

Ellison not first to forgo Bible for oath: Follows presidents, governors and legislators

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When Keith Ellison, the recently elected Minnesota Democrat who will be the first Muslim in Congress, announced that he would take his oath of office on Islam's holy book, the Qur'an, he provoked sharp criticism from conservatives and some heated discussion in the blogosphere.

The ensuing discussion has revived the debate about whether America's values and legal system are shaped only by Judeo-Christian heritage or if there is room for Islamic and other traditions.

"America is interested in only one book, the Bible. If you are incapable of taking an oath on that book, don't serve in Congress," Dennis Prager, a conservative talk radio host in Los Angeles, wrote in a November 28 TownHall.com editorial. Prager, who is Jewish and serves on the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, argued that Ellison should "not be allowed" to take his oath on the Qur'an.

In a subsequent interview, Prager said his objections were not to Ellison's use of the Qur'an but to his not using a Bible. "This has nothing to do with the Qur'an. It has to do with the first break of the tradition of having a Bible present at a ceremony of installation of a public official since George Washington inaugurated the tradition," Prager said. He added that he would accept Ellison's using a Qur'an if he also used a Bible. Ellison could not be reached for comment.

But Ellison would not be the first member of Congress to forgo a Bible at the swearing-in ceremony. Congresswoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D., Fla.) took her oath in 2005 on a Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible, which she borrowed from Representative Gary Ackerman (D., N.Y.) after learning a few hours earlier that the speaker of the House didn't have any Jewish holy books.

“Each of us has every right to lay our hand on the Bible that we were raised with; that’s what America is all about—diversity, understanding and tolerance,” said Wasserman Schultz. “It doesn’t appear that Dennis Prager has learned anything from his time on the Holocaust commission.”

Other politicians have departed from the Bible as well. Hawaii governor Linda Lingle used the Tanakh when she took her oath in 2002, and Madeleine Kunin placed her hand on Jewish prayer books when she was sworn in as the first female governor of Vermont in 1985.

As for U.S. presidents, in 1825 John Quincy Adams took the presidential oath using a law volume instead of a Bible, and in 1853 Franklin Pierce affirmed the oath rather than swearing it. Herbert Hoover, citing his Quaker beliefs, also affirmed his oath in 1929 but did use a Bible, according to the Joint Congressional Committee on Inaugural Ceremonies. Theodore Roosevelt used no Bible in taking his first oath of office in 1901, but did use one in 1905.

House members are sworn in together on the House floor in a ceremony without any book, holy or otherwise. But in an unofficial ceremony, individual members reenact an oath-taking so that it can be photographed—a tradition dating from the beginning of the wide use of photography.

Still, some conservative Christians have taken Prager’s editorial as a clarion call. The American Family Association, for example, sent out an “action alert” to its 3.4 million members urging them to write their members of Congress to ask for a “law making the Bible the book used in the swearing-in ceremony of representatives and senators.”

Swearing in officeholders on Islam’s holy book “represents a change in our society, our culture, if we hold up the Qur’an as equivalent to the Holy Bible,” said AFA president Tim Wildmon.

The Anti-Defamation League, a leading anti-Semitism watchdog group, issued a statement calling Prager’s views “intolerant, misinformed and downright un-American,” especially in light of the fact that President Bush appointed him to the Holocaust Memorial Council in August.

Prager said the ADL statement was a result of a personal feud with the group’s president, Abe Foxman. “I am a very big supporter and believer that conservative

Christians are the backbone of this society. [Foxman] thinks that the religious right is the greatest enemy of American democracy, and he's very angry at a prominent Jew who defends them."

Many say prohibiting Ellison from taking his oath on the Qur'an would violate the constitutional provision that "no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States."

Kevin J. "Seamus" Hasson, president of the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, said, "It makes no sense at all to have [Ellison] violate the Constitution in order to affirm his duty to uphold the Constitution." -*Omar Sacirbey, Religion News Service*