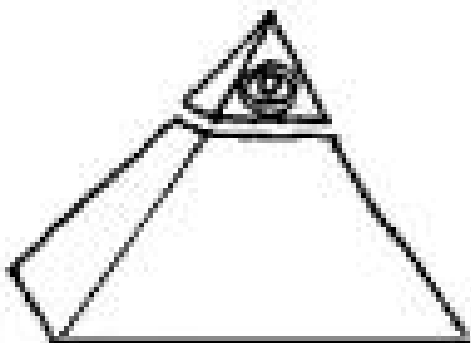


## No greater commandment ...

Pat Marrin | Jun. 4, 2009 NCR Today



"There is no greater commandment than these." Mark 12:30

Early reports are that [President Obama's speech in Cairo](#) [1] has been well received. He specifically addressed the world's 1.2 billion Muslims, citing major areas of tension that, he said, must be engaged truthfully and resolved with patient listening and fair-minded resolve.

Underlying many of the difficulties between Islam and the West is the fundamental role of God in human society. Since the Enlightenment, Western cultures have relied on a kind of official agnosticism regarding any one religion in order to protect pluralism and the freedom of all religions to worship and practice in a realm held in theory to be separate from the social compact. Relativizing religion as the cornerstone of morality has required substituting reason, the rule of law and other humanistic principles to create a workable modern secular state. The Muslim world has fundamentally resisted the Enlightenment and retained certain religious absolutes as the basis for its otherwise modern cultures.

Rapprochement between Islam and the West confronts this fundamental question of the role of God. The president acknowledged this by citing the teachings of all world religions as essential to finding the common ground for dialogue. Universal human rights, the right to self-determination, religious freedom, the rejection of violence -- all these shared aspirations derive from principles grounded in something absolute, not just human self-affirmation. Without referencing this religious grounding for Islam, the president would have failed to acknowledge the collective voice of the majority of his 1.2 billion listeners who had begun their day at dawn bowing in prayer to the absolute authority of God.

In today's gospel, a religious lawyer (scribe) asks Jesus what is the greatest commandment in the law. He responds by reciting the Sh'ma, the core expression of Jewish faith said each day: "Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is one, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul and with all your strength." Jesus then adds, "And you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

In answering thus, Jesus is grounded at the source of the three major religions of the Book, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

As the president's address is analyzed around the world, perhaps the most critical issue will surface, namely, that for Muslims, Jews and Christians, violence must be recognized as an extreme that does not solve anything but only makes things worse. Violence violates the core commandments of all religions and any claim to reason and authentic enlightenment. Violence finds no support in any appeal to God, by whatever name.

Here is the common ground that must define our efforts to find a future built on peace and justice. If the president's careful rhetoric in Cairo advances us closer to that future, it will be accompanied by a commitment to nonviolence as the cornerstone of American policy.

[These reflections (and sketches) by Pat Marrin are inspired by the [day's scripture readings](#) [2].]

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[1] <http://ncronline.org/news/global/obama-offers-spiritual-vision-global-peace>

[2] <http://www.usccb.org/nab/today.shtml>