

The Pragmatics of Performance: Putting 'Faith' in Aid in the Sahrawi Refugee Camps

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Since the 1970s, Sahrawi refugees have depended upon humanitarian assistance and political support offered by a variety of secular and faith-based non-governmental organizations. In this article I explore the ways in which Sahrawi refugees' political representatives (the Polisario Front) have mobilized religiously-related claims to maximize diverse short- and long-term benefits both inside and outside the camps. In light of the contemporary geopolitical context, including localized concerns regarding 'Islamism' and 'terrorism' in North Africa, I argue that notions of 'secularism' and 'religious tolerance' have been invoked during interactions with different non-Sahrawi audiences to demonstrate the 'ideal' nature of the Sahrawi camps. In particular, the presence and activism of American evangelical humanitarians are invoked by the Polisario Front to demonstrate the 'ideal' nature of the camps as spaces of 'religious tolerance' and 'inter-faith dialogue'. However, the presence of evangelical humanitarians equally has the potential to create an irreconcilable rupture not only with other, non-evangelical donors (including 'secular' Spanish 'Friends of the Sahrawi'), but also between the Polisario and the very refugees which this organization purports to represent. I conclude the article by arguing that rather than creating a dialogic process between refugees and both secular- and faith-based humanitarians, maintaining the appearance of 'religious tolerance' is ultimately founded upon a system of *repress-entation* which purposefully centralizes certain groups, identifiers and dynamics whilst simultaneously displacing and marginalizing the potential for debate and contestation.

Keywords: Evangelical humanitarianism, inter-faith dialogue, *repress-entation*, performance, secularism

Introduction

In addition to humanitarian assistance provided by the European Commission's Humanitarian Office, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the World Food Programme, approximately

155,000 Sahrawi refugees who have been living in refugee camps in South-West Algeria since the mid-1970s currently receive substantial material and political support from a variety of secular and faith-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Indeed, Sahrawi refugees' survival is contingent upon the provision of aid by NGOs and civil society movements, including European ones which variously describe themselves as 'Christian' or 'secular' in nature (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2009a), but also American evangelical groups whose roles inside and outside the camps have thus far remained undocumented. In this article I explore the nature and implications of the camps being characterized by high degrees of 'inter-religious' contact in a context of refugees' multi-faceted dependence upon the support and 'friendship' offered by these diverse organizations. I analyse, in particular, how, why and to what effect Sahrawi refugees and the Polisario Front (Sahrawi refugees' political representatives and camp managers) have responded to and attempted to ensure the continued presence and activism of evangelical humanitarians in the refugee camps and beyond.

Whilst recognizing the inherent power imbalances which exist between Sahrawi refugees and their aid providers, I move away from popular fears that 'disaster evangelism' (Olivo Ensor 2003) may lead to powerless aid recipients being 'brainwashed' by powerful proselytizing donors. Rather, the main aim of this article is to demonstrate the ways in which Polisario representatives have successfully mobilized religiously-related claims to maximize diverse short- and long-term benefits both inside and outside the camps. Given that donors hold different and often contradictory normative preferences according to their political- and faith-based standpoints, and often directly or indirectly encourage recipients to meet specific non-economic conditionalities, a key question which will be addressed throughout is how refugees are able to 'ingratiate themselves' to secure the support of a given actor (Harrell-Bond 1999: 151; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2009a, 2010a, 2010c), without creating an irreconcilable rupture with others who might be alienated or repelled by the same dynamics.

