

Trump's shiny new monotheistic narrative



Rashmee Roshan Lall

For a patently irreligious man, Donald Trump is pressing God into service a lot. As he embarks on his first overseas trip as US president, his itinerary appears to be conspicuously constructed around the concept of monotheism.

The thread that links Trump's first three foreign destinations – Saudi Arabia, Israel and Vatican City – is their status as the centres of Islam, Judaism and Christianity, respectively. Trump has sanctimoniously cast this package tour of the home of three Abrahamic religious traditions as a pitch for “tolerance... the cornerstone of peace.”

The sentiment would not have been out of place in a papal statement. Or Jimmy Carter's White House. The 39th US president had a deep and abiding personal faith. It caused him to be called America's most famous Sunday school teacher with all the boring wholesomeness that implied. And then there was the darker manifestation of presidential religiosity in George W. Bush. He claimed divine consultation before invading Iraq.

Trump is nowhere near that point but he appears to have had a religious conversion of sorts, at least in terms of rhetoric. Since early April, he has used the phrase “children of God” twice, possibly to create the halo effect of a US president guided by just principles.

Trump mentioned “children of God” as the reason for lobbying Tomahawk cruise missiles at a Syrian airfield on April 7. Barely a month later, he repeated the phrase standing alongside Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas but this time it was a verbal missile aimed at the Palestinian people. “All

children of God must be taught to value and respect human life and condemn all of those who target the innocent,” Trump said, in rebuke to what he described as the “hatred” and “incitement for violence” among Palestinians.

Finally, of course, there is Trump's impending obeisance to the idea of religious tolerance through successive trips to Riyadh, Tel Aviv and the Vatican.

Trump's increasing reliance on religion as a positive force sits oddly with his record as a politician. On the campaign trail, Trump used, nay abused religion, or at least one particular faith, Islam. He repeatedly miscategorised its tenets and the motivations of its followers. As president, one of his first actions was to target a clutch of mainly Muslim countries with a controversial and arbitrary entry ban.

He has displayed similar cynicism about the value of the Christian faith. As a candidate, Trump shamelessly wooed and won evangelical Christians, who account for about 25% of the American electorate. Despite his obvious disinterest in the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, Trump presented himself as a president who would literally empower Christian values. It worked.

Evangelical voters disregarded Trump's evident ignorance of the Bible and norms of church-going behaviour. They ignored Trump's brazen admission that he saw no reason to seek divine forgiveness for anything. And they appeared not to notice his comically brief, vague and unconvincing remarks about divine concepts, notably in response to the Christian Broadcasting Network's question “Who is God to you?” Trump replied with an inanity (“God is the ultimate”) before changing the subject to a great golf course deal.

Evangelicals have continued to support Trump's controversial actions as president, not least the ban on Muslim entry and apparent hostility towards non-white, non-Christian immigration to the United States.

So what is with the upcoming multifaceted tour then? Symbolically, Trump will pay homage to something his controversial chief strategist Steve Bannon plugs as “Judeo-Christian values.”

How does Riyadh fit into this world view?

“Transactionally” is the short answer. The Saudi capital will serve as a handy backdrop for a propaganda exercise that is meant to counter the impression of raging Islamophobia within the Trump administration.

Scheduled meetings with King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, the Gulf Cooperation Council officials and other Arab leaders will feed into a shiny new narrative, one that Trump recently described as constructive cooperation “with our Muslim allies to combat extremism, terrorism and violence.” This will convey the impression of tensile strength in dealing with terrorism. It is likely to play well to the American public back home.

Israel will provide an opportunity for Trump to appear engaged in brokering a peace deal with the Palestinians.

Meeting Pope Francis will give a soft-focus impression of humility and grace and continue the nearly 100-year-old tradition of interaction between pontiffs and American presidents.

All of this will make for compelling theatre but it is hard to take it as anything more.

The eager Arab interlocutors gathered in Riyadh may praise Trump as “a true friend of Muslims,” words used by Saudi Arabia's deputy crown prince when

he visited Washington. But the hosannas will be realpolitik, an appreciation of Trump's hard line on Iran and softness on human rights issues.

It is a moot point whether the Arab leaders can even be said to wholly speak for their people, especially the young. A recent survey of 18-to-24-year-olds across 16 Arab countries revealed profound disgust with the Trump administration's attitude towards the Muslim world. It is unlikely that young Arabs would describe Trump as a “true friend of Muslims.”

It is unlikely that young Arabs would describe Trump as a “true friend of Muslims.”

Trump's Israeli-Palestinian deal-making will also be a shadow play, so long as his administration offers no road map, no promise of a two-state solution and no guarantee that the US embassy will not suddenly be moved from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

As for the pope, candidate Trump denounced the head of the Catholic church as “disgraceful,” an act of disrespect for which he has never apologised. It is hard to see what, if anything, this bombastic and divisive politician shares with a simple Jesuit priest who espouses progressive values.

The monotheism tour may end up as no more than another episode of the Trump reality show.

Rashmee Roshan Lall is a columnist for The Arab Weekly. Her blog can be found at www.rashmee.com and she is on Twitter: @rashmeerl.

Trump's increasing reliance on religion as a positive force sits oddly with his record as a politician.

