

Obama Contextualizing Religion and History

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Abstract

In the wake of the burning alive of the Jordanian Air Force Pilot by the ISIS, the US President Barak Obama delivered a speech in the Prayer Breakfast Party where he compared the ISIS gruesome murders to the Spanish Inquisition, the Crusades and the slavery in the US. He criticized terrorism being perpetrated in the name of religion. This study seeks to address the power, and rather danger, of contextualizing religion and history as an 'excuse-provision mechanism.'

Keywords: Obama speeches; contextualization; frame semantics; religious discourse; Islamic discourse

1. Introduction

"It is like comparing oranges to apples!""That thing happened some 920 years ago!"These are some of the readers' comments on the published articles about Mr. Obama's speech in the National Prayer Breakfast on February 5, 2015, where he compared the ISIS murders to the medieval Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition and the slavery in the US. His speech was overshadowed by the videotaped immolation of the Jordanian Air Force Lt. Pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh by the ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Sham/Syria). Religion is often invoked in conflicts and disputes around the globe, although sometimes erroneously (The Economist 2015, 11). The contextualization of religion and history is not uncommon in the Islamic discourse as well. The preacher/khatib of a Friday speech/khuba in Irbid, Jordan, commented on the death of the Jordanian pilot and invoked the story of Saladin's recovery of Jerusalem (Personal communication; February 6, 2015). After taking over Jerusalem, according to the preacher, Saladin was in full control of the Holy City and its residents, who were mainly Christian. "What did he do to them? Did he burn them? **Did he kill them? No. he set them free.**" (Boldface added to emphasize the intertextuality with the killing of the Jordanian pilot). As is often emphasized by scholars and media campaigners, terrorism can never be condoned by any religion, literally phrased in Arabic as 'Terrorism has no religion'(al'irhab la deenalah). It could be practiced by any ethnic or religious group (Abu Matar 2011). "Islam is innocent of you, Daesh (ISIS)" is also a slogan written on the Jordanian plane missiles sent to bombard the ISIS after the murder of the Jordanian pilot (Hawkins 2015). In a speech at the National Prayer Breakfast, the US President Obama warned of getting on high horses when dealing with Islamic extremism. In the name of Christ, according to Obama, so many atrocities were practiced throughout history such as the medieval Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition and the slavery in the US.He pointed out that religion is not supposed to be utilized to brutalize other people.

The present study seeks to provide a critical analysis of Obama's speech with reference to the contextualization strategy whereby an earlier story or event is being invoked and associated with a current incident. Historical and discursal parallels have been drawn utilizing notions like frame semantics (Fillmore 2006; Fillmore, 2010: 163).Obama's speech was delivered on Thursday, February 5, 2015, less than 48 hours after the release of the videotape of the immolation of the Jordanian Air Force pilot by ISIS. The report about Obama's speech appeared on Thursday night on a few websites, two of which were (www.dailymail.co.uk) and (www.hotair.com).

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A few hundred of the readers' comments on the reports about Obama's speech appeared on the two web sites. The present study is an analysis of Obama's speech as quoted and commented on in the two websites by the reporters, David Martosko and Noah Rothman. Some of the reader's comments will be analyzed in the discussion section.

2. Text

Obama acknowledged that the world's chief terror threat comes from people who "profess to stand up for Islam but instead betray it." Commenting on ISIS terror, he maintained that "professions of faith have been used both as an instrument of great good, but also twisted and misused in the name of evil." He further commented on how faith is often "twisted and distorted, used as a wedge, or worse, sometimes used as a weapon." He added: "Lest we get on our high horse and think this is unique to some other place ... Remember that during the Crusades and the Inquisition, people committed terrible deeds in the name of Christ ... In our home country, slavery and Jim Crow all too often was justified in the name of Christ ... No God condones terror" (Martosko2015).

