

OBAMA IN EGYPT: APPEALING TO ISLAM

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Obama breaks ranks with international statesmanship and global institutional politics and appeals to personal ethics in the name of a common humanity. That's why he interests ordinary people.

Delivered to a full house at Cairo University on the 4th of June 2009, Barack Obama's much heralded address to the Muslim world received the kind of global exposure that was matched only by his inaugural speech. Indeed it is difficult to think of any other occasion when the words of an American president have received such close attention around the world. The only precedent that comes to mind is John F. Kennedy's famous speech of June 26th, 1963, in Berlin, given at the height of the Cold War on the very threshold of the Soviet Union. And if Kennedy had mispronounced the famous phrase "*ich bin ein berliner*", which in other contexts might also mean "I am a jelly doughnut", Obama, too, mispronounced now common words like "*hijab*" or headscarf, thus belying his claims of familiarity with Islam. Like Berlin in its day, Cairo in ours is a city divided between powerful rivals, a repressive government enjoying Western support set against a religious opposition with worldwide connections. Also like Berlin



Obama Address: June 4, 2009, Grand Hall of Cairo University
Photo: Saul Loeb/AFP /Getty Images

it stands on the edge of a great precipice between planetary rivals that Obama identified by the names Islam and America. But here the similarity ends, for while Kennedy's words were about the hemispheric struggle between a pair of superpowers, his successor spoke about the hostility of two very different actors that are by no means equivalents. How can a global religion like Islam, lacking any representative authority or institution, be related to a country like the United States, which operates within the framework of international politics?

I would like to suggest that by forcing these incommensurable entities into a conversation, President Obama broke with the language of institutional politics altogether to conceive of global interactions among actors of many different and even indeterminate kinds. For if his invocations of dialogue and respect were treated by many in the press as an exercise in public relations, their massive audience tells us that it was precisely such a move away from the grammar of international politics that men and women around the world found interesting. But what after all was so novel about the speech? Certainly not the oft-repeated stereotypes about the en-

twined histories of "Abrahamic religions", the tolerance of Muslim Spain or the Arab transmission of Greek learning to Christian Europe. Radical instead was Obama's effort to be true to the following statement made early on in his speech: "I am convinced that in order to move forward, we must say openly to each other the things we hold in our hearts, and that too often are said only behind closed doors". With this sentence the President not only opened the door to a remarkable confession of America's history of wrongful deeds in the Muslim world, he also abandoned the circumscribed categories of statesmanship to deal with the kind of popular prejudices and theories that proliferate in blogs, web forums, talk radio and everyday conversations.

appealing to Islam in a way that brought the limits of conventional politics to light

At the same time, therefore, as he spoke about laying to rest the "crude stereotypes" that some Americans and Muslims have of one another, Barack Obama took much greater ones on board. Such for example was the anthropomorphic conception of Islam as one kind of political agent that could be set against the West as another. However much the President tried to qualify this view by rejecting notions like that of a clash of civilizations, his whole speech depended upon the possibility of its truth. And since so many people take these conceptions seriously, Obama's engagement with them cannot be dismissed as ignorant, particularly in light of the fact that he departed from the language and therefore the criteria of conventional politics by entertaining them. After all "Islam" does not fit into the structure of international politics because in its

current incarnation, as a threat animating terrorists who are dedicated to an undefined global cause, it cannot be confined to states or even would-be states, which happen to be the only legitimate actors in the world's political order as presently constituted. Indeed Islam is seen as a threat today precisely because the terrorists who use its name are not for the most part likely to take over states or even to be supported by them.

Yet by appealing to Islam in a way that brought the limits of conventional politics to light, Barack Obama was only following the lead of statesmen who had in the past done much the same. From Napoleon to Kaiser Wilhelm II, to say nothing of Ronald Reagan, European and American heads of state have quite regularly appealed to Islam in order to bring about world-historical changes that moved outside the bounds of normative politics. Such at least was the fantasy that allowed the Emperor of All the French to spread rumours about his conversion to Islam while conquering Egypt, or the German Emperor to rely upon similar stories while attempting to rouse an anti-British jihad during the First World War. And then of course there was the American president who did in fact promote a jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan by encouraging Muslims from around the world to support it. Naturally these projects can all be seen as attempts to use Muslim passions for the purposes of *realpolitik*, though I would argue that the fantasy underlying them had long outstripped such aims, depending as it did on the vision of a world-wide uprising motivated by a specifically religious sensibility, one that Christianity could no longer provide. Whatever accounts for the relative absence of Christian movements in the West, it is certain that Islam has for some time now provided an important model for imagining the lim-



Egyptian honor guards ride alongside U.S. President Barack Obama convoy
Photo: Flickr/Free Mass/AP Photo/Amr Nabil

its of international politics there.

