

John Quincy Adams On Islam: “Old Man Eloquent” (Part II)

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Today, a side of Adams that was not made much of in his lifetime has for many of us become the most important, and much-needed, part of his legacy: his critical view of Islam and of Muhammad. He derived these views from experience – his own and his father’s – of Muslim behavior (both of the Barbary Pirates and of the Ottoman Turks), from his lifelong study of history, and from his intensive reading of the Qur’an. John Adams and Thomas Jefferson were sent in 1786 to negotiate in London with the ambassador from Tripoli, Sidi Haji Abdrahaman, about the seizure of American ships. They reported back in a joint letter to John Jay (then a senior American diplomat), explaining that “We took the liberty to make some inquiries concerning the Grounds of their pretensions to make war upon a Nation who had done them no Injury, and observed that we considered all mankind as our Friends who had done us no wrong, nor had given us any provocation. THE AMBASSADOR ANSWERED US THAT IT WAS FOUNDED ON THE LAWS OF THEIR PROPHET, THAT IT WAS WRITTEN IN THEIR KORAN, THAT ALL NATIONS WHO SHOULD NOT HAVE ACKNOWLEDGED THEIR AUTHORITY WERE SINNERS, THAT IT WAS THEIR RIGHT AND DUTY TO MAKE WAR UPON THEM WHEREVER THEY COULD BE FOUND, AND TO MAKE SLAVES OF ALL THEY COULD TAKE AS PRISONERS, AND THAT EVERY MUSSELMAN WHO SHOULD BE SLAIN IN BATTLE WAS SURE TO GO TO PARADISE.”

John Quincy Adams would certainly have learned from his father about what the Tripolitanian ambassador had maintained in his discussions with Adams and Jefferson. He may even have been later shown a copy – he was then a junior at Harvard – of the letter that was sent to John Jay. He also had his own rich

store of observations of Muslim behavior, for the Barbary Pirates continued, throughout the next thirty years, from 1786 to 1816, to attack American shipping and seize American seamen, who were then held for exorbitant ransom. For a while after the First Barbary War (1801-1805) with Tripoli, attacks decreased. But when the Americans became preoccupied with European matters, eventually fighting the British in the War of 1812, the Barbary states – Tripoli, Tunis, Algiers – resumed attacks on American and European shipping. Once the War of 1812 had ended, and the Treaty of Ghent (1814) signed, the Americans resumed a more aggressive policy in the Mediterranean. When America defeated Algiers in the Second Barbary War, that spelled the end of the last major campaign of the Barbary pirates. Western ships increasingly surpassed in speed and deadly force (better cannons) those of the Muslims, and the Barbary pirate threat to Christian shipping steadily decreased as a result.

It was clear to John Quincy Adams, that while force could change Muslim behavior, nothing would change the Muslim belief that they had “a right and a duty” to make war on the Infidels. This war was on continuous display in the Mediterranean against all who were too weak to withstand them, as was their making “slaves of all they could take as prisoners” – the Christian seaman they held as slaves in North Africa, some permanently enslaved, while others were to be ransomed for sums. American shipping initially proved to be a most vulnerable target, given the small size of the American navy. It was only the buildup of that navy, begun by Jefferson, and its deployment to the Mediterranean to take aggressive action against the Barbary pirates, that finally halted, after two wars a decade apart, the attacks by Muslim corsairs on American ships and seamen.

The other example John Quincy Adams had immediately before him of Muslim aggression against Christians was the suppression, by the Turks, of the Greeks when they began their war for

independence. That war lasted from 1821 to 1832, and while the Greeks were ultimately successful, Adams, who during this period was Secretary of State (1817-1825), and then President (1825-1829), received direct accounts of the extreme brutality by the Muslim Turks against the Greek Christians.

But it was not just his contemporaneous experience of Muslim behavior toward Christians that formed John Quincy Adams's view of Islam. He was a deep student of history all of his life. He knew how Islam had spread across the Middle East and North Africa, and how its advance was halted in the west by Charles Martel at Poitiers in 732, and in the east, much later, at the gates of Vienna in 1683. He knew about the 800 years it took the Christians to complete the Reconquista of Spain. He knew how, over 1200 years, Muslim armies had conquered many different lands, and subjugated many different peoples.

And he took a special interest in the Ottoman Turks, who were in a long but steady military decline that began with that defeat at Vienna in 1683. The Ottomans began to lose battles, small ones at first, to the increasingly more powerful Russian forces. Their first major defeat came in the Russo-Turkish War of 1768-1774, after which they were compelled to sue for peace. By the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca (July 21, 1774), Russia's right was recognized to intervene to protect Christians in the Ottoman Empire – a clear indication of Muslim brutality against subjugated Christians, for why else would such intervention be thought necessary? A series of Russo-Turkish wars, and Russian victories, continued to whittle away at Ottoman domains in the Caucasus. When Adams was the Minister to Russia (1809-1814), with direct and frequent contact with the Tsar, he would have heard about Russian clashes with, and victories against, the Ottoman Turks in the Caucasus.

