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**Obama in Cairo: Can Common Ground Become Holy Land?**

Few speeches, in the retrospect of years, qualify as events. "Obama in Cairo" has a good chance. Here's why I think so:

1.....A youngish man of global influence addressed the world youth of a culture he knew "on three continents" but which is not his own. He said few words before announcing his theme: "I came here to seek a new beginning....based on mutual interest and mutual respect."

2.....In a world agonizing over territorial rights, he challenged Muslim youth (well, all Muslims, but his oration was youth-oriented) to participate in a world pilgrimage toward *common human ground*.

3.....With a calm confidence and hopefulness, he spoke of that common human ground as a promised land and land of promise, the place - the only place - of world peace and global prosperity.

4.....Because the common human ground is not geographical, it is owned by none and can be claimed and occupied by all who are willing to pay for it "without money and without price" (Isaiah 55:1) - but at the cost of ceasing to feed on past and present grievances and on dreams of vengeance and dominance. Lest any read his idealism as Utopian, he realistically laid out on-the-ground blockages to arriving at common human ground and called for "patience" on the pilgrimage, lest overexpectations lead to disappointment and cynicism.

5.....Religious pilgrimages are for *penitents*. The proud and satisfied do not long for a better land - a better world - for themselves and their children's children. To the Muslim world, Obama modeled penitence by confessing his country's shortcomings. Repentance opens the gate of faith, the faith that "We can." We can arrive at common human ground, where we can see as others see and do together what needs to be done and is impossible if we see only "our" side and are blind to "their" side.

6.....Conversation does not ascend to common ground until each participant feels "I am understood." No previous President of the United States was as well prepared as is Obama to say to the Muslim world, "I understand you." With almost ecstatic eloquence, he detailed the riches Islam has contributed to humanity. In good Arabic, he said what translates as "Peace be with you." While he said "I am a Christian" and quoted the golden rule from "the Holy Bible," three times he quoted from "the Holy Qur'an" (to ovations, of course). (The crucial quotation: "*Be conscious of God, and speak always the truth*.") He well knows that Islam and Christianity are essentially competing religions, yet he could use the Islamic phrase "Moses, Jesus, Muhammad - peace be upon them." And he concluded with another translation of the Muslim greeting: "May God's peace be upon you."

7.....Obama's hero, Abraham Lincoln, spoke of "the better angels of our nature."  
We human beings have it in us to be demons or angels; and we can choose to live the higher or lower level of our heritage. The strategy of the Cairo speech was to appeal to Muslims, especially Muslim youth, to live up to ideal Islam.

8.....Finally, his American witness: "People in every country should be *free to choose and live their faith*." The Muslim tradition solidly denies religious freedom to Muslims: the punishment for apostasy (leaving Islam for another religion or no religion) has been death. I say "has been": the Qur'an need not be read to insist on death.

9....."The Holy Land," which the Romans called "Palestina," as the land-bridge of three continents, is earth's most embattled territory. The religious undertone of the Cairo oration was that "The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it" (Psalm 24:1). Our President believes that, with God's help, "those who live in it" can come so to live in it together as to constitute it, the whole of it, *holy land*.

