Religion and American foreign policy: the Bush-Obama divide and its impact on Transatlantic relations

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Introduction

A comparatively religious United States and a largely secular Europe logically have a different perspective on the nature of international relations. This was the conclusion drawn by Javier Solana, the EU’s High Representative for the common foreign and security policy, when explaining the deep-seated causes of the transatlantic discordance during the presidency of George W. Bush.

That religion is an important factor in foreign policy-making is not a new finding. As explained by leading authors in the field, the moral and religious beliefs held by policy-makers can be seen as their ‘guides to action’ or ‘cognitive maps’. They «[...] serve as a prism or filter that influences the actor’s perception and diagnosis of political situations and that provides norms and standards to guide and channel his choices of action in specific situations».

According to Solana, the Bush administration’s religious certainty resulted in an explanation of international relations in terms of evil, moral choice and free will, while Europeans generally saw a more nuanced complex of psychological and political factors behind the evolutions in world affairs. As a result, Solana feared increasing transatlantic discordance.

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3 George, Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy, cit., p. 45. For a similar view, see Judith Goldstein, Robert O. Keohane, “Ideas and Foreign Policy: An Analytical Framework”, in Id. (eds.), Ideas and Foreign Policy. Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1993, pp. 3 and 13-17.
tension between the unyieldingly clear moral distinctions of the Bush administration and the European search for international compromise.

Political scientists such as Timothy J. Lynch and Robert S. Singh – arguing that the Bush administration’s religious rhetoric and ideologically divisive argumentation represented the mainstream tradition in American foreign policy – concluded that there was no reason to expect a different approach from Bush’s successor. This article finds otherwise. While religion continues to be an important source of inspiration in the foreign policy rhetoric of the United States, the analysis by such authors as Lynch and Singh is all too simplistic. George W. Bush and Barack Obama represent two fundamentally different streams of the American religious tradition. In contrast with the Bush approach to religion and international affairs, Obama’s philosophical and religious views – far from limiting the possibilities of international cooperation – constitute an active incentive for engagement and compromise and are an important contributing factor to the transatlantic reconciliation.

The Bush administration, religion and international affairs

Sociological and political studies regularly confirm the strongly held Christian beliefs of the American population, especially in the Mid and South West, and their extensive political exploitation. This contrasts with Western Europe’s increasing secularization. The constitutionalisation of Western Europe’s enlightenment thinking – and the memories of Europe’s devastating wars of religion – have established a tradition of seeing religion as a largely private matter that is best kept outside the realm of political argumentation. In the United States, the relationship between religion and politics has a different history. Already in 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote that he knew of «[...] no country in the world where the Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America». As historian Walter A. McDougall has described, during the first century of its

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existence, America self-identified with the notion of a promised land where devout Christians would live in liberty under God. In its second century, the promised land evolved into a crusader State, called to save the world. Thus, according to Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., America started seeing itself as an elect nation or a redeemer nation, entrusted by the Almighty with the charge of carrying its light to the unregenerate world. During the presidency of George W. Bush, the role of religion as an important factor in American foreign policy formulation reached new heights. Frequently talking about Christ as his Saviour, Bush was – according to some accounts – convinced that he was «in the Lord’s hands», acting as God’s chosen instrument. As remarked by Samuel Huntington, when coming into office, Bush and his Attorney General John Ashcroft were determined to underline the role of religion in American life and to give a major boost to government support for religious associations.