I therefore argue that the Sahrawi refugee camps are composed of constantly shifting, merging and diverging 'stages', where 'front-' and 'backstage' performances of the Sahrawi self (following Goffman 1971) are re-presented to different Sahrawi and non-Sahrawi audiences. While Goffman's dramaturgical analogy recreates 'simplistic divisions of social space into frontstage areas of masking and disguise (marked by presence of performance) and backstage areas of honesty and authenticity (marked by the absence of performance)' (Conquergood 1992: 92), this analysis rejects such a 'binary opposition between reality and appearance' (*ibid.*: 84). As a means of advancing our understanding of the multiple roles which religion may play in contexts of forced displacement, this article therefore focuses on the modalities through which religion may variously condition refugees' interactions with donors of different faiths. Indeed, the purpose of this exercise is not to ascertain what such performances are 'disguising', or what Sahrawi

refugees' 'authentic' religious identity or belief systems may be. Rather, the paper questions and critiques the ways in which particular representations of the religious Self and Other have been constructed and reconstructed across time and space by Sahrawi and non-Sahrawi actors alike.¹

In this context, 'faith' emerges as part of a fluid and ever-evolving script which is reflexively engaged and projected by Sahrawi actors according to the perceived priorities and expectations of diverse donors. Given the constantly shifting donor audiences in the camps, including European 'secular' humanitarians, Muslim members of Algerian civil society, and American evangelists, multiple public performances must be presented and managed 'on-stage', just as a variety of 'hidden transcripts' will be enacted, debated and contested 'off-stage' (Scott 1990) in the absence of non-Sahrawi observers (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2009a). While I have elsewhere critiqued the Polisario's official representation of the Sahrawi refugee camps as ideal *secular* spaces, characterized by female empowerment, as a means of publicly complying with the faith- and gender-based conditionalities of members of Spanish civil society (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2009a, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c), in this article I explore a range of means through which Sahrawi actors have captured and mobilized American evangelical audiences.

In the first part of the article I therefore provide a brief overview of the extent to which European and North American normative preferences surrounding 'good' and 'progressive' Muslims have influenced official accounts of the position of religion in the Sahrawi refugee camps. Drawing on research conducted between 2002 and 2009 with and about Sahrawi refugees in the Algerian-based Sahrawi refugee camps and in Cuba, South Africa, Spain and Syria (where several thousand Sahrawi youth live and study, often spending up to a decade without contact with their families in the refugee camps) (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2009a), I argue that the Polisario offers a variety of expositions of the role of Islam to external observers in line with their perceptions of donors' priorities and both implicit and explicit conditionalities attached to the provision of aid. As such, notions of 'secularism' and 'religious tolerance' have been invoked during interactions with different non-Sahrawi audiences to demonstrate the 'ideal' nature of the Sahrawi camps. Representations of the camps are thus revealed to be intimately related to the contemporary geopolitical context, including localized concerns regarding 'Islamism' and 'terrorism' in North Africa. In order to distance the Sahrawi self from these perceived threats, a number of representational strategies have been developed which centralize the Sahrawi's openness to the presence and activism of American evangelists in the camps and beyond. The second half of the article explores the nature and implications of evangelical actors' roles as providers of aid and advocates for the Sahrawi people, examining the ways in which different Sahrawi and non-Sahrawi audiences engage with evangelically-endorsed scripts and performances. I conclude by interrogating what I refer to as the 'tyranny of tolerance'; I argue that, rather than creating a dialogic process between

refugees and both secular- and faith-based humanitarians, maintaining the appearance of ‘tolerance’ is ultimately founded upon a system of *repression* which purposefully centralizes certain groups, identifiers and dynamics whilst simultaneously displacing and marginalizing the potential for debate and contestation.

Scripting the Sahrawi Refugee Camps

Whilst almost entirely dependent upon externally provided support, the Sahrawi refugee camps have been managed by the Polisario Front since the camps’ establishment in 1975 (for a detailed history of the conflict over the Western Sahara, see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2009a). In February 1976, the Polisario established the camp-based ‘Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic’ (SADR), the Sahrawi ‘state-in-exile’ which has been recognized by over 70 non-Western states and is a full member of the African Union (formerly the Organization of African Unity). The Polisario/SADR is ‘the only authority with which camp residents have regular contact’ (Human Rights Watch 2008: 9), and it has developed its own constitution, camp-based ministries, police force (and prisons), army and parallel ‘state’ and religious legal systems, the latter implementing a Maliki interpretation of Islam.

