

# Religion, faith and global politics

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# Introduction

LORRAINE ELLIOTT

Since the end of the Cold War, a number of scholars have speculated that religious differences have come to replace the ideological differences of that earlier period, giving some resonance to Samuel Huntington's clash of civilisations and a new twist to Francis Fukuyama's end of history thesis. The empirical base for claims about a resurgence of religion-based inspiration for and justification of foreign policy actions, and the diplomatic challenges that this inspires, can be found in a number of quarters. This includes the proclaimed role of faith in the personal and public politics of a number of contemporary leaders; the growth in what seems to be faith-based non-state actors whose actions often link religion with rebellion, violence and resistance; internal politics in a number of countries in which religion or faith are increasingly tied up with matters of state and disputes over public policy (ranging from the debate over religious symbols in schools in France to electoral competition over the value of a secular versus Islamic state in Turkey); and provocations of various kinds that seem designed to demonise rather than respect religious difference, such as the recent confrontations over the so-called Muhammad cartoons first published in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in September 2005.

Religion and faith have become increasingly 'securitised', articulated as one part of a broad-ranging crisis in world order, used to justify increasing military expenditure, offensive defence and pre-emptive action. They have also become the declaratory and public faces of much (although clearly not all) of contemporary political terrorism. In its most extreme and simplistic terms, and some would argue its most dangerous, this securitisation becomes a struggle between good and evil in which the pursuit of understanding has given way to stark and often simplistic dualisms that rest on incommensurable differences between 'them' and 'us'.

Despite the separation of state and church associated with the development of the secular state since the seventeenth century, at least in Europe and its outposts, one could reasonably argue that religion and faith have never been entirely absent from the stage of international relations and world politics. They have been vehicles for conflict and the pursuit of power, on the one hand, and driving forces in humanitarianism and social justice on the other. Religion, especially Christianity, was central to the imperial mission, the 'mission civilatrice' which sought to acquire territory and resources for economic and political gain but also to bring Christian civilisation to 'barbarians' at the same time as it sought to subjugate them. On other fronts,

Western, particularly American support for underground churches in the communist bloc was a key feature of the Cold War. Various kinds of faith claims were caught up in nationalist movements both before and after the decolonisation movements of the post-Second World War period. Even in the supposedly secular West, religion and faith became markers for domestic inclusion and exclusion or for determining friends and enemies (or at least those about whom one should be wary) in international politics. At the same time, of course, faith-based groups of all kinds have been equally prominent, alongside non-faith based groups, in the peace movement, in demands for greater global social justice and for ‘making poverty history’, in delivering humanitarian assistance in extreme emergencies, and in seeking to publicise and protect those who are most vulnerable, globally as well as locally.

Contemporary concerns about the role of religion and faith in world politics have often overlooked this persistence in favour of a resurgence theory. This *Keynote* examines a number of key themes and sites in the apparent resurgence of religion and faith in global politics to offer a more critical inquiry into what are, as all of the authors here observe, complex issues. As Stuart Harris notes in the final piece in this collection, the rise of conservative forms of religion is both geographically widespread and not confined to Christianity or Islam. Yet it is the latter two that have provided much of the fodder for public debate in Australia and elsewhere about the role and place of religion and religious identities in domestic and foreign policy. For that reason, it is also those two faiths, despite often substantial differences and tensions within them, around which a number of settled and often unquestioned assumptions have arisen. The four papers here revisit those assumptions.

The *Keynote* starts with Mark Beeson’s investigation of the role of faith and religion in US foreign policy. He argues that alongside the characterisation of the US as a secular liberal democratic state, we should take seriously the evangelical Christian influence on that country’s leaders and its foreign policy. While this is partly a feature of the present Bush administration—although it has precedents in other administrations as both Beeson and Harris point out—it is a feature of an American exceptionalism that reinforces a sense of special providence, both personal and collective, that sets the US apart from its European and other allies (even those, such as the United Kingdom, whose prime minister also occasionally blurs the line between his private faith and his public policy). At the same time, the idea of a commitment to the theological truth, Beeson points out, gives the US something more in common with radical Islam than with the more secular parts of the developed world.

In the second of the essays, Shahram Akbarzadeh explores the radical aspect of Islam as a force in global politics. As well as pointing out the diversity within foreign policy positions among Muslim actors, both

state and non-state, he also draws attention to an often overlooked but central aspect of the Islamic perspective on global affairs: a sense of unfairness that rests on tangible grievances and a desire to be treated as equal and as equals. In other words, this is as much if not more a politics of (in)justice as it is a politics of religion. This, he suggests, is made more potent because of a view that there are no meaningful mechanisms through which to address the lack of fairness and parity which is perceived to underpin inconsistencies in US policy, sometimes supported by other states, on nuclear issues, on Israel, and on the outcomes of democratic elections.

