

Reinforcing presumed religious identities: where are women and secularists of Muslim countries in Obama's speech in Cairo ?

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It is beyond doubt that many people around the world, of various political opinions and creeds, will feel relieved after the discourse the President of the USA delivered in Cairo today. It is apparently a new voice, a voice of peace, quite far from Bush's clash of civilisations. But is it so?

I presume that political commentators will point at the fact that Obama equates violence on the side of occupied Palestinians to violence on the side of Israeli colonizers, or that he has not abandoned the idea that the USA should tell the world how to behave and fight for their rights, or that the Israel-Palestinian conflict is reduced to a religious conflict, or that he still justifies the war in Afghanistan, etc...

All those are important issues that need to be challenged.

However, what affects me most, as an Algerian secularist, is that Obama has not done away with the idea of homogeneous civilisations that was at the heart of the theory of the 'clash of civilisations'. Moreover, his very American idea of civilisation is that it can be equated to religion. He persistently opposes 'Islam and the West' (as two entities- civilisations), 'America and Islam' (a country vs a religion); he claims that 'America is not at war with Islam' (a country vs a religion).

In short 'the West' is composed of countries, while 'Islam' is not. Old Jomo Kenyatta used to say of British colonizers: 'when they came, we had the land, they had the Bible; now we have the Bible, they have the land'. Obama's discourse confirms it: religion is still good enough for us to have, or to be defined by. His concluding compilation of monotheist religious wisdom sounds as if it were the only language that we, barbarians, can understand.

These shortcomings have adverse effects on us, citizens of countries where Islam is the predominant and often the state religion.

First of all, Obama's discourse is addressed to 'Islam', as if an idea, a concept, a belief, could hear him. As if those were not necessarily mediated by the people who hold these views, ideas, concepts or beliefs. As Soheib Bencheikh, former Great Mufti of Marseilles, now Director of the Institute of High Islamic Studies in Marseilles, used to say: 'I have never seen a Qur'an walking in the street'...

Can we imagine for one minute that Obama would address himself to 'Christianity' or to 'Buddhism'? No, he would talk to Christians or Buddhists... to real people, keeping in mind all their differences.

Obama is essentializing Islam, ignoring the large differences that exist among Muslim believers

themselves, in terms of religious schools of thought and interpretations, cultural differences and political opinions. These differences indeed make it totally irrelevant to speak about 'Islam' in such a totalizing way. Obama would not dare essentialize, for instance, Christianity in such a way, ignoring the huge gap between Opus Dei and liberation theology...

Unfortunately, this essentializing Islam feeds into the plans of Muslim fundamentalists whose permanent claim is that there is one single Islam - their version of it -, one homogeneous Muslim world, and subsequently one single Islamic law that needs to be respected by all in the name of religious rights. Any study of the laws in 'Muslim' countries show that these laws are pretty different from one country to the other, deriving not just from different interpretations of religion, but also from the various cultures in which Islam has been spreading on all continents, and that these supposedly Muslim laws reflect as well historical and political factors including colonial sources [1] - obviously not divine.

This is the first adverse consequence of Obama's essentializing Islam and homogeneizing Muslims: as much as he may criticize fundamentalists - which he calls 'a minority of extremists' -, he is using their language and their concepts. This is unlikely to help the cause of anti fundamentalists forces in Muslim countries.

It follows suite that Obama talks to religions, not to citizens, not to nations or countries. He assumes that anyone has to have a religion, overlooking the fact that in many instances, people are forced into religious identities. In more and more 'Muslim' countries, citizens are forced into religious practice [2], and pay dissent with their freedom and sometimes with their lives. It is a big blow to them, to their human rights, to freedom of thought and freedom of expression, that the President of the USA publicly comforts the views that citizens of countries where Islam is the main religion are automatically Muslims (unless they belong to religious minority).

Regardless of the fact that one is a believer or not, citizens may choose not to have religion as the main marker of their identity. For instance to give priority or prominence to their identity as citizens. Many citizens of 'Muslim' countries want to leave religion in its place and delink it from politics. They support secularism and secular laws, i.e. laws democratically voted by the people, changeable by the will and vote of the people; they oppose unchangeable, a-historical, supposedly divine laws, as a process that is alien to democracy. They oppose the political power of clerics.

Obama is claiming to defend democracy, democratic processes, and human rights? How can this fit with addressing whole nations through their supposed, hence imposed, religious identities?

Where is the place for secularists in Obama's discourse? For their democratic right to vote laws rather than be imposed laws in the name of God? For their human right to believe or not to believe, to practice or not to practice? They simply do not exist. They are ignored. They are made invisible. They are made 'Muslims' . Not just by our oppressive undemocratic governments - by Obama too... And when he talks of his own fellow citizens, these '7 million American Muslims', did he ask them what their faith was or is he assuming faith on geographical origin?

In this religious straight jacket, women's rights are limited to their right to education - and Obama distances himself from arrogant westerners by making it clear that women's covering is not seen by him as an obstacle to their emancipation. Especially, if it is 'their choice'... Meanwhile, Iran is next door, with its morality police that jails women whose hair slips out of the said-covering, in the name of religious laws... And what about Afghanistan or Algeria where women were abducted, tortured, raped, mutilated, burnt alive, killed for not covering [3] ?

At no point does he raise the issue of who defines culture, who defines religion, who speaks for 'the

Muslims' - and why could not it be defined by individual women themselves - without clerics, without morality police, without self appointed, old, conservative, male, religious leaders - if their fundamental human rights were to be respected. Obviously, Obama trades women's human rights for political and economic alliances with 'Islam'... 'Islam' definitely owns oil, among other things.

No, this discourse is not such a change for an American President: Obama remains within the boundaries of clashing civilisations- religions. How can this save us from the global rise of religious fundamentalism, which this discourse was supposed to counter? He claims that ' as long as our relationship is defined by differences, this will empower those who sow hatred.../... promote conflict...' , but the only thing he finds we have in common is ' to love our families, our communities, our God'... Muslim fundamentalists will not discown such a program.

In God we trust....

Footnotes

[1] For instance, from 1962 to 1976, the source for Algerian laws on reproductive rights was the 1920 French law; or, in 1947, the source for Pakistani law on inheritance was the Victorian law that the UK itself had already done way with.

[2] One Malaysian state made daily prayers compulsory; Algerian courts condemned to prison non fasting citizens in 2008; Iranian courts still jail women for 'unislamic behavior'.

[3] Shadow Report on Algeria. wluml.org