Following the Al Qaeda attacks of September 2001 and the resulting global war on terror, Bush’s emphasis on America’s God-given values and the evangelical phrasing of his foreign policy statements became particularly divisive in their international context. In the days immediately after 11 September 2001, Bush caused a controversy when warning Americans that «[...] this crusade, this war on terrorism is going to take a while». The use of the word crusade brought to mind the medieval Christian wars to recover the Holy Lands from the Muslims. It raised fears among Europeans that the United States response to the September 2001 attacks could spark a clash of civilizations and contribute to Al Qaeda’s goal: a war between the Muslim world and the West. Even after the crusade firestorm, Bush

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continued to build his speeches on religious metaphors and references to the United States as the blessed country in a struggle against the evil terrorists. In an address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American people, following the attacks, Bush typically underlined that the American citizens could be «[...] assured for the rightness of our cause, and confident of the victories to come» because «[...] freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war, and we know God is not neutral between them». Similarly, in his second inaugural address, Bush emphasised that the cause of the United States was aligned with that of the «Maker of Heaven and Earth» and «Author of Liberty». Such language, together with the war of choice in Iraq and the strong support for Israel created an impression in the Arab world that the United States was engaging in a worldwide war against Islam. The frequent use by Bush’s neoconservative supporters of the term Islamofascists to designate the enemy only reinforced this impression in the Muslim world.

On the other side of the Atlantic, European leaders were worried about the political consequences of this religious discourse as it risked destroying decades of patient attempts to build a constructive intercultural and Euro-Mediterranean dialogue. For senior German diplomat Karsten Voigt – the Coordinator of German-American Cooperation in Berlin’s Foreign Office – historical reasons made it particularly hard for Europeans to accept the link that Bush made between religion and patriotism. Voigt recalled that, as recently as in World War I, the belt buckle of German soldiers were inscribed with «God is with us». As the Europeans had consciously decided never to return to the period of their own history when wars and colonial conquests were justified by the use of religion, Voigt emphasized that the political-religious rhetoric of the Bush administration «[...] meets not just with incomprehension in Europe, but with dismay».

16 In this context, it is interesting to note that the top-secret intelligence briefings from the Secretary of Defense to President Bush in the days after the US invasion of Iraq had cover sheets that juxtaposed war images with inspirational Bible quotes. For example, the cover of the Secretary of Defense’s Worldwide Intelligence Update of 31 March 2003 showed a US tank in the Iraqi desert beneath a quote from Ephesians 6:13: «Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand». See Robert Draper, *And He Shall Be Judged*, available at [http://men.style.com/gq/features/news/landing?id=content_9217](http://men.style.com/gq/features/news/landing?id=content_9217) and [http://men.style.com/gq/features/topsecret](http://men.style.com/gq/features/topsecret).


One of the consequences of the Bush administration’s religious certainty was a strong tendency to see the world in simple black and white terms. Immediately after the attacks of September 2001, Bush warned that «[…] every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists»23. The same attitude manifested itself in Bush’s categorization of States and other actors in international affairs as strictly good or evil. In his famous «axis of evil» speech of January 2002, Bush singled out North Korea, Iran and Iraq as belonging to the camp of the morally wrong: States that were instruments for «the evil designs of tyrants»24. In spite of the criticism, Bush strongly defended his choice of words: «Some worry that it is somehow undiplomatic or impolite to speak the language of right and wrong. I disagree. […] We are in a conflict between good and evil, and America will call evil by its name. By confronting evil and lawless regimes, we do not create a problem; we reveal a problem. And we will lead the world in opposing it»25. Even in his farewell address, Bush returned to the theme: «America must maintain our moral clarity. I’ve often spoken to you about good and evil, and this has made some uncomfortable. But good and evil are present in this world, and between the two of them there can be no compromise»26.

The separation of the universe in absolute good and absolute evil made it morally impossible for the United States to engage in normal diplomatic relations with those branded as evil. As Stephen Chan has remarked, the Bush administration’s refusal to talk to the enemy was a logical consequence of its Manichean worldview because «[…] what is called “evil” is almost automatically beyond redemption, beyond discourse, beyond comprehension and understanding»27. Therefore, evil cannot be a partner in honourable compromise. It can only be defeated. According to Solana, the ethical abruptness of the Bush «good versus evil» approach constituted a misreading of international politics. The Eu’s High Representative approvingly cited Robert Kaplan who saw States as actors in an endless navigation for advantage and therefore amenable to change if given the right incentives28.