Obama's appeal to Islam, however, unlike that of his predecessors, was not meant to encourage a holy war in order to go beyond the limits of conventional politics. Its function was in fact more analytical than political or even rhetorical in character. For once he had interrupted the institutional narrative of everyday statecraft by pairing the United States with Islam, the President was able to acknowledge the impossibility of such a politics in the global arena from which the religion of Muhammad takes its meaning. As a supposedly planetary actor, after all, Islam could not be confined to any particular place or interest, thus forcing Obama to speak of any engagement with it only in the terms of a common humanity. From here he went on to speak about other issues, including pandemics, financial crises and atomic war that also affected the whole of the human race and so could not be engaged in the name of any political interest but only that of humanity itself: "This is a difficult responsibility to embrace. For human history has often been a record of nations and

tribes – and yes, religions – subjugating one another to serve their own interests. Yet in this new age, such attitudes are self-defeating. Given our interdependence, any world order that elevates one nation or group of people over another will inevitably fail."

As if to mitigate the radical implications of this statement, the President smuggled political interest in by the back door, appealing for Americans and Muslims to deal with each other on the basis of "mutual interest and mutual respect". But in doing so he fell in with the reasoning, down to their very words, of al-Qaeda's founders, who routinely speak of mankind's interdependence and the consequent impossibility of interest-driven politics, recommending instead an ethics of sacrifice in which global problems are dealt with precisely by mutual interest and respect. And indeed Barack Obama's speech marks the first time that the United States has engaged al-Qaeda in a conversation, not simply in crossing any number of red lines by acknowledging American mistakes in places like Iraq or Iran, but more importantly by putting aside the principles of statecraft to invoke the world outside, all made possible by the President's reference to Islam as a global agent. Despite the language of partnership and mutual benefit, then, at issue in the speech was the decay of political realism in the face of humanity as a new kind of interconnected reality, one threatened by our actions in a way that was never before possible. Unlike his immediate predecessor, George W. Bush, who spoke the language of traditional politics while rejecting a number of its accepted practices having to do with torture, indefinite detention and the like, Obama has restored these practices but speaks a language different from theirs, as if realizing that the authority of such a politics can never be reinstated.

While it is clear that “Islam” is not a category amenable to the tradition of political realism, the absence of a non-realist political order means that Obama, like his alter ego Osama bin Laden, is only able to deploy it by drawing upon his own background and offering himself up as the model of a global leader. So the well known and even trite references to his parents, race, childhood and the like, quite unlike the attitude of previous American presidents, who had aimed for a kind of generic universality. Yet the naming of his particularity by no means prevents Barack Obama from laying claim to the universal, because exactly these particularities are what connect him to the rest of the globe: as a product of mixture and migration, a Christian with a Muslim family background, etc. Whereas presidents in the past had seen their universality in national terms, Obama situates his within a global arena. And in fact the President does nothing more than represent in his person the planetary influence that his country exercises. If Kenyans, for example, claim Obama as if he were their representative in America, it is because they realize how much of their destiny is determined by that country. So with Obama’s election many feel as if they have somehow voted someone to power in the state that decides their future. And by representing this obscure vision of a global democracy, in which people from everywhere can claim to be represented by an American president, Barack Obama has transformed the language of international politics more than Kennedy had done as his country’s first Irish and Catholic head of state. For with him the old feminist slogan of “the personal is the political” has moved from the particularity of gender and race to a planetary universality, but only by leaving behind the lexicon of states, institutions and inter-

ests to adopt the language of the bazaar in which stereotypes serve as the chief actors of a global politics.