**BY WILLIS E. ELLIOTT  |  JUNE 6, 2009; 1:16 AM ETSAVE & SHARE:  [Send E-mail](http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/emailalink?sent=no&link=http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/willis_e_elliott/2009/06/obama_in_cairo_can_common_ground_become_holy_land.html&title=Obama%20in%20Cairo:%20%20Can%20Common%20Ground%20Become%20Holy%20Land?)   [Facebook](http://www.facebook.com/sharer.php?u=http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/willis_e_elliott/2009/06/obama_in_cairo_can_common_ground_become_holy_land.html&t=Obama%20in%20Cairo:%20%20Can%20Common%20Ground%20Become%20Holy%20Land?)   [Twitter](http://twitter.com/home?status=Obama%20in%20Cairo:%20%20Can%20Common%20Ground%20Become%20Holy%20Land?%20-%20http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/willis_e_elliott/2009/06/obama_in_cairo_can_common_ground_become_holy_land.html)   [Digg](http://digg.com/submit?phase=2&url=http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/willis_e_elliott/2009/06/obama_in_cairo_can_common_ground_become_holy_land.html&title=Obama%20in%20Cairo:%20%20Can%20Common%20Ground%20Become%20Holy%20Land?)   [Yahoo Buzz](http://buzz.yahoo.com/buzz?publisherurn=washington_po284&guid=washington_po284:http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/willis_e_elliott/2009/06/obama_in_cairo_can_common_ground_become_holy_land.html)   [Del.icio.us](http://del.icio.us/post?url=http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/willis_e_elliott/2009/06/obama_in_cairo_can_common_ground_become_holy_land.html;&title=Obama%20in%20Cairo:%20%20Can%20Common%20Ground%20Become%20Holy%20Land?%20-%20On%20Faith%20Panelists%20Blog;)   [StumbleUpon](http://www.stumbleupon.com/submit?url=http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/willis_e_elliott/2009/06/obama_in_cairo_can_common_ground_become_holy_land.html)   [Technorati](http://technorati.com/search/http:/onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/willis_e_elliott/2009/06/obama_in_cairo_can_common_ground_become_holy_land.html)    
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elliottwl,  
thanks for the reply. yeah, it's kind of scary to think that i live in "war territory." mind you, muslims, because of islam, will never be able to develop sophisticated enough weapons (on their own) to do much about it. rather than stephen hawking, the islamic idea of a scholar is someone who's memorized the koran.

**POSTED BY: WALTER-IN-FALLSCHURCH | JUNE 9, 2009 6:43 PM**[**REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**](mailto:blogs@washingtonpost.com?subject=On%20Faith%20Panelists%20Blog%20%20|%20%20walter-in-fallschurch%20%20|%20%20Obama%20in%20Cairo:%20%20Can%20Common%20Ground%20Become%20Holy%20Land?%20%20|%20%204685432&body=%0D%0D%0D%0D%0D================%0D?__mode=view%26_type=comment%26id=4685432%26blog_id=618)

Rev Eliott:

"We human beings have it in us to be demons or angels;"

How about human beings?

All you book-people's talk of angels and demons has brought nothing but war to those of the region.

How about... Just people?

People can call each other angels and demons all they want, usually reversing the labels. Angels and demons only fight, in your world, though. Never touch.

**POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | JUNE 8, 2009 4:46 PM**[**REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**](mailto:blogs@washingtonpost.com?subject=On%20Faith%20Panelists%20Blog%20%20|%20%20Paganplace%20%20|%20%20Obama%20in%20Cairo:%20%20Can%20Common%20Ground%20Become%20Holy%20Land?%20%20|%20%204685204&body=%0D%0D%0D%0D%0D================%0D?__mode=view%26_type=comment%26id=4685204%26blog_id=618)

TO WALTER-IN-FALLSCHURCH:

True. In the case of Islam, the promise is understood to be not just of that land but of the world, which is \*dar es harb" (war territory) until it becomes \*dar es islam" (peace territory, i.e. territory under sharia [Muslim law]).  
Obama in Cairo was as on-the-ground realistic and into-the-future hopeful as he could be. His realism would agree with your "intractable because of religion." But he's hopeful partly because of huis faith in religion's potential for overcoming its intractability.

**POSTED BY: ELLIOTTWL | JUNE 8, 2009 12:19 PM**[**REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**](mailto:blogs@washingtonpost.com?subject=On%20Faith%20Panelists%20Blog%20%20|%20%20elliottwl%20%20|%20%20Obama%20in%20Cairo:%20%20Can%20Common%20Ground%20Become%20Holy%20Land?%20%20|%20%204685143&body=%0D%0D%0D%0D%0D================%0D?__mode=view%26_type=comment%26id=4685143%26blog_id=618)

the problem in israel/palestine is that jews and muslims both think their god promised them this land. they claim the same god, but claim he told them different things. it's intractable - BECAUSE OF religion.

**POSTED BY: WALTER-IN-FALLSCHURCH | JUNE 6, 2009 6:50 PM**[**REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**](mailto:blogs@washingtonpost.com?subject=On%20Faith%20Panelists%20Blog%20%20|%20%20walter-in-fallschurch%20%20|%20%20Obama%20in%20Cairo:%20%20Can%20Common%20Ground%20Become%20Holy%20Land?%20%20|%20%204684800&body=%0D%0D%0D%0D%0D================%0D?__mode=view%26_type=comment%26id=4684800%26blog_id=618)

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