25 George W. Bush, Commencement Address at the United States Military Academy, West Point, New York, 1 June 2002.


28 Solana, The Transatlantic Rift, cit., p. 63.
According to Lynch and Singh, Europe should not have been surprised by the Bush administration’s religious and Manichean rhetoric. Interpreting the struggle with radical Islamic fundamentalism as the «Second Cold War on Islamist Terror», they state that «[...] crusades are basic and regularized phenomena in American public policy – foreign and domestic. The First Cold War was a crusade, literally so, against an atheistic communist empire. Not to have spoken in similar terms after the Twin Towers fell would have been extraordinary»\(^29\). For Lynch and Singh, the Bush administration was working within the well-established tradition of the sharp ideological confrontation that characterized American foreign policy since the First Cold War. Furthermore, they argued that this tradition was likely to continue after Bush’s departure.

As Seymour Martin Lipset underlined more than a decade ago, it is correct that there is a strand in America’s foreign policy articulation whereby conflicts are systematically looked upon as «battles between God and the Devil», so that «[...] compromise is virtually unthinkable»\(^30\). According to Lipset, this view of American exceptionalism always included an ‘emphasis on non-recognition of evil foreign regimes. The principle is related to the insistence that wars must end with the unconditional surrender of the Satanic enemy’\(^31\). Contrary to Lynch and Singh, who seem to interpret this way of thinking as the mainstream and only feasible way of acting for future administrations, the Bush-type of religious and Manichean rhetoric should be seen as the emanation of a very particular school; what Walter Russell Mead has called the fundamentalist stream of American Protestantism\(^32\). It is characterized by a deeply pessimistic view about the prospect for world order and an unbridgeable divide between believers and nonbelievers. Hostile toward the idea of world order based on secular morality and global institutions such as the United Nations, Russell Mead has made clear that the fundamentalists interpret the terrorist attacks of September 2001 as part of the imminent and apocalyptic Last Judgment characterized by a final clash between Christ and Satan\(^33\).

In contrast with the prediction of Lynch and Singh, the Obama administration, while also relying heavily on faith, rejected this fundamentalist strand in America’s politico-religious tradition. As will become clear in the following section of this article, Obama’s foreign policy practice is resolutely part of what Russell Mead called the American tradition of liberal Christianity. Aiming for the support for progressive political causes at home and abroad, liberal Christians have often interpreted their religious conviction as a call for results-oriented common action between Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, and nonreligious people

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\(^{29}\) Lynch, Singh, *After Bush*, cit., p. 44.


\(^{33}\) *Idem*, pp. 27-29.
for the common good, thus enhancing the prospect for stable, international – as well as transatlantic – cooperation\textsuperscript{34}.

The Obama administration, religion and international affairs

Already before taking up his presidential duties, Barack Obama signalled a fundamental disagreement with what he perceived as the Bush administration’s misuse of religion. Speaking on the final primary night for the Democratic nomination, he rejected «[...] the kind of politics that uses religion as a wedge and patriotism as a bludgeon»\textsuperscript{35}. In his first months in office, Obama used a series of mutually reinforcing public remarks to systematically reach out to people of all life stances, and in particular Muslims\textsuperscript{36}. In contrast with his predecessor, Obama refused to identify America with the white evangelical Christians of the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition. «Whatever we once were», he said, «we are no longer just a Christian nation; we are also a Jewish nation, a Muslim nation, a Buddhist nation, a Hindu nation, and a nation of nonbelievers»\textsuperscript{37}. Demonstrating a strong commitment to mending relations between the United States and the Muslim world, Obama repeatedly underlined that the United States was not, and would never be, at war with Islam\textsuperscript{38}. Marking a personal difference with his predecessor, the new president emphasized that «[...] many Americans have Muslims in their families or have lived in a Muslim-majority country – I know, because I am one of them»\textsuperscript{39}.