The Sahrawi ‘state’, law and religion are thus intimately interconnected in the camps, with Islam identified in the Sahrawi Constitution as the explicit fundamental source of the Sahrawi legal system (Art. 2 and Art. 3 of the 2003 and 1976 SADR Constitution respectively), and the Ministry of Justice and Religious Affairs having joint functions. Despite these interconnections, however, the Sahrawi refugee camps have habitually been heralded by European and North American observers as ‘ideal’ spaces and locales of ‘best practice’ through explicit reference to the ‘secular’ and ‘democratic’ nature of the camps (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2009a, 2010a). Indeed, elsewhere I have argued that during encounters with European secular and Christian audiences, the Polisario mobilizes two intersecting strategies: first, it has a tendency to ‘silence’ and render invisible the multiple, and at times contested, roles of Islam in the camps; second, on those occasions when religion *is* mentioned, the Polisario systematically projects an image of ‘secular Sahrawi Islam’ which is resolutely different from any Other Islam (*ibid.*).² The Sahrawi refugee camps can thus be conceptualized as stages from which particular discourses and political campaigns are projected internationally to convince non-Sahrawi audiences of the justifiability and necessity of their support for the Sahrawi ‘struggle’ for self-determination (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2009a). Simultaneously, they emerge as microcosms in which contemporary and shifting debates and dilemmas surrounding the ‘acceptable’ face of Islam and the desirability of inter-faith relations are enacted.

Public declarations made by and on behalf of the Sahrawi people apropos their ‘secularism’ and ‘religious tolerance’ must therefore be viewed not only in relation to the current geo-political (in)security context and intensified

rejection of Islam in the West, but also more localized concerns about an 'Islamically dominated North Africa', 'Islamic fundamentalism' in the Saharan desert and Maghreb (see Keenan 2004; Zoubir 2002), and the purported emergence of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (see Darbouche 2007: 2; del Pino 2003). Directly opposed to these characterizations of the region as inherently imbued with threats and danger, the Polisario and its supporters explicitly present the Sahrawi as fulfilling all the non-economic priorities associated with contemporary notions of 'good governance' ('peaceful', 'secular' and 'democratic'), and therefore as a prototypical example to be followed by other actors in the international arena (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2009a). The Polisario have therefore successfully projected the Sahrawi camps as 'ideal' spaces inhabited by 'good' refugees, in part by reflecting mainstream European and North American normative preferences for the development of a 'good' and 'progressive' Islam. While Soares and Osella note that 'insufficient attention is devoted to how the state intervenes to promote, co-opt, thwart, or isolate various forms of Islam and ("good" or "bad") Muslims' (2009: 10–11), this article presents insights into the ways in which non-state actors, including the Polisario Front and evangelical actors, have promoted a particular image of the Sahrawi as 'good' and 'progressive' Muslim refugees.³

Accordingly, the international celebration of the Sahrawi refugee camps' success is, in many ways and through many means, directly associated with and even dependent upon the concealment, or discursive minimization, of everyday Muslim identity, practice and institutions (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2009a, 2010a). For instance, although European and North American humanitarian and political visitors to the camps are typically taken by official Sahrawi guides on a 'tourist route' of 'secular' Sahrawi institutions such as the National Parliament and National Hospital, buildings associated with Islam, such as the camps' established mosques, are in fact excluded from such tours. One of the clearest examples of this policy's success is that many visitors, including Brazier (1997), Ryan (1999), Bryant (2004), and Thorne (2004) have erroneously declared that there are 'no mosques' in the camps,⁴ while my own interactions with Spanish NGO workers who have regularly visited the 27 February Refugee Camp indicate that the majority of these were unaware that the yellow and green building facing the entrance to the Sahrawi National Women's School was a mosque.