It might take decades to reform al-Azhar



Ahmad Abou Douh

The Egyptian Constitution of 2014 gave al-Azhar, the country's top Islamic seat of learning, complete independence from the state. The venerable institution lost nothing of its traditional theological role and religious influence in the country.

It was feared that al-Azhar would fall under the total control of the Muslim Brotherhood, which had infiltrated the institution's highest authority, the Council of Senior Scholars.

The grand imam of al-Azhar, Ahmed el-Tayeb, however, was apprehensive of the rising career of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi while in his previous role as minister of defence. Tayeb was aware that, if the general took power, al-Azhar would revert to its role as an analyst of the government's policies, a role it has assumed since the time of President Gamal Abdel Nasser.

Nasser was the first president to thrust al-Azhar into politics in modern Egypt, hoping that it would help in the transition to a socialist regime. During the coronation of King Farouk I in 1936, the prime minister at that time, Moustafa el-Nahas Pasha, refused to let the 16-year-old regent take the oath of allegiance before al-Azhar's senior scholars; he had him take it before the parliament as a gesture marking the beginning of the secular state.

Nasser needed the backing of al-Azhar to give religious legitimacy to the government's new policies, which were questioned and opposed by political Islamists, especially the Muslim Brotherhood. Sisi also appealed to al-Azhar for support when he overthrew Muhammad Morsi in July 2013. Today, it looks as if Sisi is determined to disturb the murky waters of al-

Azhar knowing the risks involved.

Ahmed Hosny, the president of al-Azhar University, during a televised appearance in May, blatantly accused researcher and journalist Islam Behery of apostasy. On the same programme, Hosny said al-Azhar “cannot declare members of [ISIS] as apostates because the organisation is committing individual acts but, in the end, they are Unitarians.” These declarations cost Hosny his position following a general outcry in the country and returned the issue of religious extremism at al-Azhar to the forefront.

It seems that the eternal power struggle in religious affairs in Egypt is still raging between extremist Salafists and the so-called moderates. In 2014, Abd Dayim Nasir, adviser to the imam of al-Azhar, declared that “the Salafists want to turn al-Azhar into a political instrument. We're against that because we do not want to have the law subjugated to a religious power which decides what is right and what is wrong.”

Three years later, it looks as if Nasir was far from reality. It seems that al-Azhar is once again victim of the full religious powers and independence granted to it by the constitution. It is facing a mini intellectual rebellion.

Journalist Ahmed al-Khatib said 12 members of al-Azhar's Council of Senior Scholars belong to the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic Jihad Organisation. Khatib is facing imprisonment for publishing articles critical of al-Azhar.

For Rifaat al-Said from the National Progressive Unionist Party, “al-Azhar's problem is that it got used to extremist thinking which produces only extremists... and that causes al-Azhar to regress even further.”

“Al-Azhar has a difficult and complex structure,” he said. “The

grand imam is an open-minded person but he is in charge of a curriculum in which some courses are extremist, which, of course, will produce similar thinking. He also heads the Council of Senior Scholars, which must be restructured to bring in enlightened personalities and which must abandon the frozen mindsets controlling it.”

Some Egyptian diplomats fear that the conflict between the government and al-Azhar may be turned into an attack on Islam.

Al-Azhar continues to resist calls for reform. Some conservative religious figures are trying to turn it into a Vatican for Muslims. “Extremists are explaining those calls for reforming al-Azhar and presenting them to Muslims as part of a colonialist scheme to destroy Islam. This is why they are staunchly resisting them,” said Amine Shelby from the Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs.

One of the severest critics of al-Azhar is Member of Parliament Mohamed Abou Hamed. He introduced a bill that directly threatens Tayeb's position. “Both Salafist and Muslim Brotherhood ideologies exist inside al-Azhar and nobody can deny that fact. This represents a real handicap on the path to reform,” Abou Hamed has said.

“There are leading administrative and teaching figures who espouse delinquent ideas. Even

the Council of Senior Scholars includes Brotherhood figures and this despite the law which classifies the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organisation. In its current composition, the council is breaking the law.”

Still, Abou Hamed's bill was withdrawn.

The battle for al-Azhar has regional reverberations. Some powerful countries in the region are carefully monitoring the conflict. The “Arab spring” brought the issues of the role of religion in society and of who has the authority to determine that role to the forefront.

Some Arab regimes that had welcomed the removal of the Muslim Brotherhood from power are concerned about al-Azhar turning into a force confronting the secular governmental system in Egypt. Others are apprehensive of the influence of the controversial scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who is an al-Azhar alumnus whose ideas have become a staple of Brotherhood ideology.

Many Arab officials are aware of the influence of al-Azhar University not only in the Arab world but also in the wider Muslim world and especially among the Muslim minorities in Europe and elsewhere. Hundreds of thousands of Muslim students travel to al-Azhar to study religion.

Some Egyptian diplomats fear that the conflict between the government and al-Azhar may be turned into an attack on Islam. They say that Sisi must tread very carefully and handle reforming al-Azhar with patience. After all, it took the Muslim extremists decades to infiltrate al-Azhar; it might very well take decades more to dislodge them.

Ahmad Abou Douh is an Egyptian writer.

It took Muslim extremists decades to infiltrate al-Azhar; it might very well take decades more to dislodge them.