«Far too often», Obama remarked at his first National Prayer Breakfast, «we have seen faith wielded as a tool to divide us from one another – as an excuse for prejudice and intolerance». Instead, the new administration proposed faith as a bridge for positive action and cooperation beyond the traditional cleavages. Underlining the overlapping, common principles of religion – justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings – Obama repeatedly highlighted the

\textsuperscript{34} Idem, p. 31.
\textsuperscript{37} Barack Obama, \textit{The Audacity of Hope}, New York, Crown, 2006, p. 218. Obama repeated this in his Inaugural Address and in his television interview with Al Arabiya. See also Barack Obama, \textit{Press Availability with Turkish President Gul}, Ankara, Turkey, 6 April 2009.
\textsuperscript{39} Obama, \textit{Remarks to the Turkish Parliament}, cit..
Golden Rule that, in his eyes, was binding all great life stances together: «[...] that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us»\(^{40}\). Bringing the Golden Rule into practice, Obama argued «[...] requires us not only to believe, but to do – to give something of ourselves for the benefit of others and the betterment of our world»\(^{41}\). As he recalled in *The Audacity of Hope*, it was precisely this motivating and constructive dimension of faith – as a bridge for common action between and for people of different origins – that first attracted him to religion\(^{42}\). It was by working with Church people on the South Side of Chicago, «[...] who simply wanted to help neighbours who were down on their luck – no matter what they looked like, or where they came from, or who they prayed to» that Obama «first heard God’s spirit»\(^{43}\). Seeing religion in the strong African American tradition as a spur for social change, Obama thus made political use of faith as «the wellspring not of certainty but of hope»\(^{44}\). In other words, Obama’s outlook on religion converged with the return to – what Anne-Marie Slaughter and Tod Lindberg called – the genius of America’s foundational arrangements:

«[...] they extend a welcoming hand to those from different religious traditions or from none to join the community of goodwill that is not contingent on embracing the faith tradition from which it arose, but on accepting the obligation toward others. This understanding of faith unifies rather than divides. It makes room for those of many faiths and those of no faith to come together around a set of moral principles for conduct both at home and abroad»\(^{45}\).

Obama’s perspective on faith had several consequences for his foreign policy. Trying to convince the world that the United States was no longer the Christian crusader from the Bush era, the new President repeatedly called upon the international community to see his country as a partner looking for international cooperation based on overarching values «[...] of the common humanity that binds us together»\(^{46}\). In line with Russell Mead’s description of the ‘liberal Christian’ ideal type, Obama’s interpretation of faith served as a bridge to the world rather than a separation line\(^{47}\). As he underlined in his Cairo speech: «[...] faith should bring us together»\(^{48}\). By looking at the common hopes and values of mankind – transcending specific nations, peoples and religions – Obama hoped that «[...] the particular faith that motivates each of us can promote a greater good for all of us. Instead of driving us apart, our varied beliefs can bring us together to feed the

\(^{40}\) Obama, *Remarks at National Prayer Breakfast*, cit.; Obama, *Remarks on a New Beginning*, cit..

\(^{41}\) Obama, *Remarks at National Prayer Breakfast*, cit..


\(^{43}\) Obama, *Remarks at National Prayer Breakfast*, cit..


\(^{45}\) Slaughter, Lindberg, *Back to Basics*, cit., p. 8. Anne-Marie Slaughter joined the Obama administration as Director of Policy Planning at the US Department of State.

\(^{46}\) Obama, *Videotaped Remarks in Celebration of Nowruz*, cit..


\(^{48}\) Obama, *Remarks on a New Beginning*, cit.
hungry and comfort the afflicted; to make peace where there is strife and rebuild what has broken; to lift up those who have fallen on hard times» 49. His main point was that interfaith dialogue had to be turned «[...] into interfaith service, so bridges between peoples lead to action – whether it is combating malaria in Africa or in providing relief after a natural disaster» 50. Going from this general principle to his own administration’s own policy toward the Muslim world, Obama underlined the capital importance of concrete cooperative achievements. «Our focus», he stated in Cairo «will be on what we can do, in partnership with people across the Muslim world, to advance our common hopes and our common dreams»:

«Above all, above all we will demonstrate through actions our commitment to a better future. I want to help more children get the education that they need to succeed. We want to promote health care in places where people are vulnerable. We want to expand the trade and investment that can bring prosperity for all people [...] And when people look back on this time, let it be said of America that we extended the hand of friendship to all people» 51.