However, it is precisely the changing identity of the humanitarian audience in the refugee camps which allows, or in fact demands, the creation and re-presentation of different 'religious' and 'secular' 'selves' and the adoption of different 'voices' in local and international contexts. Hence, despite rendering the Sahrawi's religious identity and practice invisible to long-standing Spanish 'friends' of the Sahrawi people, the Polisario habitually centralizes Islam in interactions with Algerian authorities, whilst displacing Islam and mobilizing notions of shared experiences of colonial oppression and racism to secure support from the Cuban and South African governments

(Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2009a). While it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the Polisario's international public relations strategies with Algerian, Cuban and South African audiences (see *ibid.*), this brief reflection nonetheless suggests that religious identity and practice may be variously minimized or magnified, and allocated a central or marginal position, depending on the Polisario's perceptions of the audience's politico-religious preferences.

Far from a coherent, official performance enacted for all observers, or a singular objective 'authentic' backstage reality, the contradictions between the Polisario's performances are here themselves identified as objects of analysis, refuting the possibility or desirability of identifying 'secret principles to be uncovered' (Foucault 2006: 169). Such an endeavour, however, is complicated by various courses of action taken by the Polisario to minimize the visibility and audibility of different, and often contradictory representational strategies. On the one hand, as Goffman (1971) suggests, performances can be architecturally and temporally organized so as to prevent audiences from witnessing backstage activity or earlier performances that could undermine the image of message being fostered frontstage (Benford and Hunt 1992: 44). The Polisario is indeed able to minimize certain challenges by carefully controlling the visa system which grants non-Sahrawis access to the refugee camps, allowing only certain visitors to coincide at given points in time within their confines, and ensuring that non-Sahrawis are accompanied by official Sahrawi guides who simultaneously monopolize the means of transportation to, within and from the camps, and ensure that 'guests' are accommodated in 'appropriate' locations. When such measures have failed, the Polisario has expelled, deported and black-listed visitors who have been identified as having the potential to directly challenge the Polisario's official representation of the camps (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2009a).

Nonetheless, overt 'audience segregation and backstage control' (Benford and Hunt 1992: 43), is typically unnecessary as the likelihood of social interactions between different donor audiences is often reduced in light of the linguistic barriers which exist between many European, American and Middle Eastern donors. Furthermore, these interactions are also unlikely as a result of pre-existing tensions and animosity between different donor groups, such as Spanish NGO workers who frequently reject the presence, activities and intentions of evangelists in the camps.

Evangelical Performances: 'Spreading the Word'

As a means of demonstrating the Sahrawi people's 'ideal' nature, American 'friends' of the Sahrawi assert that although evangelists and missionaries are regularly deported by the Moroccan authorities for allegedly engaging in criminalized proselytization activities (see BBC News 2010; EFE 2010; US Department of State 2010), the Sahrawi's political representatives actively welcome the presence and support of evangelical groups in and for the Sahrawi refugee camps. For instance, in response to allegations made in

a Galician newspaper regarding the Polisario's reported involvement with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, long-standing observers of the Sahrawi refugee camps Pazzanita and Smith de Cherif (2010) specifically stated that:

Remarkably, so tolerant is Saharawi Islam that within the last few years, Christian evangelists have held roundtable discussions with Saharawi and Algerian religious clerics in the Tindouf camps and have built a school for English language studies in the Smara camp. Meanwhile, Morocco expels a Spanish citizen from El-Ayoune, where she was teaching Spanish, without grounds, but because she is an evangelist Christian.

Declarations of the openness of the camps to Christian church groups are widely mobilized by high-profile American pro-Sahrawi activists, such as Suzanne Scholte of the (Republican) Defense Forum Foundation, Christian Solidarity Worldwide–USA and the US–Western Sahara Foundation who, in the early 2000s,

helped organize a delegation of Christians from all over the United States to visit the camps and have a prayer service with and for the Sahrawi people and for the liberation of their homeland. It was the first Christian prayer service held in the camps and included Christians from the USA, Spain and Muslims from Algeria and the Western Sahara (Defense Forum Foundation n.d.).