3. Context

On Thursday, February 5, 2015, Obama delivered a speech as he appeared at the National Prayer Breakfast, an annual prayer event attended by 3600 people from 50 states and 130 countries. On Tuesday evening, February 3, 2015, an online video appeared showing the burning alive of the Jordanian Air Force Lt. Pilot Muath Al-Kasasbeh by the ISIS. That incident was the most shocking in a series of gruesome executions videotaped and released online. The dramatic rise and the sweeping victories of ISIS in Iraq and Syria in less than two years' time left so many questions unanswered at the political and religious fronts. Among these questions are the involvement of religion in politics and the ability of the religious scripture to mobilize people and give justification for the perpetration of crimes in the name of religion. Among the reasons for the rise of ISIS is the instability in the Middle East in general and Iraq and Syria in specific as a result of the Arab Spring, the wave of social protests that started in December 2010 (see Schwartz, 2015: 3; Rifaat, 2014: 5-16).

It is also necessary to refer to the historical events that Obama invoked, particularly the Crusades and the Spanish Inquisition because of their relevance to the issue of religion and the East-West relationship. The Crusade Campaigns against the Muslim World in the medieval era were inspired by religious sentiments on both sides of the conflict. The Christian motivation was the liberation of the Holy Land from the infidels, as the Muslims used to be described. The recovery of the Muslim territories and particularly the holy shrines (Jerusalem and Al-Aqsa Mosque) by Saladin was also imbued with Islamic religious sentiments. In the Muslim collective unconsciousness, the image of the discrepancy between the occupation of Jerusalem and its later recovery always looms. Whereas the Crusaders massacred more than 70 thousand Muslims upon capturing Jerusalem, Saladin spared the Christians eighty-eight years later when he recovered the city and allowed them to leave in peace (Besant and Palmer, 1871: 355-361). The same theme was invoked in the movie *Kingdom of Heaven* (Scott 2005; director) in the final conversation between Saladin (played by Ghassan Massoud) and Balian of Ibelin, the defender of Jerusalem (played by Orlando Bloom). By referring to the Crusades, Obama hit more than one raw nerve for both the Muslims and the Europeans, the least of which were the psychological implications of the campaigns on the collective unconsciousness of a European civilization that had just been recovering from the crude conditions of the dark Middle Ages (For a perceptive account of this point, see Muhammd Asad, 1934: 51-52; Asad was a Jewish Austro-Hungarian journalist who converted to Islam in the early 20th century). Moreover, enmity against the medieval Muslim World helped the European leaders create a sense of unity and identity among all Europeans (Griffel2015, 30). The Spanish Inquisition is often invoked in the Islamic discourse (preaching, khutbas, textbooks) to illustrate on the medieval European/Christian intolerance. It was the late fifteenth century Spanish law which forced the Jews and the Muslims to convert to Catholicism or otherwise be expelled. It was an era that was characterized by intransigence and persecution (Perez, 2004: 1).

Finally, Obama's speech was overshadowed by the murderous attacks against the French Charlie Hebdo magazine staff on January 7, 2015. The magazine was renowned for its sarcastic cartoons directed to political and religious symbols. One of these symbols was Prophet Muhammad. Therefore, the attacks were religiously inspired, based on some of the Muslim scholars' legal decrees (*fatwas*), drawn from jurisprudence laws (*ahkamfihiyya*). Some of the preachers (*khatibs/imams*) who embarked on the Charlie Hebdo murders cited a few incidents in the history of Islam where Prophet Muhammad was insulted by his opponents but abstained from reacting violently (Khan, 2015; Hathout, 2015). Likewise, the videotaped immolation of the captured pilot was also seen as a violation of Islamic doctrines.

One of the scholars who were cited in the videotape was Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328), a medieval Muslim scholar who was said to have authorized the burning of the apostates in special cases as acts of retribution and vengeance (Hoover, 2015; Blank, 2015). Hussein Halawa (2015), a contemporary scholar and the chairman of the Irish Council of Imams, provides a counterargument to refute this fatwa/interpretation. He believes that this fatwa has been blown out of proportion. He cited the opinions of the scholars who were contemporaneous with Ibn Taymiyya and who opposed his fatwa and considered it unacceptable for Muslims to punish by immolation.

