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# The Challenge of Islam — A Christian Perspective

Wednesday, April 8, 2009

President Barack Obama has put the issue of Islam front and center on the international stage. His visit to Turkey, and his very public statements to the Muslim world, have raised a host of questions at home and abroad.

In his [speech](#) to the Turkish parliament on Monday, President Obama declared: “The United States is not, and never will be, at war with Islam.” He went on to say that “our partnership with the Muslim world is critical not just in rolling back the violent ideologies that people of all faiths reject, but also to strengthen opportunity for all its people.”



But the President also spoke of his “deep appreciation for the Islamic faith.” Here is the statement in context:

*I also want to be clear that America’s relationship with the Muslim community, the Muslim world, cannot, and will not, just be based upon opposition to terrorism. We seek broader engagement based on mutual interest and mutual respect. We will listen carefully, we will bridge misunderstandings, and we will seek common ground. We will be respectful, even when we do not agree. We will convey our deep appreciation for the Islamic faith, which has done so much over the centuries to shape the world — including in my own country. The United States has been enriched by Muslim Americans. Many other Americans have Muslims in their families or have lived in a Muslim-majority country — I know, because I am one of them.*

At a press conference in Turkey, the President made yet [another statement](#):

*“One of the great strengths of the United States is ... we have a very large Christian population — we do not consider ourselves a Christian nation or a Jewish nation or a Muslim nation. We consider ourselves a nation of citizens who are bound by ideals and a set of values.”*

On CNN with host Roland Martin on Monday night, I said this:

*“I think President Obama rightly said that the United States is not at war with Islam. I think that’s a very helpful clarification. But you can’t take Islam out of the whole civilizational struggle we are in, not only in the war on terror, but, frankly, going back for centuries, coming up with a definition of what a good civilization would look like and how a society ought to be arranged.”*

I do think that President Obama was correct in stating that the United States is not at war with Islam. This is not only important in terms of international diplomacy, but also in terms of constitutional authority. The government of United States has no right or authority to declare war on any religion.

We can understand the political context, especially as the President was in Turkey. Given the confusions rampant in the Muslim world, that is a crucial clarification. Of course, a quick review of the statements of President George W. Bush will reveal that he said much the same thing, over and over again.

The fact that President Obama made these comments in Turkey is very important. Throughout the Muslim world, most Muslims do see the United States as, in effect, at war with Islam. Classical Islam understands no real distinction between religion and the state, but instead establishes a unitary society. Thus, when a foreign power like the United States invades a Muslim nation like Iraq, most Muslims see this as a war against Islam.

While specific forms of government vary in the Islamic world, this general understanding holds true. Unlike New Testament Christianity, Islam is essentially a territorial religion including all lands under submission to the rule of the Qur'an. The President was in Turkey when he made these statements, and Turkey is usually defined in the media as having a secular government. Indeed, the Turkish constitution even requires a secular government. But, as anyone who has visited Turkey knows, this requires a very unusual definition of what it means to be secular.

Being Muslim is part of what the Turkish people and government call "Turkishness," a unifying concept that goes all the way back to Mustafa Kemal Attaturk, the founder of modern Turkey. Offending "Turkishness" is a criminal act in Turkey. The Turkish government is the steward of every one of the seemingly countless mosques within the nation and it pays the imams. Thus, Turkey is a Muslim nation with a secular government, but its secular character would not be seen as anything close to secular on an American model.

In this light, President Obama's statement that America is not a Christian country is also both accurate and helpful, though he is being criticized by many conservative Christians for making the claim. His clarification, offered in Muslim Turkey, establishes as a matter of public fact the reality that our American constitutional system is very different from what is found in the Muslim world — and even in Turkey itself.

Furthermore, if the United States is to be understood as a Christian nation in the same sense that most nations in the Islamic world consider themselves to be Muslim nations, then America *is* at war with Islam.

The controversy over the President's remarks in this context are misplaced. There is indeed a controversy over whether it is appropriate to call America a Christian nation in the sense that Americans would even make such a claim — but the context in Turkey and the Muslim world is very different. Do American Christians really believe that Christianity benefits by being associated with all that America represents in the Muslim world? To many Muslims, America appears as the great fountain of pornography, debased entertainments, abortion, and sexual revolution. Does it help our witness to Christ that all this would be associated in the Muslim mind with "Christian" America?

Beyond any historical doubt, the United States was established by founders whose worldview was shaped, in most cases quite self-consciously, by the Christian faith. The founding principles of this nation flow from a biblical logic and have been sustained by the fact that most Americans have considered themselves to be Christians and have operated out of a basically Christian frame of moral reference. America is a nation whose citizens are overwhelmingly identified as Christians and the American experiment is inconceivable without the foundation established by Christian moral assumptions.

But America is not, by definition, a Christian nation in any helpful sense. The secularists and enemies of the faith make this argument for any number of hostile and antagonistic reasons, and they offer many false arguments as well. But this should not prompt American Christians to make bad arguments of our own.

I criticize President Obama, not for stating that America is not at war with Islam, but for failing to be honest in clarifying that we do face a great civilizational challenge in Islam. Islam is, in effect, the single most vital competitor to Western ideals of civilization on the world scene. The logic of Islam is to bring every square inch of this planet under submission to the rule of the Qur'an. Classical Islam divides the world into the "World of Islam" and the "World of War." In this latter world the struggle to bring the society under submission to the Qur'an is still ongoing.

President Obama also created his own confusion over these issues, subverting his own main point. If America is not at war with Islam, it would seem unhelpful for the Obama administration to now refer, against previous American practice, to Iran as "The Islamic Republic of Iran." Similarly, some of his words and gestures during his trip seemed overly indulgent toward Islam — especially as these words and gestures would have been interpreted in the larger Islamic world.

This ambition drives the Muslim world — and each faithful Muslim — to hope, pray, and work for the submission of the whole world to the Qur'an. Clearly, most Muslims are not willing to employ terrorism in order to achieve this goal.

Nevertheless, it remains the goal.

Islam and the West offer two very different and fundamentally irreconcilable visions of society. While we are certainly not a nation at war with Islam, we are a nation that faces a huge challenge from the Islamic world — a challenge that includes terrorism, but also a much larger civilizational ambition that remains central. Anyone standing in Istanbul, the historic seat of Ottoman power, should certainly recognize that fact.

As a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ and a minister of the Gospel, my primary concern about Islam is not civilizational or geopolitical, but theological. I believe that Jesus Christ is indeed, “the Way, the Truth, and the Life,” and that no one comes to the Father but by Him [John 14:6]. Salvation is found only through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Gospel of Christ is the only message that saves.

I can agree with President Obama that Islam has produced cultural wonders, but I have to see it more fundamentally as a belief system that is taking millions upon millions of persons spiritually captive — leaving them under the curse of sin and without hope of salvation.

For Christians, regardless of nationality, this is the great challenge that should be our urgent concern. Our concern is not mainly political, but theological and spiritual. And, all things considered, Islam almost surely represents the greatest challenge to Christian evangelism of our times.

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