

From the Announcer, First Baptist Church, Hamilton, NY, January/February 2007

### *The Politics, and Religion, of Generosity and Inclusion*

The new U.S. Congress is the most diverse ever—more women, African-Americans, Latinos, and Asians than any previous body. It's also the most religiously diverse. Among the usual assortment of Episcopalians, Lutherans and Baptists, there are Buddhists (2), Jews (43), Mormons (15), Roman Catholics (154), non-denominational Protestants (26), unaffiliated (6), and a single Muslim—the first.

Reflecting this new diversity, incoming Rep. Keith Ellison (D-Minn.), the Muslim, requested to take the oath of office on the Koran rather than a Christian Bible. Outrage followed. “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,” wrote Dennis Prager, a talk radio host in Los Angeles. Prager, who is Jewish, argued Ellison should “not be allowed” to take his oath on the Koran.

Prager said his objections were not to Ellison's use of the Koran 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.”

That, of course, is not true. Ellison would not be the first to forgo a Bible at the swearing-in ceremony. As reported by the *Religious News Service*, Congresswoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-Fla.) took her oath in 2005 on a Tanakh, the Hebrew Scriptures. “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.

As for presidents, in 1825 John Quincy Adams took the presidential oath using a law volume, and in 1853 Franklin Pierce affirmed the oath rather than swearing it. Herbert Hoover, citing his Quaker beliefs, also affirmed his oath in 1929—although a Bible was present. Theodore Roosevelt used no Bible in taking his first oath of office in 1901, but did so in 1905.

As point of fact, House members officially are sworn in together on the House floor in a ceremony *without any book, holy or otherwise*. Only in an individually reenacted photo-op do members use a Bible.

Still, conservative action groups have sent out an “action alert” urging members to demand a “law making the Bible the book used in the swearing-in ceremony of representatives and senators.”

Rep. Virgil Goode (R-Va.) warned that *real* Americans must “wake up” and close their borders to Muslim immigrants before any more are elected to office. It doesn't seem to matter that Ellison, an African-American Muslim convert, traces his family roots in the United States to 1741.

As a Baptist who knows that the phrase, “separation of church and state” was first used by Thomas Jefferson in a letter to Connecticut Baptists, I think otherwise. In that letter Jefferson spoke of “the loathsome combination of church and state” which forces citizens to support churches they do not attend and recite creeds they do not believe—and, I suppose, *to swear on holy books not theirs!*

Personally, I applaud Keith Ellison's election. Religious diversity is crucial for religious freedom. James Madison, who under pressure from Virginia Baptists pushed for the amendments to the Constitution known as the Bill of Rights, said it as well as anyone:

*Religious freedom arises from that multiplicity of sects, which pervades America, and which is the best and only security for religious liberty in any society. For where there is such variety of sects, there cannot be a majority of any one sect to oppress and persecute the rest.”* (Virginia, June 12, 1788)

Finally, I leave with you the following words (edited for space) of Representative Ellison upon his assumption of office. Would that his critics be as gracious and generous:

*Choose Generosity, Not Exclusion*  
Representative Keith Ellison (D-Minn.)

Somewhere in America today, there is a young couple feeling vulnerable. Maybe one has been laid off due to outsourcing, and maybe, the other is working for something close to a minimum wage. They probably have no medical benefits. Things are tough for working people—but in America, we often turn to our faith in tough times.

When our couple shows up for worship service, probably on a Sunday, there is no doubt that the preacher will tell them “God loves you.” But the next thing the preacher tells them is crucial—not only to the young couple, but to us all.

Will the preacher tell our young couple, “God loves you—but only you and people like you?” Or will the preacher say, “God loves you and you must love your neighbors of all colors, cultures, or faiths—as yourselves?” One message will lead to a stinginess of spirit, an exclusion of the “undeserving,” and the other will lead to a generosity of spirit and inclusion of all.

In America today, we are encouraged to believe in the myth of scarcity—that there just isn’t enough—of anything. But in the story of the miracle of the loaves and fishes, Jesus, who the Muslims call Isa, found himself preaching to 5000 at dinnertime, and there didn’t appear to be enough food. The disciples said that there were only five barley loaves and two fish...we just have to send them away hungry...we simply don’t have enough. But Jesus took the loaves and the fish and started sharing. There was enough for everyone... more than enough.

The idea here is not that there is a boundless supply of everything. But the idea is that there is *enough*.

Poverty is not necessary. America need not have 37 million Americans living below the poverty line. It is a choice. Hunger is a choice. Exclusion of the stranger, the immigrant, or the darker other is a choice.

(But) we can choose generosity.

We live in a society that says that there is enough for a tax break for the wealthy but not enough for an increase in the minimum wage or for national health care. There is enough for subsidies to oil and coal companies but not for families who are struggling to afford childcare or a college education. But it doesn’t have to be this way.

We need a politics of generosity based on the reality of abundance as opposed to a politics of not-enough. The richest 1 percent of the nation, on average, owns 190 times as much as a typical household. The child poverty rate in the United States is the highest of 16 other industrialized nations

Recently, I have become the focus of some criticism for my use of the Qu’ran for my ceremonial swearing in. Let me be clear, I am going to be sworn into office like all members of Congress. I am going to swear to uphold the United States Constitution.

We seem to have lost the political vision of our founding document—a vision of inclusion, tolerance and generosity.

I do not blame my critics for subscribing to a politics of scarcity and intolerance. However, I believe we all must project a new politics of generosity and inclusion.

My constituents in Minnesota elected me to fight for a new politics in which a loving nation guarantees health care for all of its people; a new politics in which executive pay may not skyrocket while workers do not have enough to care for their families. I was elected to articulate a new politics in which no one is cut out of the American dream—not immigrants, not gays, not poor people, not even a Muslim committed to serve his nation.