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Obama's approach has promise of peace

by Michael Sean Winters

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The thing that continually astonishes about President Obama is his self-assurance. The range of his speech in Cairo this morning is to political rhetoric what the Queen of the Night's aria "The Vengeance of Hell Boils in My Heart" is to the soprano repertoire. Only the great attempt it. Only a virtuoso succeeds.

The most important parts of the speech were the twin and related themes of empowerment and hope. He spoke about seeking better times, better relations, better societies and called attention to the fact that his own personal story need not be unique. Still, it is difficult to underestimate the affect on the Muslim world, especially of the youth in that world, of hearing such words delivered by a man whose middle name is Hussein and whose skin color is the same as theirs. Few American Catholics failed to place a framed picture of President John F. Kennedy in their homes. President Obama, in his own personhood, defies the lies about America spread about by Islamic extremists.

Obama did not en flesh his calls for boldness in facing the problems he outlined with any specific proposals. "Dialogue" alas will probably not end the Arab-Israeli hostilities, although it is certainly a part of the mix, and definitely better than war. The President did not call for an end to settlement construction by Israel or the removal of Hamas from control of Gaza by the Palestinians. But, part of Obama's approach is to start with common ground, to find points where warring parties can agree, and then build on it. In the Mideast, of course, the source of the trouble is "common ground", ground that is being fought over. Still, compared to the bluster of the Bush years, Obama's approach has the promise of advancing the peace process, slowly to be sure, but slowly is the only way such hatreds are dismantled.

I was curious at his choice of one verb. "So I have known Islam on three continents before coming to the region where it was first revealed," said the President. "Revealed"? There was, I suspect, no intention on the part of the president's speechwriters to suggest anything specifically theological there, but I am

wondering how the word 'revealed' can be conceived in a non-theological way and can't come up with anything. Compared to his post-modern riff at Notre Dame -- 'But remember too that the ultimate irony of faith is that it necessarily admits doubt?' -- his reference here to the fact of revelation is a welcome, though not unproblematic, development.

The President's remarks about Israel were forceful. He said: 'America's strong bonds with Israel are well known. This bond is unbreakable. It is based upon cultural and historical ties, and the recognition that the aspiration for a Jewish homeland is rooted in a tragic history that cannot be denied.' The bond is unbreakable, and it is courageous of the President to have said so in front of this audience. But, the aspiration for a Jewish homeland is not only rooted in tragedy. It, too, is rooted in revelation.

Presidential trips to the Mideast are always odd. The speech was billed as a speech to the Muslim world and the reasonableness of the President's tone and words are a necessary antidote to the extremism preached down the street at the Saudi-funded madrassahs. Yet, the Saudis are 'our friends.' There is a house of mirrors quality to Mideast diplomacy. Navigating these waters will require self-confidence and more. But, it was nice to hear those high-notes this morning.

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