Obama’s interpretation of faith as a source for cooperative action contributed to a general conception of American foreign policy that was fundamentally different from the «God versus the Devil» approach of his predecessor. While Bush defended the moral clarity that came with a separation of good from evil, Obama put the emphasis on international politics as an opportunity to work together in the spirit of compromise, rather than as a tool to divide:

«All of us share this world for a brief moment in time. The question is whether we spend that time focused on what pushes us apart, or whether we commit ourselves to an effort – a sustained effort – to find common ground, to focus on the future we seek for our children, and to respect the dignity of all human beings» 52.

As explained by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, finding common ground was the main focus of the administration’s foreign policy:

«We’re not going to agree with everybody; that is obvious. We have our own perspectives and experience and goals. But we want to work in a constructive way [...] why would we just focus on the disagreement? Let’s see how many areas of agreement we can sign off on, and then try to tackle the disagreement» 53.

Obama’s willingness to dialogue and diplomacy – especially with former enemies – was symbolized by a single phrase in his augural address: «[...] we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist» 54. After having opened a

49 Obama, Remarks at National Prayer Breakfast, cit..
50 Obama, Remarks on a New Beginning, cit..
51 Obama, Remarks to the Turkish Parliament, cit..
52 Obama, Remarks on a New Beginning, cit..
54 Obama, Inaugural Address, cit.
dialogue with old foes Syria and Cuba, agreed to exchanging ambassadors with Venezuela, reset relations with Russia, upgraded contacts with China, invited Iran and North Korea to come to the diplomatic negotiating table and announced the closure of the prison at Guantanamo Bay, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated that President Obama had effectively «[...] launched a new era of engagement based on common interests, shared values, and mutual respect»\(^55\). For Clinton, the purpose of Obama’s openness to diplomacy was to advance American interest by tilting the international society away from a multi-polar world based on competition and moving it toward a multi-partner world based on cooperation and shared responsibilities\(^56\). Likewise, Vice President Joe Biden stated that the administration was «[...] trying to build a multi-partner world [...] to make common cause on common challenges»\(^57\).

For Europe, the new President’s engagement for dialogue and common action – even with traditionally unfriendly regimes – constituted a welcome development. It contrasted with the good versus evil approach of George W. Bush that, according to Eu High Representative Javier Solana, had caused severe transatlantic tension on the approach of countries such as Iran. Bush’s moral judgment of the regime in Tehran prevented his administration from entering into a meaningful dialogue. Europe’s political analysis – and, as Solana emphasizes, not its moral relativism – encouraged it to bring about reform in Iran through engagement rather than through isolation\(^58\). The European experience itself – ending centuries of mortal enmity between France and Germany – was cited by Solana as explaining a dedication «[...] to a system of permanent negotiation that requires patience and compromise»\(^59\). In this light, Obama’s philosophical openness and emphasis on the search of common interests was applauded in Europe. Underlining the transformational character of Obama’s approach, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown welcomed him to London in April 2009 with the words: «[...] Your first 70 days in office have changed America and you have changed America’s relationship with the world»\(^60\). Following the Cairo speech in June 2009, individual European leaders expressed strong public support for the Obama approach. Solana hailed Obama’s remarks as «[...] without any doubt» opening «a new page in relations with the Arab-Muslim world». He added that «[...] many things in this speech [...] represent a meeting of minds with what the European Union has been defending for some time»\(^61\). Likewise, French President Nicolas Sarkozy – meeting Obama


\(^{58}\) Solana, *The Transatlantic Rift*, cit., p. 63.

\(^{59}\) *Idem*, p. 65.


just two days after the Cairo address – claimed that «France, Europe and the United States – are totally aligned [on Iran]» and that he «totally agreed» with Obama’s strategy on the Israeli and Palestinian issue. For José-Manuel Barroso, the President of the European Commission, Obama’s worldview was leading to a «growing convergence of European and American positions».