After he left the Presidency in 1829, John Quincy Adams undertook almost immediately to write and publish his strong

views on Islam and Muslims. This "Essay on Turks," little noted at the time, has now become the best-known of all his contributions as an American statesman. The "Essay on Turks" is now more famous than the three treaties he negotiated (the Treaty of Ghent, the Treaty of 1818 with Great Britain, and the Adams-Onis Treaty of 1819), more famous than his work on the Monroe Doctrine, more famous than his defense of Indian rights, or even than his argument at the Supreme Court that led to the setting free of African slaves in the *Amistad* case.

The "Essay on Turks" startles us now because we are not used to such a forthright and truthful account of Muhammad and of Islam. We live in a different time, sunk in a swamp of appeasement and interfaith outreach, when pusillanimity and evasion are the order of the day in public discussions of Islam. The most-quoted part of the "Essay on Turks" was put up at Jihad Watch just a few days ago, on July 11, the 250th anniversary of Adams's birth, but it deserves to be reposted:

In the seventh century of the Christian era, a wandering Arab of the lineage of Hagar, the Egyptian, combining the powers of transcendent genius, with the preternatural energy of a fanatic, and the fraudulent spirit of an impostor, proclaimed himself as a messenger from Heaven, and spread desolation and delusion over an extensive portion of the earth. Adopting from the sublime conception of the Mosaic law, the doctrine of one omnipotent God; he connected indissolubly with it, the audacious falsehood, that he was himself his prophet and apostle. Adopting from the new Revelation of Jesus, the faith and hope of immortal life, and of future retribution, he humbled it to the dust, by adapting all the rewards and sanctions of his religion to the gratification of the sexual passion. He poisoned the sources of human felicity at the fountain, by degrading the condition of the female sex, and the allowance of polygamy; and he declared undistinguishing and exterminating war, as a part of his religion, against all the rest of mankind. THE ESSENCE OF HIS DOCTRINE WAS VIOLENCE

AND LUST: TO EXALT THE BRUTAL OVER THE SPIRITUAL PART OF HUMAN NATURE.

Between these two religions, thus contrasted in their characters, a war of twelve hundred years has already raged. That war is yet flagrant; nor can it cease but by the extinction of that imposture, which has been permitted by Providence to prolong the degeneracy of man. While the merciless and dissolute dogmas of the false prophet shall furnish motives to human action, there can never be peace upon earth, and good will towards men. The hand of Ishmael will be against every man, and every man's hand against him. It is, indeed, amongst the mysterious dealings of God, that this delusion should have been suffered for so many ages, and during so many generations of human kind, to prevail over the doctrines of the meek and peaceful and benevolent Jesus.

The precept of the Koran is perpetual war against all who deny that Mahomet is the prophet of God. The vanquished may purchase their lives, by the payment of tribute; the victorious may be appeased by a false and delusive promise of peace; and the faithful follower of the prophet, may submit to the imperious necessities of defeat: but the command to propagate the Moslem creed by the sword is always obligatory, when it can be made effective. The commands of the prophet may be performed alike, by fraud, or by force."

The natural hatred of the Mussulmen towards the infidels is in just accordance with the precepts of the Koran.

In writing his "Essay on Turks," he was really writing an essay on all Muslims, even if what prompted him was the behavior, at the time of its writing, of the Ottoman Turks. In particular, Adams was concerned with the brutality of the methods used by the Turks in suppressing the Greeks who were fighting for their independence. For the Ottoman Turks could reasonably be taken to represent Islam and Muslims. They had

for centuries possessed the caliphate; they were the leading Muslim power at the time; it was their brutal behavior toward Christians that was most in evidence. And indeed, he makes clear early on that while his essay is about the Turks, they were simply practicing the same Islam, with the same Qur'an, as the Arabs, the Afghans, the Muslims in India, in Central and East Asia.

John Quincy Adams had seen how both the Turks, and the North African pirates, from Tunis, Tripoli, and Algiers, had behaved toward Christians. He had read the Qur'an, understood its contents, realized that the war against all Infidels was not an aberration: "The natural hatred of the Mussulmen towards the infidels is in just accordance with the precepts of the Koran." He had first heard of this from his father's account of the Tripolitanian ambassador, in 1786. Nothing he learned subsequently, through reading or observation, suggested another – kinder, gentler – view of Islam. Hatred, and perpetual war against the Infidels – these Qur'anic injunctions accorded with the dispatches he received from those reporting on the Barbary Pirates, and the Ottoman-ruled Greece and the Balkans. That war could never end, until the final defeat of one side or the other.