Scholte has widely transmitted accounts of the Sahrawi's receptivity to Christianity and overarching religious tolerance in the international arena, including before the US Congress and the UN Decolonization Committee on numerous occasions since 2002. Alongside Scholte, several other evangelists have advocated for the Sahrawi people at Capitol Hill, and before the UN Decolonization Committee, including (in October 2009) Dan Stanley, senior pastor from RockFish Church who reportedly led the first prayer session in the camps, and Cheryl Banda and Janet Lenz from Christ The Rock Community Church (UN General Assembly 2009). The Polisario's determination to activate not only evangelists' humanitarian assistance but also their political support is arguably, at least in part, as a result of these organizations' proven dedication and efficiency in so prominently lobbying on behalf of 'the Sahrawi people.'

The most active of the American evangelical groups throughout the 2000s has been the Wisconsin-based Christ The Rock Church.⁵ This organization provides humanitarian aid packages to Sahrawi refugees which are enveloped in evangelical imagery and translated extracts from the Gospel; has established and run the Es-Salam ('Peace') English language school in Smara Refugee Camp since 2004;⁶ and organizes regular trips to the camps for members of the Church and American Congress to attend bi-lingual 'prayer services', 'inter-faith dialogues' and 'worship concerts' with and for Sahrawi refugees (Kustusich 2009). In addition to these activities and services within the camps, members of Christ The Rock also host approximately 20 Sahrawi children every summer, organizing political demonstrations in

support of the Sahrawi quest for self-determination, and directly advocating for the Sahrawi ‘cause’ in the United States and beyond.

As has been recognized by the Polisario Front, ‘a successful performance usually requires enlisting and empowering a supporting cast [who] are frequently recruited from audiences’ (Benford and Hunt 1992: 40). In their role as active and powerful advocates for the Sahrawi in the US and international arenas, members of Christ The Rock systematically represent ‘the Sahrawi people’ as intrinsically tolerant of different cultures and religions and willing to ‘peacefully’ participate in ‘interfaith dialogues’ (Lenz, quoted in Kustusich 2009). As such, Polisario’s American ‘brothers and sisters’ ‘perform the performance’ outside the camps, ‘accept[ing] and act[ing] upon their particular presentation as if it were unquestionably real’ (Benford and Hunt 1992: 38). In some cases, this entails reciting an existing ‘script’ on a new ‘stage’, but typically also results in varying degrees of transformation of the script, or the purposeful highlighting of particular terms and dynamics which might have been less centrally located in the ‘original’ performance.

However, while the Sahrawi are officially assigned the roles of ‘ideal’ Muslim refugees precisely by virtue of their ‘tolerant Islam’ which ‘not only openly welcome[s] Christians into their refugee camps’ but has ‘even’ led to the Polisario explicitly ‘ask[ing] Christians to establish churches in their homeland once the refugees return [to the Western Sahara]’ (Scholte 2005), the presence and activism of evangelists in the camps and beyond is not unequivocally accepted by other, non-evangelical actors in the camps.

Tensions and Negotiating Stages in the Camps

As noted by Ferris, ‘evangelical groups, which see their humanitarian work as an integral part of their missionary activities,’ are often criticized by both secular and ‘traditional faith-based organizations which are committed to respecting the religious beliefs of those whom they assist’ (2005: 317). On the one hand, Janet Lenz of Christ The Rock assures observers that ‘we didn’t come here to convert anyone... We’re trying to open up conversation so we can better love our fellow man’ (quoted in Kustusich 2009). Despite this assertion, however, Christ The Rock’s *Statement of Faith* (posted on the Church’s official webpage) indicates clearly that members ‘believe in Christ’s commission to preach the gospel to every creature, and to make disciples of all nations’, citing Matthew 28: 19–20 and Mark 16: 15 (Christ The Rock n.d.). In line with other faith-based evangelical missionary organizations (Clarke 2006: 835), Christ The Rock aims to spread the Gospel (i.e. ‘evangelize’) beyond the Church’s existing congregation, by sharing the ‘Good News’ and encouraging conversion. They therefore share ‘the belief that more souls can be brought to Christ through the witness of caring for the needs of others than by merely preaching Christianity’ (Thaut 2009: 326, referencing Bornstein 2005).

