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Congressman Criticizes Election of Muslim

By Rachel L. Swarns

WASHINGTON — In a letter sent to hundreds of voters this month, Representative Virgil H. Goode Jr., Republican of Virginia, warned that the recent election of the first Muslim to Congress posed a serious threat to the nation's traditional values.

Mr. Goode was referring to Keith Ellison, the Minnesota Democrat and criminal defense lawyer who converted to Islam as a college student and was elected to the House in November. Mr. Ellison's plan to use the Koran during his private swearing-in ceremony in January had outraged some Virginia voters, prompting Mr. Goode to issue a written response to them, a spokesman for Mr. Goode said.

In his letter, which was dated December 5, Mr. Goode said that Americans needed to "wake up" or else there would "likely be many more Muslims elected to office and demanding the use of the Koran."

"I fear that in the next century we will have many more Muslims in the United States if we do not adopt the strict immigration policies that I believe are necessary to preserve the values and beliefs traditional to the United States of America and to prevent our resources from being swamped," said Mr. Goode, who vowed to use the Bible when taking his own oath of office. Mr. Goode declined Wednesday to comment on his letter, which quickly stirred a furor among some Congressional Democrats and Muslim Americans, who accused him of bigotry and intolerance.

They noted that the Constitution specifically bars any religious screening of members of Congress and that the actual swearing in of those lawmakers occurs without any religious texts. The use of the Bible or Koran occurs only in private ceremonial events that take place after lawmakers have officially sworn to uphold the Constitution.

Mr. Ellison dismissed Mr. Goode's comments, saying they seemed ill informed about his personal origins as well as about Constitutional protections of religious freedom. "I'm not an immigrant," added Mr. Ellison, who traces his American ancestors back to 1742. "I'm an African-American."

Since the November election, Mr. Ellison said, he has received hostile phone calls and e-mail messages along with some death threats. But in an interview on Wednesday, he emphasized that members of Congress and ordinary citizens had been overwhelmingly supportive and said he was focusing on setting up his Congressional office, getting phone lines hooked up and staff members hired, not on negative comments.

"I'm not a religious scholar, I'm a politician, and I do what politicians do, which is hopefully pass legislation to help the nation," said Mr. Ellison, who said he planned to

focus on secular issues like increasing the federal minimum wage and getting health insurance for the uninsured.

“I’m looking forward to making friends with Representative Goode, or at least getting to know him,” Mr. Ellison said, speaking by telephone from Minneapolis. “I want to let him know that there’s nothing to fear. The fact that there are many different faiths, many different colors and many different cultures in America is a great strength.”

In Washington, Brendan Daly, a spokesman for the incoming House speaker, Nancy Pelosi of California, called Mr. Goode’s letter “offensive.” Corey Saylor, legislative director for the Council on American-Islamic Relations, criticized what he described as Mr. Goode’s “message of intolerance.” Representative Bill Pascrell Jr., Democrat of New Jersey, urged Mr. Goode to reach out to Muslims in Virginia and learn “to dispel misconceptions instead of promoting them.”

“Keith Ellison serves as a great example of Muslim Americans in our nation, and he does not have to answer to you, to me or anyone else in regards to questions about his faith,” said Mr. Pascrell, whose district includes many Arab-Americans.

The fracas over Mr. Ellison’s decision to use the Koran during his personal swearing-in ceremony began last month when Dennis Prager, a conservative columnist and radio host, condemned the decision as one that would undermine American civilization.

“Ellison’s doing so will embolden Islamic extremists and make new ones, as Islamists, rightly or wrongly, see the first sign of the realization of their greatest goal—the Islamicization of America,” said Mr. Prager, who said the Bible was the only relevant religious text in the United States. “If you are incapable of taking an oath on that book, don’t serve in Congress,” Mr. Prager said.

In his letter, Mr. Goode echoed that view, saying that he did not “subscribe to using the Koran in any way.” He also called for ending illegal immigration and reducing legal immigration.

Linwood Duncan, a spokesman for Mr. Goode, said the Virginia lawmaker had no intention of backing down, despite the furor.

“He stands by the letter,” Mr. Duncan said. “He has no intention of apologizing.”