4. Discussion

Let us start with a very delicate and profound issue that is tackled by the two sites, dailymail.co.uk and hotair.com. David Martosko, the US political editor in the Daily Mail, concedes that "Obama FINALLY acknowledges ISIS is linked to Islam-then compares it to the Crusades the Spanish Inquisition, and American slavery" (Martosko 2015; emphasis original). Martosko underscores how Obama, before this speech, declined to refer to the violence in Europe and the Middle East as Islamist extremism or frame ISIS as a radical Muslim sect. Obama used the term 'fanatics' or 'terrorists.' In his speech on Thursday, Obama publicly acknowledged that the world's chief terror comes from people who "profess to stand for Islam but instead betray it" (Martosko, 2015). The same theme has also been reiterated by hotair.com's Noah Rothman (2015), who emphasizes that Obama has undermined his oft-repeated claim that ISIS and its cadre of supporters are unrepresentative of Islam. However, both writers criticized Obama's dubious moral equivalency between Christian and Islamic violence. The argument in the next section will hinge on the significance of Obama's equivalency and how contextualization and framing were being utilized instrumentally as a timely discourse strategy for pragmatic ends. Contextualization refers to how a message such as an event, a statement or a saying is put into the right context so that the addressee(s) could understand it with the most possible cognitive effect and the least possible processing effort. The same result could be attained by referring to an earlier text and/or context that could facilitate the comprehension of the message. The message is framed, i.e. put in frame, and the various types of relevant background knowledge are activated and triggered. For example, the term *breakfast* requires the activation of the background reference associated with the *3-meal culture*; likewise, *weekend* is associated with *7-day cycle*, and so on. Frame semantics is a theoretical framework that provides a plausible descriptive adequacy to the notion of contextualization. Therefore, a word represents a category of experience, and *meanings are relativized to scenes*, as was phrased by Charles Fillmore, the father of frame semantics. According to Fillmore (2010: 163), the word *buying* invokes *selling, buyer and seller*; in other words, the whole *transaction process* is triggered, and the word *buying* is but a cell in a matrix or web that consists of various cells.

In his speech, Obama put historical events in relation to their sociopolitical factors concerning the legitimization of the use of violence in the name of religion. By hinting at how the professions of faith were used as an instrument of great good but also twisted and used as a weapon in the name of evil, Obama was alluding to the power, and sometimes the danger, of the interpretation of the sacred texts (hermeneutics and exegesis; *tafsir* in Arabic). The interpretation is put in such a way that serves the interests of the faction or the party. This potential lies within the very fabrics of hermeneutics, whose object, according to Kinsella (2006:3, paragraph 7), is to give explanations to texts but without considering any single explanation as the only possible explanation; "the goal of a hermeneutic approach is to seek understanding, rather than to offer explanation or to provide an authoritative reading or conceptual analysis of a text." This elusive nature of hermeneutics concerning the most authoritative and representative of God's and Prophets' intent to provide interpretations of scripture leaves so many questions unanswered (Duderija, 2011: 314). The crux of Obama's speech was when he said: "Lest we get on our high horse and think this is unique to some other place ...". His comment was in the context of accusing ISIS of utilizing Islamic doctrines as the justification for their atrocities. There are two issues that need to be tackled about this part. First, Obama used the informal term *get on high horse* which means *behaving arrogantly and in a way that shows you think you are superior to others*. Other terms are also used to give a similar meaning such as *Come off your perch!* In Arabic the terms used is *Come off your ivory tower!* Second, the term is informal! President Obama is renowned for his eloquent speeches and an elevated, formal style (DeAngelis, 2014; Reyes, 2014: 559). So, why did he resort to informal style? It is likely that Obama utilized informal style to imply linguistic and social solidarity with the listeners and to share their viewpoints and concerns. Besides, the use of personal pronoun *we* is one of the strategies Obama employed to indicate that he shares the same world and culture as the listeners (Goodman and Graddol, 1996: 150).