It is recognized that 'the activities of evangelical groups which combine assistance with a missionary message can have repercussions on all faith-based humanitarian organizations' (Ferris 2005: 317), in so far as non-evangelical organizations can be 'stained' and viewed with 'suspicion' by *recipient* populations (these terms were used by a senior Save the Children employee cited in de Cordier 2009: 620). Equally, the local and international activism of evangelists may be more vehemently rejected by other secular and Christian humanitarian aid *providers* than by recipient populations themselves. An inherent incompatibility may therefore be identified not only between the belief systems of aid providers and aid recipients, but also between different groups of aid providers themselves, including in particular those which privilege the 'secular' and purportedly 'neutral' foundations of what the same employee referred to as '*bona fide*' humanitarian organizations (*ibid.*).⁷

Indeed, a number of Spanish NGO workers whom I interviewed in the 27 February Camp and Smara Camp spontaneously expressed concerns regarding the presence of evangelists in the camps, with one Spanish doctor stating that 'although it might sound like a conspiracy theory, I don't trust them—what are they *doing* here?' (author's translation). Equally, a group of female Spanish 'Friends of the Sahrawi' vocally rejected the presence of evangelists who had organized a two-hour 'worship concert' and 'barbecue' in the sand dunes on the outskirts of one of the refugee camps in 2002 (personal observations, March 2002).

In apparent opposition to Ferris' conclusion that 'the activities of evangelical Christian groups in traditionally Islamic societies have had a negative impact on inter-faith relations' (2005: 324), it is precisely the presence and activism of these groups which are invoked by the Polisario to demonstrate the 'ideal' nature of the camps *as* spaces of 'religious tolerance' and 'inter-faith dialogue.' Indeed, the Polisario's Sahrawi Union of Journalists and Writers has reflected, on the English version of their webpage, that 'much of the discourse of the solidarity movement between Western Sahara and non-Muslim partners is secularized' and that the inter-faith dialogues organized by Christ The Rock and the Sahrawi Youth Union are

an example of how religious faith can also be brought into the discourse of the solidarity movement, a move that perhaps helps non-Muslim friends of Western Sahara understand their Saharawi colleagues in a way that is closer to how many Saharawi see themselves (UPES 2008).

As such, the presence of evangelists in the camps is officially represented as having the potential to provide a space within which Sahrawis are able to publicly identify themselves and be identified by others as Muslims, rather than through the secular lens outlined above.

Despite such official public declarations, however, in a refugee camp context characterized by significant power inequalities, in which the Sahrawi are

represented as an audience which is eager to allow missionaries to complete their own religious performances, we must ask whether the Polisario's dedicated efforts to maximize evangelists' humanitarian and political support leave space for Sahrawi refugees who are not members of the Polisario to critique, debate, or reject the presence and activities of such groups.

The Tyrannies of Tolerance?

I argue that rather than creating and maintaining a dialogic process between Sahrawi refugees and both secular- and faith-based humanitarians, recent initiatives and representational strategies in the camps are reinforcing what we might call 'the tyranny of tolerance.' Maintaining the appearance of tolerance on-stage is founded upon what I refer to here and elsewhere as a system of *repress-entation* which purposefully centralizes certain groups, identifiers and dynamics whilst simultaneously displacing and marginalizing those which challenge official accounts of the camps (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2009a; 2010b).⁸ In the context of the 2008 inter-faith dialogues held in the camps,

to avoid potential tension, only a few political leaders from the Polisario Front (the independence movement of the Sahrawi people), local religious leaders and volunteers from Christ The Rock were invited (Kustusch 2009, my emphasis).

On this occasion, as at the 2002 'worship concert' referred to above, the Sahrawi 'audience' was restricted to those who had already officially demonstrated their allegiance to the official script of 'tolerance.' Furthermore, specific 'unofficial scripts' were ultimately inexpressible in this public arena:

Janet Lenz, the founder of Christ The Rock's Sahrawi project, asserted that 'while a few of the attendees at the inaugural session *did attempt to debate*, the proceedings were for the *most part peaceful and cordial*' (*ibid.*, my emphasis).