Akbarzadeh's examples focus on the Middle East. In the third of the essays here, Greg Fealy examines the relationship between Islam and diplomacy closer to 'home', in Southeast Asia. His theme is that what appears to be a more robust pursuit of an Islamically-oriented foreign policy agenda in the two largest of the Muslim states in the region—Indonesia and Malaysia—is actually far more complicated than at first seems. Islam is, he suggests, an important factor in the diplomacy of those two countries and their leaders but it is not a determining or primary factor. In drawing out the complexities of this, Fealy explains the ways in which Islam and foreign policy are bound up in domestic politics and political sensitivities, the priorities of intra-ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) diplomacy rather than intra-Islamic diplomacy, and the leadership imperatives of the presidential and prime ministerial incumbents in Indonesia and Malaysia.

Complexity is also the theme of the final piece in which Stuart Harris revisits the tensions between secularisation and a return to religiosity in foreign policy inspired by a reaction to modernity and liberalism. In identifying what he sees as the symmetries between Christian conservatism and political Islam, Harris suggests that interactions between faith and foreign policy are played out in identity politics, in ideas about the legitimate role of religion and those 'with faith' in the practice of diplomacy and also in the values and beliefs that are brought to bear on the content of foreign policy. He also cautions us, as do the other authors in this *Keynote*, to be aware of often overlooked political and normative complexities of the relationship between religion, faith and international politics.

## With God on their side: Religion and American foreign policy

MARK BEESON

History has called America and our allies to action, and it is both our responsibility and our privilege to fight freedom's fight ... Those of us who have lived through these challenging times have been changed by them. We've come to know truths that we will never question: evil is real, and it must be opposed ... Deep in the American character, there is honor, and it is stronger than cynicism. And many have discovered again that even in tragedy—especially in tragedy—God is near.<sup>1</sup>

The quotations above are taken from George W. Bush's 'State of the union address' of 2002, in which he famously described North Korea, Iran and Iraq as constituting an 'axis of evil' that threatened world peace. We now know, of course, that the intelligence that justified such assertions and the supposed links between the axis was flawed at best, deliberately deceitful at worst. We also know that regime change in Iraq had been part of the proposed foreign policy agenda of some of Bush's key advisors long before they ever got to the White House; 11 September 2001 provided a convenient rationale for a policy that might have been otherwise difficult to justify.

Consequently, we might be forgiven for being a little sceptical—even somewhat cynical, perhaps—about the entire discourse surrounding America's policy toward the Middle East in particular. Clearly, it *has* frequently been manipulative, self-serving and designed to obscure a number of long-standing foreign policy goals, of which attempting to gain a controlling influence over the Middle East and its critically important, rapidly diminishing energy supplies is not the least important.<sup>2</sup> But Bush's own words caution us against such cynicism. There may, it seems, be other, possibly more compelling, motives underlying American foreign policies: the United States of America and its president may—in the minds of America's millions of fundamentalist Christians, at least—be playing their parts in a pre-ordained and divinely-inspired drama.

While many Europeans and Australians feel decidedly uncomfortable about the continual invocation of God that punctuates so many of the speeches of Bush, most Americans do not. On the contrary, without the support of the increasingly politicised evangelical movement in the US,

<sup>1</sup> George W. Bush, 'State of the union address', Washington, DC, 29 January 2002, <[www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html](http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html)>.

<sup>2</sup> Michael T. Klare, *Blood and oil: How America's thirst for petrol is killing us* (London: Penguin, 2004).

America's 'born again' president would simply not have won office. In America, God still matters, and His followers exercise a growing influence over the course of national policy. Part of Bush's personal appeal to other Christians is that his beliefs are seen as genuine, making him both America's political *and* religious leader. Whether observers of the US and its foreign policies are comforted or appalled by this possibility will no doubt also depend on their own personal beliefs. But whatever we personally make of the sorts of transcendental questions that apparently exercise Bush, we need to recognise that they form a central part of his understanding of reality and are part of a long tradition of what Richard Hofstadter described as the 'paranoid style of American politics'.<sup>3</sup> Unless we recognise both the way many Americans have thought about themselves and their historical role, and the increasing influence of a highly organised and influential Christian lobby in American politics, we shall not be able to understand the forces that currently shape American foreign policy.

#### **THE EXCEPTIONAL AMERICANS**

The US is, of course, a country like no other. These days, this exceptionalism is primarily associated with American hegemony,<sup>4</sup> or the dominant position the US enjoys across a range of indicators of national power and influence. Whether it is overt military might or the more diffuse influence it exercises through international institutions and the projection of cultural values, America has achieved such an unparalleled pre-eminence that it has become commonplace to describe it as 'unipolar'.<sup>5</sup> But whatever we call it, the fact that one country enjoys such a pre-eminent position means that its foreign policies assume an added significance for every other country on the planet. This would be an important and potentially troubling development no matter which country found itself in such a dominant position. But America is not, and never has been a 'normal' country, and it is becoming even less like its peers under the Bush administration. The growing influence of

<sup>3</sup> Hofstadter suggested that the 'paranoid' leader in America 'does not see social conflict as something to be mediated and compromised, in the manner of a working politician. Since what is at stake is always a conflict between absolute good and absolute evil, the quality needed is not willingness to compromise but the will to fight things out to a finish. Nothing but complete victory will do. Since the enemy is thought of as being totally evil and totally unappeasable, he must be totally eliminated—if not from the world, at least from the theatre of operations to which the paranoid directs his attention'. Richard Hofstadter, *The paranoid style in American politics and other essays* (New York: Vintage, 1964), p. 31.

