



My Country, 'Tis of Thee: My Faith, My Family, Our Future

Keith Ellison

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The first Muslim to be elected to Congress speaks out about what divides Americans—and what can bring us together.

I raised my right hand and placed my left on the Quran, which was being held by my wife and mom. Suddenly I was blinded by a cascade of camera flashes.

Keith Ellison is the first Muslim elected to Congress. In fact, the first nonwhite that Minnesota has ever elected to Congress. That wasn't why he ran, however. Quite simply, he entered politics because he wanted to make a difference—to contribute to the future of his children, his community, and his country.

This memoir, while filled with delightful family anecdotes and Ellison's personal recollections, is far more than that. Ellison speaks from the heart, talking about the ever-changing face of America: his "sweet land of liberty."

In his own family, he sees an illustration of what makes America great. In three generations, his father's family went from slavery to respected professionals. And while being black is a source of pride for the family, they also acknowledge being a "melting pot": Ellison ancestors include a white French-Creole merchant and his African-born slave mistress, a Spaniard, and even a Croatian. And he sees in them freedom of religion and expression. The Ellisons have room to love and respect not just a Muslim but also a Baptist, a couple of Catholics, and even an agnostic.

Ellison talks candidly of himself and his dreams, his conversion to Islam, and how important his faith is to him. He is proud of his political role in pursuing justice for Muslim Americans whose constitutional rights are being imperiled by bigotry and ignorance. He dreams of his daughter growing into an independent, all-American woman who is also Muslim. But he emphasizes how his private beliefs play no part in his politics, because upholding the separation of church and state is fundamental to who he is.

His frank commentary on all that America has the potential to be doesn't pull any punches, because Ellison believes true liberty grows and evolves. Just as our young nation slowly came to realize that we could achieve true liberty only when all people—including the black ones—were free, so we must now acknowledge as equals our new and changing population, no matter their color, country of origin, or creed. Ellison sees a country increasingly polarized by politics and religion, and like Martin Luther King Jr., he has a dream. A true United States of America—undivided by petty hatred and bigotry and kept strong by unity. That's Keith Ellison's dream.

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