Adams had grasped the doctrine of Jihad, even if he never used that word: it signified the struggle, incumbent upon all Muslims, to defeat all Infidels, until Islam everywhere dominated, and Muslims ruled, everywhere: "The precept of the Koran is perpetual war against all who deny that Mahomet is the prophet of God." He had seen how the Barbary Pirates and the Turks had behaved toward Christians. He had understood how the texts and teachings of Islam explained the behavior both of the Barbary Pirates in their attacks on Christian shipping, and the brutal behavior of the Turks in suppressing the Greeks. He knew, having seen it, about the "false and delusive promise of peace" that the Barbary Pirates would offer after defeats, and "submit to the imperious necessities of defeat,"

but were required by their creed to renew warfare whenever it could be “made effective.” The Qur’an required perpetual war until the final victory of Muslims everywhere.

Adams called Islam a “merciless and dissolute dogma.” He understood the “mercilessness” of the actual Muslims, the Turks, then on the warpath against the Greeks. When he spent five years as Minister to Russia, he surely heard from the Russians directly about the brutal treatment of Christians in the Ottoman domains, which is why the Russians demanded, after their first major victory over the Turks in 1774, that they be allowed to act, when they deemed it necessary, as protectors of those Christian communities. He heard, too, of course, about the treatment of the American seaman seized and enslaved by the Barbary pirates. A student of history, he would have been aware of how Muslims, over 1200 years of conquest, had treated those they defeated, often killing their captives. He had read, in the Qur’an, the suggestions as to various ways that Infidels could be mutilated and killed: striking at their necks, cutting off their hands and feet, crucifying them, and so on. One can well imagine how Adams, who read the Christian Bible daily, must have reacted in horror when he first came across such examples of Qur’an-mandated cruelty, as in 5:33:

The only reward of those who make war upon Allah and His messenger and strive after corruption in the land will be that they will be killed or crucified, or have their hands and feet on alternate sides cut off, or will be expelled out of the land. Such will be their degradation in the world, and in the Hereafter theirs will be an awful doom.

As to what he called the “dissolute dogma” of Islam, by this Adams meant that Muhammad had “poisoned the sources of human felicity at the fountain, by degrading the condition of the female sex.” The Muslim view of women as merely sexual objects, who existed to gratify the sexual passion of men, could be seen in Islam’s acceptance of polygamy, and of using

female captives, those who were “slaves that the right hand possesses,” for sexual pleasure, and of conceiving of the Muslim Heaven only in terms of a sexual paradise, where the best Muslims were promised 72 black-eyed virgins, so very different a concept from the Heaven of Christianity. What could be more “dissolute” than the Muslim idea of Heaven as a kind of brothel with dozens of permanently accommodating females for each deserving man?

Adams also grasped the role of religiously-sanctioned deceit or “fraud” that Muslims were allowed to practice both to protect themselves, and to lure their enemies into traps, or even by the making of treaties that could be broken whenever the Muslim side felt strong enough to go to war, never mind what they had promised. The most important Qur’anic verse sanctioning deception of non-Muslims states: “Let believers not take for friends and allies infidels instead of believers. Whoever does this shall have no relationship left with Allah – unless you but guard yourselves against them, taking precautions.” (Quran 3:28; see also 2:173; 2:185; 4:29; 22:78; 40:28.)

Al-Tabari’s (838-923 AD) Tafsir, or Quranic exegesis, is a standard reference. It glosses 3:28 as follows: “Under their [infidels’] authority, fearing for yourselves, behave loyally to them, with your tongue, while harboring inner animosity for them... Allah has forbidden believers from being friendly or on intimate terms with the infidels in place of believers – except when infidels are above them [in authority]. In such a scenario, let them act friendly towards them.”

The Islamic scholar Ibn Kathir (1301-1373) wrote about 3:28: “Whoever at any time or place fears their [infidels’] evil, may protect himself through outward show.”

In support of this, Ibn Kathir quotes two of Muhammad’s companions. Abu Darda said: “Let us smile to the face of some people while our hearts curse them.” Al-Hassan said: “Doing

taqiyya is acceptable till the day of judgment [in perpetuity].”

Adams had almost certainly not read Ibn Kathir or Al-Tabari. But he had understood enough from the Qur’an itself, not just from 3:28 but also from other verses, such as 3:54, where Allah is praised as a master schemer, or deceiver: “And they (the disbelievers) schemed, and Allah schemed (against them): and Allah is the best of schemers.” His “Essay on Turks” makes much of the role fraud played in the spread of Islam.