At its simplest, framing entails comparing and drawing analogies. The article that appeared on the website (www.hotair.com) was entitled, "Obama: You know, Christians were just as bad as ISIS a few centuries ago" (Rothman, 2015). The title grasped the very essence of Obama's speech: framing and comparing. By invoking historical incidents, Obama's intent was to establish equivalency and set the so-called 'Islamic extremism' against the so-called 'Christian extremism', the past extremism against the present-day extremism, the Christian West against the Muslim/Middle-East, and European and Muslim/Middle Eastern against the American. If Obama were to be accused of bias against the Muslim World, then the answer would be to invoke the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition and slavery in the US. If Obama were to be accused of bias against the Muslim World *and* Europe, then the answer would be to invoke the slavery in the US. More importantly, Obama sought to compare 'apples to oranges' and to invoke things that 'happened 920 years ago' (as the comments on the two websites maintain; Adam Smith, Michigan and Emma, Los Angeles) for *current* pragmatic and political ends. It is no harm confessing the perpetration of atrocities in the past as long as the victims and the victimizers no longer exist! But the rewards are immense. They include the ethical and cultural credence accomplished upon admitting that extremism did exist in every culture and religion. In turn, justification would be given to fighting the looming extremism, as represented most notably by ISIS. The real challenge, however, is admitting responsibility towards those who are still alive, like the relatives of the million Iraqis who died as a result of the US occupation of Iraq in 2003. This is far from being possible, owing to the political and ethical implications that would follow. This attitude was voiced clearly by the British ex-Prime Minister Tony Blair, who was a key ally to the US led coalition taking part in the invasion of Iraq. Blair (2010) was given a hard time by the correspondent of Aljazeera TV channel while defending Britain's attitude. Mr. Blair abstained from claiming responsibility towards the catastrophic results of the invasion on Iraq, despite the correspondent's emphasis on the false accusations of the Iraqi ownership of nuclear weapons. The same applies to France and Turkey abstaining from claiming responsibility towards the Algerian colonial era and the 1915 Armenian genocide, respectively. The common feature among these examples is that the political and ideological systems governing the present-day US, Britain, France and Turkey are relatively a continuation of those systems that reined during the eras mentioned above, unlike the present-day democratic and liberal Germany and Italy that would find it easier to renounce the Nazi and Fascist eras.

Finally, let's place Rothman's (2015) argument about Obama's dubious moral equivalency against Salama's (2012) views about Obama's rhetoric of pluralization. Rothman manages to describe the contradiction in Obama's very essence of assertion. Rothman concedes that Obama claims that ISIS and the other Islamic fundamental groups represent a violent strain of Islam and, therefore, are unrepresentative of their faith. By the same token, it could be claimed that the medieval Christian violence was committed by a limited religious adherents who were unrepresentative of their faith. Therefore, the link was supposed to be established between the extremists on both sides of the conflict, but not between the unrepresentative strains of Islam on one hand *and* Christianity as a whole on the other hand. The theme that underlies Obama's message is his demand not to judge or stereotype the Westerners on the basis of what a handful of them had done in the past, and not to judge the Muslims on the basis of what a handful of them have done in the present time. In this argument lies the danger of equivalency, comparison or framing. Not all the Westerners, in the past time or present time, would agree with Obama on the futility of their deeds. If the medieval Crusades and the Spaniards were to be asked about what they had done, they would most probably see their deeds as justifiable to save the Holy Land and to purify their religion. One of the readers' comments on Martosko's (2015) article reiterated nearly the same proposition (Roger, Wales, United Kingdom; 'They were the response of the Christian world to the invasion of its most holy lands...'). This issue in Obama's speech could better be deciphered by adducing Salama's (2012:211-212) approach to Obama's rhetoric of pluralization. Salama alludes to the Obama's deeply ingrained style of pluralization which fares quite well with the message content. Obama often resorts to the pluralization of politically and religiously heterogeneous actors, such as Americans, Israelis, Christians, and Jews against Arabs, Palestinians and Muslims. Obama imports from different discourses in an attempt to appeal to heterogeneous audiences with clashing historical conflicts. The driving force behind this type of discourse is an increasing awareness of the absurdity of the bifurcated West and East. The danger still remains, though, that the heterogeneous actors could end up polarizing, instead of pluralizing! As a veteran politician, Obama would rather choose to take his chances, most notably because the rewards are higher than the risks. The ultimate goal of Obama's pluralization/framing was to bolster a global front against ISIS.

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