Tolerance and peacefulness here are conceptualized as being dependent upon the repression of 'debate' or contestation on-stage, recreating the camps as spaces of unequivocal acceptance of the religious Other.⁹ In light of Harrell-Bond's designation of the Sahrawi as 'good' refugees because of their reluctance to 'complain' (1999: 151), we must therefore ask under what circumstances different groups of Sahrawis are *allowed* to complain and reject certain interventions (also see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2009a and 2010c). We must concurrently question to what extent power imbalances and dependence upon external support *condition* refugees' potential responses to diverse donors and initiatives.

While both the Polisario and Christ The Rock have limited the general refugee population's access to inter-faith and Christian worship activities in the camps, the annual hosting programme for Sahrawi children provides another clear example of the extent to which certain audiences are unable

to observe specific, potentially controversial stages. Just as evangelists are unable to access refugees' performances 'back-stage' for a combination of linguistic, temporal and spatial reasons (also see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2009a), so too are Sahrawi families prevented from accessing the spaces in which their children are hosted and mobilized in the United States. Sahrawi children's visits to the United States are a key part of the international public relations strategy promoted by the Polisario Front, with these children acting as 'ambassadors' for the Sahrawi people, just as they do in the more established Spanish hosting programme (in which up to 10,000 children participate a year; see Crivello and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2010). During their time in the US, children stay with members of evangelical churches, regularly attend church with their host families, and participate in high-profile demonstrations.

In an account of one such demonstration, the Be Their Voice project (jointly run by Christ The Rock and the US–Western Sahara Foundation) reports that

we joined our voices together in songs that drew our hearts and eyes heavenward to the God of Justice who cares so much for these forgotten people of the desert. From our hearts of love for the Saharawi, united cheers began to ring out for them. The crowd of Christ Followers closed in tighter around the children, and suddenly, the voices rising above all other were those of the children . . . in their own language, crying out for freedom (Be Their Voice 2007).

In such contexts, evangelical actors and the Polisario are able to enact performances which are inaccessible to Sahrawi refugees in the camps, while Sahrawi children themselves are positioned centre-stage as performers who 'belong' to the Sahrawi cause (a cause which they represent as 'pure victims' of the conflict, cf. Malkki 1995: 11–12; also see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2009b), rather than 'belonging' to their parents. Given their physical absence, Sahrawi parents are unable to observe their children's socio-political and religious interactions on diverse American stages, or to respond to, and potentially resist and reject, scenes in which 'the crowd of Christ Followers close in tighter around the[ir] children.'

While it is not the purpose of this paper to reveal Sahrawi refugees' 'authentic' religious beliefs and priorities, it is nonetheless worth briefly noting that Sahrawi adults regularly express concerns regarding the impact of children's short- and long-term absences from the camps upon their religious identity and identification. Indeed, one female interviewee explicitly asked that

The Sahrawi delegates outside must pay attention to these children [abroad] so that they maintain their links with the Sahrawi culture and its people. . . The westerner [*sic*], for example, does not eat cuscus and does not pray, they have different traditions and customs. Therefore I hope that the guards and representatives are responsible and that they provide the children with proper guidance (40-year old woman cited in Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2009a).

I would therefore conjecture that a general awareness of the above-mentioned performances would potentially activate the ‘tension’ which has remained latent until now, alienating Sahrawis whose individual, familial and collective priorities and concerns may be irrevocably different from those of Polisario and evangelical actors alike. In the tightly controlled camp context, however, there is no space for such dissenting voices to be heard by non-Sahrawi audiences, demonstrating the heterogeneity both of refugees’ preferences, and of their ability to perform, observe or critique Sahrawi and non-Sahrawi representations ostensibly undertaken on their behalf.