One can well imagine Adams’s surprise when he first read in the Qur’an that Allah was lauded, as “the best of schemers” – one more example of what, Adams realized, was a kind of Christianity in reverse. The praise in the Qur’an of deception and fraud, the command to wage Jihad, or perpetual warfare “in the path of Allah,” against the Infidels, the description of how to strike terror among Islam’s enemies, the practice of sating one’s lust with plural wives, and captive females used as sex slaves, the Muslim heaven which promised the sensual bliss of 72 dark-eyed virgins – all of this horrified him.

John Quincy Adams did not have to worry about a small army of Muslim apologists ready to attack him for stating home truths about Islam. In his day, there was no CAIR, no Linda Sarsour, no John Esposito to condemn him for “Islamophobia” and to try to lead his likely audience astray. There were no Muslims, and consequently no mosques, offering unwary Infidels the chance to participate in those Ask-A-Muslim exercises in cozy taqiyya and tu-quoque. Adams’s uncompromising description of Islam was confirmed by what Americans knew about Muslim behavior, both from their experience with the Barbary Pirates, and from observing how the Turks – the most powerful Muslims of the time, possessors of the caliphate, who ruled, directly or through suzerains, the Middle East, North Africa, Greece, the Balkans, and much of the Caucasus – treated their Christian subjects. His lifetime of study of history naturally included, among its subjects, how Islam spread, what its texts and

teachings, as conveyed in the Qur'an, revealed about its essence, what was required of the non-Muslims subjugated by Muslim conquerors, what was revealed about Muhammad's character from the reports of his words and deeds. Adams's rereading of the Qur'an to understand the tenets of this faith and the character of its prophet Muhammad, who "by fraud or by force" had conquered so many lands, helped explain, made sense of, the behavior of "the Turks" as they put down, with their wonted brutality, the Greek Christians who had risen up to defy their Turkish Muslim masters.

There is one more thing about John Quincy Adams that deserves notice. He was, by all accounts, a brilliant orator, known as "Old Man Eloquent." That oratorical skill was much in evidence when he argued on behalf of the *Amistad* prisoners before the Supreme Court. But he was also brilliant as a writer, and had he not been, his essay on "the Turks" (that is, on Islam) would not now be so often read, nor have had the impact it has had on those who – not least here, at this site – have been lucky enough to learn of it. From an early age Adams showed himself to be precociously adept at English composition. As with everything he deemed important, he worked and worked at it. Dip into any of the 14,000 pages of his diaries, even the entries he wrote in his early teens, and you will of course find some laconic jottings, but also the rounded periods of a fully formed prose style. In between diplomatic postings, and while he was simultaneously serving in the United States Senate, which would have been task enough for most men, Adams was appointed to the prestigious post of Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard in 1806; he immediately set to work on the lectures he would deliver to his students. We know that he read and studied many writers on rhetoric, including Quintilian, Cicero, Bacon, and George Campbell, all of whom he made use of in the thirty-six lectures he prepared for his Harvard students between 1806 and 1809. When his students heard that he would be leaving Harvard to become United States Minister to Russia, they asked that his lectures be published,

and they were, as "*Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory*." He understood the importance of studying rhetoric, that is the art of persuasion. This was not a mere flourish, but essential to winning and convincing an audience. He ranked it high among his accomplishments. In 1810, Adams wrote in his diary about his *Lectures* that "I shall never, unless by some special favor of Heaven, accomplish any work of higher elevation."

Actually, he did "accomplish" one "work of higher elevation" even than his lectures on rhetoric and oratory. His most important written work, as we now realize, is the one on Islam, the "Essay on Turks," which today amazes many at first reading, and then heartens those who realize they have finally found the American statesman they have been looking for in vain, the one we need most today. And it turns out to be John Quincy Adams who, alone among our presidents, senators, congressmen, cabinet ministers, diplomats (and Adams filled every one of those offices), so perceptively grasped the disturbing sinister essence of Islam.

That same "Essay on Turks" ought to be required reading in courses on American history. Ideally, it ought to be assigned along with both Adams's furious denunciation of how the white settlers and their government were mistreating the Indians (with the case of the Creeks pushed forcibly westward offered in evidence), and with a description of his central role, including his closing argument before the Supreme Court, in the *Amistad* case. For Adams will then be understood as what, in fact, he always was – an implacable defender of human rights. And the chiefest offenders against human rights, then as now, in 1829 and in 2017, were Muslims. Should his "Essay on Turks" become part of the required reading in American history, and even were it to be assigned by a teacher hostile to its contents, Adams's eloquent truth-telling will not be convincingly rebutted, and will, in any case, prove impossible to forget.