

# Obama and Islam: A Tale of Three Speeches

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By **Peter Berkowitz** - September 23, 2014

Speeches -- even or especially when they are intended to obscure the truth -- reveal something of the convictions of the speech giver and clarify his opinions about the character of his audience. So it was with President Obama's special address to the nation from the White House on Sept. 10, announcing military operations to "degrade and ultimately destroy" the savage jihadists seeking to reestablish a caliphate in Iraq and Syria.

At the very moment he was summoning the nation's support for the most recent battle in the long war Islamism has waged against the United States and her allies, the president insulted the people's intelligence and demonstrated disdain for our capacity for self-government.

Presuming to understand Islam better than those who are undertaking jihad in its name, Obama declared that "ISIL is not 'Islamic.'" The reason he gave for this remarkable assertion is that "No religion condones the killing of innocents, and the vast majority of ISIL's victims have been Muslim."

The president's reasoning is either tautological or false. It is tautological if the president means no religion condones the killing of individuals -- whether of the same or another religion -- *it regards* as innocent. It is false if the president meant that no religion condones killing individuals whom *our* morality -- the morality that underlies liberal democracy -- regards as innocent.

Liberal democracies draw a sharp distinction, for example, between combatants -- men and women who serve in the armed forces -- and noncombatants. Many jihadists, however, regard all citizens of Western liberal democracies, whether or not they wear military uniforms and take up arms, as enemies of Islam and therefore fair game for maiming and killing. For support the jihadists can cite an impressive array of fatwas, or legal rulings of Islamic jurists.

Moreover, contrary to President Obama's assertion, the fact that the vast majority of ISIL's victims have been Muslims proves nothing about ISIL's Muslim credentials, just as the slaying of Protestants by Catholics and Catholics by Protestants during the 17th century European wars of religion did not alter that the combatants who bathed the continent in blood were Christians. Indeed, if the killing of Muslims established that one did not really practice Islam, it would follow that the large swaths of Sunnis and Shias who have waged religious war against each other for more than a millennium and a half do not qualify as Muslims.

What then caused the president to speak so foolishly?

One possibility is that Obama doesn't take religion seriously. We know, however, that can't be right because of the acclaimed speech on the complexities of race and religion that he gave in March 2008 as he battled Hillary Clinton for their party's presidential nomination.

After it had been revealed that the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, the spiritual leader of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago (which Obama regularly attended for two decades), had repeatedly voiced vehement contempt for America and its promise of freedom and equality, then-Sen. Obama faced the delicate task of condemning Wright's most egregious opinions while showing sympathy for the circumstances that generated them and admiration for the man who uttered them.

Obama rose to the occasion. In a speech at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, he spoke eloquently of the ambiguities of the black experience in America; of predominantly black churches' ministry to the full range of black Americans' material and spiritual needs; and of his own Christian faith being nurtured by Wright. Trinity United, Obama acknowledged, had many faces. It encompassed "in full the kindness and cruelty, the fierce intelligence and the shocking ignorance, the struggles and successes, the love and, yes, the bitterness and bias that make up the black experience in America."

In simultaneously vindicating and distancing himself from Trinity United, Obama made a point of explicitly rejecting Wright's vulgar contention that "the conflicts in the Middle East" are "rooted primarily in the actions of stalwart allies like Israel." Rather, argued Obama, much of the violence engulfing the Middle East arose "from the perverse and hateful ideologies of radical Islam."

His 2008 speech indicates that Obama takes seriously the capacity of religion to uplift human beings, the complexities of actual religious life, and the dangers posed by radical Islam. A second explanation of his surreal assertion that ISIL is not Islamic is therefore necessary. Perhaps he doesn't really take Islam seriously.

We know that can't be so because only 15 months after his Philadelphia speech and less than half a year after his inauguration, Obama delivered a much-ballyhooed speech in Cairo. The speech was not addressed to Egyptians or even to Arab nations but to the Muslim world as whole. Although it does not contain even a single mention of "jihad," "Islamists," or "radical Islam," Obama's Cairo speech does recognize, up to a point, Islam's internal struggles and certain gaps between Western ways and the ways of many who practice Islam.

In reaching out in a spirit of conciliation to the Muslim world, Obama understandably highlighted the contributions Islam has made to civilization. Less understandably, he primarily blamed the tensions between the United States and Muslim world on the West: colonialism, the Cold War, modernization, and globalization.

These tensions, Obama observed, have been exploited by a small number of "extremists." While America would pursue those who "engage in violence against civilians," it would never, the president emphatically stated, make war on Islam.

But in making the valid distinction five years ago between Islam and Muslim extremists, the president committed the same error that he made two weeks ago at the White House. America stands with true Muslims against false Muslims, the president averred in Cairo, "because we reject the same thing that people of all faiths reject: the killing of innocent men, women, and children." As if the jihadists believe that those whom they decry as heretics, infidels, and apostates are innocent.

In Cairo, the president also recognized that reality is more complicated. He rightly called for greater democracy, tolerance, and protection of women's rights in the Muslim world. His gently phrased admonitions both suggested that Islam harbors tendencies that conflict with the principles of liberal democracy and affirmed that the Islamic tradition has moral resources that can be brought to bear to condemn the violence perpetrated by Islamists and embrace the principles of liberal democracy.

But does the president believe his own admonitions? Why, five years after the Cairo speech, with the Middle East from Libya to Iran rocked by a surging Islamism, and with an Islamist threat mounting in Europe, the United States, and Australia (last Thursday, Australian counterterrorism forces detained 15 suspects in connection to an alleged ISIL plot to commit public beheadings in Sydney and Brisbane) does he insist on sugarcoating matters?

A third possibility to explain the president's bizarre insistence that Muslim extremists are not Muslim is that while he takes religion and Islam seriously, he doesn't take seriously his responsibility to treat the American people like adults and inform us about the true nature of the threats we face.

A president who was determined to lead the people rather than coddle them would, for example, not hide the warrior teachings that are inscribed in Islam. He would not whitewash the Islamic teaching that divides the world into "the house of peace" (Dar al-Islam), which is under the rule of Islam, and "the house of war" (Dar al-Harb), which comprises the rest of the world. He would not obscure the comprehensive character of Islamic religious law, or Sharia, which seeks to regulate all aspects of life and demands to be realized in politics. He would not conceal the Islamic principle that where Islam once ruled it must always rule -- a principle that, among other things, converts Israel into an irreparably illegitimate country and renders all Israelis, including noncombatant women and children, legitimate targets. And, accordingly, he would not declare that ISIL is not Islamic.

To be sure, Islam puts forward qualifications to, and alternative interpretations of, all of these dangerous doctrines. But the president, apparently, prefers we believe that the one and only true Islam preaches peace exactly as we in the West understand it.

That is a multicultural fairy tale.

The president has been right in his speeches to stress that America respects the achievements of Islam, seeks to live in peace with peace-loving Muslims, and is devoted to protecting the rights of Muslim Americans no less vigorously than the rights of all other Americans.

But the president should also show respect for the American people and their capacity for self-government by accurately explaining the Islamist threat. Perhaps the exigencies of realpolitik make it difficult for a U.S. president to state clearly that jihadists take their cue from Islamic authorities and that radical Islam is a radicalization of Islam. Certainly, President Obama's predecessor didn't do this, either. By failing to find the wherewithal to address Americans like grown-ups about the war the Islamists are waging against us and our allies, the leader of the free world hinders our capacity to prevail.

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