Concluding Remarks

In this article I have argued that ‘faith’ and ‘religion’ can be conceptualized as forming part of a fluid script which is dynamically projected by Sahrawi and non-Sahrawi actors to diverse audiences across local and international stages. In order to convince external observers of the justifiability and necessity of their humanitarian and political support for the Sahrawi ‘cause’, I have proposed that the Polisario variously centralizes or marginalizes Islam in a range of representational strategies, or performances, according to the perceived priorities of the ever-changing audience(s). More precisely, I have explored the nature and implications of evangelists’ activism in and for the Sahrawi refugee camps, arguing that their presence is mobilized by both the Polisario and evangelists themselves in local and international arenas to demonstrate the ‘ideal’ nature of ‘the Sahrawi people.’ However, although the Polisario has the potential to ‘ingratiate themselves’ (Harrell-Bond 1999: 151) with their supporters through representations of the camps as unique spaces of religious freedom and tolerance and of ‘the Sahrawi people’ as inherently welcoming of evangelical groups, these performances equally have the potential to create an irreconcilable rupture not only with other, non-evangelical donors (including ‘secular’ Spanish ‘Friends of the Sahrawi’), but also between the Polisario and the very refugees which this organization purports to represent. The enactment of such debates and contestations, however, is suppressed in the camps via strategies of *repress-entation* which limit the audibility, visibility and very presence of those actors whose individual, familial and collective priorities and concerns may be diametrically opposed to those of key donors and the Polisario alike. In this way, different groups of Sahrawi refugees, Polisario representatives and non-Sahrawi humanitarians have recourse to unequal fields of vision and action, whilst all simultaneously put ‘faith’ in aid.

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1. Nonetheless, elsewhere I build upon Scott's analogy of on-stage and off-stage projections of official and hidden transcripts respectively (1990), to contrast the Sahrawis' official representation of secularism to Western audiences on-stage, with the 'religious normality' expressed and performed off-stage by diverse Sahrawi actors in the absence of Western observers (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2009a).
2. An in-depth analysis of 'secularism' (a much debated and analysed concept and political project) is beyond the scope of this article, and yet it is crucial to note that 'secularism is not an absence of religion' nor must it be 'antagonistic to religion'; rather, it is 'a specific cultural formation in its own right' (Warner 2007: 210). In the context of the present analysis, I find that the most useful general definition of secularization is that of religion becoming and remaining a *private* matter (e.g. Asad 2001, 2006: 494; Hann 2000). Religion in the Sahrawi case-study can be defined as a private matter in so far as it is separated, not from either the state or the Sahrawi public, but rather from non-Sahrawi observers.
3. The Polisario's discursive constitution of the Sahrawi as 'good' 'secular' Muslims (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2009a, 2010a) almost directly parallels broader categorizations of 'good' forms of 'secular Islam' in France: 'The qualities of "secular Muslims" were equated [by the MMLF] with peace, justice, liberty, *laïcité*, freedom of conscience, freedom of speech, individual freedom, free will, the reform of Islam, absolute equality in rights between men and women, and inter-religious dialogue' (Mas 2006: 596).
4. This invisibility is reinforced by official Polisario declarations, including those made by the Sahrawi representative to the United States, whose interview with *The Christian Science Monitor* led the journalist to report that 'mosques are conspicuously absent from the camps' (Thorne 2004).
5. While a number of evangelical groups have visited the camps, including members of the RockFish Church referred to above, Christ The Rock Church is the most active and visible of these both within the camps and in the international arena. It is for this reason that this paper focuses on that particular Church's initiatives in Algeria and in the United States.
6. There were reportedly between 15 and 20 American evangelists teaching English in the Smara refugee camp at the time of my fourth fieldwork visit to the camps in 2007. Also see <http://www.betheirvoice.org/programs>, last accessed 5 September 2010.
7. For a critique of the foundations and implications of secular humanitarianism, see Ager and Ager (2011).
8. For instance, in Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2010b) I analyse the *repress-entation* of violence against women in mainstream accounts of the Sahrawi refugee camps (also see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2009a).
9. Indeed, as noted by Asad, 'too often in post-Enlightenment society "to tolerate" [religious] differences simply implies not taking them seriously' (1997: 195).

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