

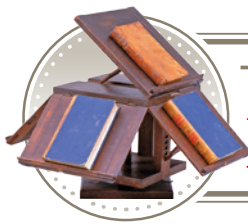
Th: Jefferson

MONTICELLO

SPRING 2014

www.monticello.org

VOLUME 25, NUMBER 1



THE REVOLVING BOOKSTAND

Monticello's **Revolving Bookstand** is a new series of monthly book reviews featuring what our staff is reading. Wm. Scott Harrop reviews Denise A. Spellberg's book *Thomas Jefferson's Qur'an: Islam and the Founders*. Read these book reviews each month on the Monticello Blog at www.monticello.org/revolvingbookstand.

Wm. Scott Harrop is a lecturer in the University of Virginia's Department of Middle Eastern and South Asian Languages and Cultures. He teaches "Recent Revolutions in the Islamic World" through a Jeffersonian prism. He's also a past fellow at the Robert H. Smith International Center for Jefferson Studies.



Wm. Scott Harrop

In 2007, when Congressman Keith Ellison borrowed a Qur'an once owned by Thomas Jefferson for his ceremonial oath of office, he renewed a debate as old as the American republic. For some critics, a Muslim holding elected office constitutes a fundamental threat to American identity, an anathema to its founding values.

In *Thomas Jefferson's Qur'an: Islam and the Founders*, Denise A. Spellberg, associate professor of history at the University of Texas, counters that key American founders contemplated Islam in civic life. In Spellberg's judgment, an "American Muslim citizen with full civil rights" is

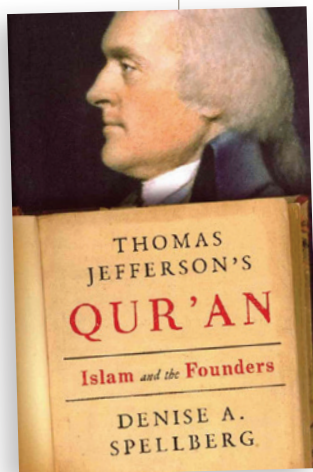
"quintessentially evocative of our national ideals."

Jefferson's ownership of a Qur'an provides Spellberg with an intriguing hook for her inquiry. Proof that Jefferson owned a copy of the Qur'an is preserved in the Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library at the University of Virginia. There, the "Virginia Gazette Daybook" records that on Oct. 5, 1765, Thomas Jefferson, then a law student at William & Mary, purchased George Sale's venerable translation of the Qur'an. Since no notes from Jefferson's reading of the text exist, Spellberg draws conclusions on how the Qur'an affected Jefferson based on the policies he promoted and his decisions in office.

Even as Spellberg details

Jefferson's criticisms of Islam as a religion, she demonstrates that Jefferson, like James Madison and George Washington, advocated religious freedom and civic rights for Muslims, Catholics and Jews. Going beyond Locke, Jefferson's critical innovation was not just to "tolerate" religious dissent, but to assert the full inclusion of citizens and public servants from all faiths — or none at all. Yet just how and why Jefferson and his concurring founders arrived at this stance deserves further exploration.

Amid the decade-long political fight for passage of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, Jefferson famously wrote, "The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods or no god. It neither picks my pocket, nor breaks my leg." Spellberg notes that despite Jefferson's



profession to be a Christian, his political foes, including John Quincy Adams, abused Jefferson's own words to slur him as an "infidel," a Muslim. He has certainly not been the last American president to face this charge.

During his presidency, Jefferson clashed with North African Muslim powers when Barbary corsairs attacked American merchant ships and demanded ransoms. Although Spellberg dubs Jefferson the first president of the United States to "wage war against an Islamic power," he was also the first to make peace with them. She assesses that Jefferson "never perceived a predominantly religious dimension to the conflict" and may have even used faith as a bridge to resolve the disputes.

Throughout her book, Spellberg juxtaposes colonial America's inheritance of Europe's deep fears of Islam and its precedents for the toleration of Muslims. Both timely and enlightening, *Thomas Jefferson's Qur'an: Islam and the Founders* deserves wide consideration.

.....
"The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods or no god. It neither picks my pocket, nor breaks my leg."

—THOMAS JEFFERSON
.....