In the bazaars of the Middle East as much as in that of the Internet, Islam and the West it has brought to life function as the agents of a global politics that possesses as yet no institutional space of its own. Like Frankenstein’s monster, these entities are made up from historically recognizable pieces, but neither has a world to call its own. Yet it is this that makes them truly global, as Obama himself pointed out by pairing religious extremism with the dangers of pandemics, nuclear proliferation and, he might also have added as Osama bin Laden often does, climate change. By speaking in Cairo of America’s seven million Muslims, for example, the President was pointing out that Islam was a domestic as much as an international fact and had therefore no geographical centre, something that he emphasized again when mentioning widely dispersed countries like Indonesia, Egypt, Morocco, Iraq Afghanistan and Pakistan in the same breath. Moreover by stressing the higher than average economic and educational status of Muslims in the United States, Barack Obama also made it evident that this minority could on no account be viewed as posing a problem for the state on old-fashioned socio-economic grounds. In such ways as this Islam has managed to undo the inherited categories of American as much as international politics, since it refuses to be confined to the discourse of immigration, discrimination and deprivation, not least because Muslims in the US include a large proportion of local converts, Black and White, as much as immigrants from every part of the world.

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Whether it is the struggle with radical Islam that is at issue, or that against global warming and atomic war, the international order’s inability to deal with such threats is both highlighted and hidden by the President of the United States, who can only speak to these issues in his personal capacity, which is to say as the product of a mixed marriage, the son of an African immigrant with a childhood spent in Indonesia, etc. And despite the entirely predictable statements of policy scattered in his Cairo speech, crumbs eagerly swept up by the press as providing the only recognizably “political” elements in an address that was otherwise puzzling in the inordinate length of its rhetorical flourishes, Obama’s only solution to these problems is also purely personal in nature. But this is where he is truly radical, as the following quotation on abjuring violence demonstrates: “Resistance through violence and killing is wrong and does not succeed. For centuries, black people in America suffered the lash of the whip as slaves and the humiliation of segregation. But it was not violence that won full and equal rights. It was a peaceful and determined insistence upon the ideals at the centre of America’s founding. This same story can be told by people from South Africa to South Asia; from Eastern Europe to Indonesia. It’s a story with a simple truth: violence is a dead end. It is a sign of neither courage nor power to shoot rockets at sleeping children, or to blow up old women on a bus. That is not how moral authority is claimed; that is how it is surrendered”.

Invoking the great movements against colonialism, segregation and apartheid led by Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela, as well as the colour revolutions of Eastern Europe and the rejection of dictatorship in South-East Asia, the President not only re-drew the map of our political geography, by putting together Asian, African, American and European struggles, he also did so by foregoing the institutional jargon of our political tradition. For in all these cases non-violence meant breaking the law while being willing to take the consequences in acts of sacrifice, suffering and martyrdom. Furthermore non-violence here was conceived of in purely moral and individual terms, and precisely not political ones having to do with states. Indeed such movements have always appealed to ordinary people rather than institutions. As among its great spokesmen in the past, this kind of non-violence was also meant to foster a certain kind of moral subject instead of simply achieving some predetermined goal. And in all these ways it serves as the exact obverse of Osama bin Laden's theory of violent sacrifice and martyrdom, addressing and refuting it on its own terms. This the Bush administration had never been able to do because, despite its rhetoric of ideological purity, it was deeply mired in the language of instrumental action and social engineering that has come to constitute the substance of *realpolitik* in a way that was previously true only of Soviet communism. But this is not the first time that a movement, neo-conservatism in this case, has ended up hijacked by the very opponent it has fought for so long.

When Barack Obama ended his speech saying that he had come to Cairo because he had faith in other people, he was doing nothing more than ac-

knowledging the limits of political realism in the global arena where we all live. Since these limits were brought to light by Islamic militancy as a planetary movement divested of traditional institutional forms, the President could only address them by speaking from a standpoint that was set, as it were, outside his own office; thus the constant references to his race and background as entirely non-political factors. But by turning in the end to the language of faith, Obama proved himself to be the most Christian of American presidents, certainly more faithful to the possibility of human virtue than George W. Bush with all his religious supporters. Is it possible, then, that the appeal to Islam is at the same time a call to Christianity in the new world that confronts us today – the planetary dimension of whose problems have rendered so much of our interest-based politics obsolete?