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German Chancellor Angela Merkel expressed herself in the same vein.

In contrast with the transatlantic rift in public opinion that accompanied the Bush era, the Obama approach also had a major appeal with the population in Europe. According to a survey by the Pew Global Attitudes Project six months after Obama’s inauguration, the perception of the world population toward the United States had much improved compared to the Bush period. While this was evident in Asia, Africa, Latin America and even in some Muslim countries, it was most marked in Western Europe. Between 2007 and July 2009, the favourability rating of the United States in France went up from 39 to 75 percent; in Germany from 30 to 64 percent; and in Britain from 51 to 69 percent. Even more pronounced was the belief among the European population that that Obama – as opposed to Bush – would «do the right thing in world affairs». The most spectacular change occurred in Germany. In 2008, only 14 percent of the Germans believed that Bush would do the right thing in world affairs. This figure shot up to 93 percent under Obama. In France, the figures evolved from 13 to 91 percent and in Britain from 16 to 86 percent. In other words, the Obama approach – as made explicit during his first six months in office – seemed to constitute a solid basis for the structural reinforcement of the transatlantic relationship.

Conclusion

The frequent references to religion and faith in the public pronouncements of Barack Obama – ending major speeches with the words «God Bless you, and may God Bless the United States of America» – could lead to the conclusion that his presidency constitutes a confirmation of the religious split between the United States and a Europe where religion traditionally plays a less pronounced role in public life. While this conclusion is valid, a closer examination of Obama’s messages makes clear that – in contrast with Bush – he sees faith, not as a rigid moral compass to divide good from evil, but as a vehicle to promote collaborative action and engagement across national and religious dividing lines. As such, the

62 Nicolas Sarkozy, Remarks with President Obama in Press Availability, Prefecture Caen, France, 6 June 2009.
impact of the religious connotations in Obama’s statements is very different from that of his predecessor. For Obama, faith is an instrument that should inspire people to invest «in our common humanity». In this sense, Obama’s thinking is very close to the secular reasoning expressed in the *North-South*, *Common Security* and *Our Common Future* reports produced under the leadership of European social democrats Willy Brandt, Olof Palme and Gro Harlem Brundtland. Logically, for Solana, President Obama’s agenda for change – with its emphasis on traditional European and social democratic concerns – was «immensely welcome». In other words, Obama’s interpretation of the relationship between religion and international affairs – and his reversal of the Bush approach to this relationship – was an important contributing factor to closing the fundamental philosophical gap that characterised the transatlantic relationship during the Bush era. This conclusion underscores the flaws in the reasoning of authors such as Lynch and Singh for whom Bush’s Manichean rhetoric represented the mainstream in American foreign policy and for whom continuity of this approach after Bush seemed the only option. The American presidential elections, so it seems, did make a difference.

While both Bush and Obama made use of religion as an instrument in their foreign policy, the inspiration they drew from it resulted in opposite approaches to foreign policy. Bush’s dogmatic understanding of Christianity – and his conviction that God was not neutral in the battles between good America and its evil enemies – left little or no room for compromise in international affairs. This fundamentalist interpretation of religion constitutes an important stream of American Protestantism, but it does not hold a monopoly over American religious thinking. As Anne-Marie Slaughter and Walter Russell Mead have correctly pointed out, the United States also has a strong liberal Christian tradition. It is in this tradition that Obama’s vision of faith must be seen – as an encouragement to common action that bridges religious and national cleavages.

Six months into his presidency, Obama has clearly established the fundamental philosophical principles on which he is constructing his foreign policy. The new policy formulation has had an immediate and positive impact on the state of transatlantic relations. It will be interesting to return to these foundational elements of Obama’s foreign policy at the end of his first term with a view to reassess both the degree to which the initial philosophical framework withstood the test of time and the extent to which it has contributed to the longer-term transatlantic convergence in international affairs.

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