terrorists and extremists.

Since when have lunatics needed innocent people's actions as motivation?

The Ku Klux Klan and other assorted white supremacists have hidden behind the cross for years, but no one has ever proposed that a Christian congressional representative be prohibited from swearing on a Bible.

To equate Ellison with Islamic extremism is just plain lazy, and makes about as much sense as judging Christianity through the lens of the Salem witch trials or by the head cases who bomb abortion clinics.

Ironically, there are reports that Ellison has been condemned by Islamic jihadists for participating in the democratic process.

CONSTITUTION IS CLEAR

In a brilliant instance of foresight, the actual congressional oath of office is secular, meaning the representative doesn't swear on a Bible or anything else when he or she is undertaking it. People who wish to do so do it symbolically in a private ceremony, as is the case with Ellison.

We all know that the First Amendment of the Constitution states: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

But Article VI also states:

"The senators and representatives before mentioned, and the members of the several state legislatures, and all executive and judicial officers, both of the United States and of the several states, shall be bound by oath or affirmation to support this Constitution; but no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States."

Does this apply to Americans of every faith, or not?

Do we think the Founding Fathers made a mistake, or not?

BLURRING THE LINES

Ellison has admitted making mistakes in his faith journey. Following his conversion to Islam at 19, he affiliated with members of the Nation of Islam who held anti-Semitic views, though he did not. He severed the affiliation more than a decade ago, saying that he unequivocally rejects anti-Semitism. Ellison was endorsed by the American Jewish World newspaper, and the Anti-Defamation League has defended his right to religious expression.

Rational people understand there's a vast difference between being a person of faith in public service and entering public life to further a religious agenda. In recent years, some people have deliberately sought to blur that distinction, and it's caused nothing but trouble.

Keith Ellison's job is to represent his constituents. He is not to be their imam. If he's unwilling or unable to make that distinction, it's up to the people who elected him to office to do something about it.

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