<sup>4</sup> See Mark Beeson, 'American ascendancy: Conceptualising contemporary hegemony', in Mark Beeson (ed.), *Bush and Asia: America's evolving relations with East Asia* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2006), pp. 3–23.

<sup>5</sup> As far as some prominent neoconservative thinkers are concerned, American unipolarity is a good thing that ought to be consolidated and exploited. See Charles Krauthammer, 'The unipolar moment', *Foreign Affairs*, 70(1), 1990–91, pp. 23–33.

fundamentalist Christianity in the US means it is increasingly at odds with many of its more secular counterparts in the West; religious beliefs and the sense of ‘special providence’ that imbues national debates means that in some ways the US has more in common with some of its most demonised enemies than it does with its traditional allies. Indeed, it has been persuasively argued that the growing influence of Christian fundamentalism and a political discourse that revolves endlessly and obsessively around questions of national security is creating a form of ‘political fundamentalism’ that is re-shaping American politics.<sup>6</sup>

This American aberration can be explained by two deeply intertwined factors: history and religion. From its revolutionary inception, many Americans have seen themselves and their country as different, exceptional and chosen by God to perform a unique historical role. America was the ‘promised land’; its people were chosen and blessed. Consequently, the country has from the outset been what Walter McDougall calls a ‘crusader state’.<sup>7</sup> While American foreign policy has contained multiple, often competing elements and influences,<sup>8</sup> there has been a continuing sense that America has a special significance as the proverbial ‘city on the hill’; a beacon for benighted peoples everywhere and a goal to which they could aspire. It has been America’s historical mission to spread democracy, capitalism and liberalism to the rest of the world as a consequence.<sup>9</sup> Only in America, perhaps, could Francis Fukuyama’s claims about the ‘end of history’ have been greeted with such credulousness and complacency. What makes America’s historical ambitions so important in the contemporary era, of course, is that—no matter how misguided and unlikely they may be at times—it is the only country with the capacity to pursue them unilaterally.

That such goals have frequently proved unrealisable should not obscure the importance of their motivating impulse: America’s crusading mission and the desire to remake the world has been a recurring theme of American foreign policy since it became a world power. When William McKinley decided to retain the Philippines as an American colony following the Spanish–American War, he did so mainly to ‘Christianise’ the Filipinos—despite the fact that most of

<sup>6</sup> David Domke, *God willing? Political fundamentalism in the White House, the ‘war on terror’, and the echoing press* (London: Pluto Press, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Walter A. McDougall, *Promised land, crusader state: The American encounter with the world since 1776* (Boston: Mariner Books, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> Walter Russell Mead, *Special providence: American foreign policy and how it changed the world* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Tony Smith, *America’s mission: The United States and the worldwide struggle for democracy in the twentieth century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

them were already practicing Catholics.<sup>10</sup> This mixture of reformist zeal and innocence or ignorance about the world has characterised a number of subsequent presidencies from Woodrow Wilson to Bush. But while Wilson also thought it was America's destiny to 'save the world',<sup>11</sup> what distinguishes Bush is the belief that he has personally been called by God to lead his nation and play his part in realising a divinely-inspired world order.<sup>12</sup> When seen in this light, it becomes much easier to understand why Bush adopts such a Manichean view of the world, and why so many of his speeches are littered with biblical allusions and phrases. Such language is widely recognised, endorsed by, and intended for, the most politically important elements of his support base: evangelical Christians.

America has a long history of radical theology. Religious refugees—Puritans, Baptists, Quakers, Presbyterians—constituted some of America's pioneering communities, and their historical presence helps to explain both the personalised, expressive, fiercely independent nature of religious beliefs, as well as the profound mistrust of government that is so characteristically American. Unlike much of western Europe and even Australia, however, organised religion has not gone the way of all flesh, but has continued to be a major force in American society. Indeed, what is most striking and important in the context of America's role in the world, is that religious beliefs and affiliations have become powerful sources of political mobilisation and identity.

It is worth spelling out just how different and deep-seated American beliefs are. According to a 2004 Gallup Poll, 90 per cent of Americans believed in God. Even more startlingly, perhaps, 70 per cent believed in hell and the existence of the devil. Figures like these help to explain a remarkable, but little-noted publishing phenomenon in the US: the success of the *Left behind* novels. Authored by Tim LaHaye, the series—which has sold over 60 million copies—tells the story of the path to Armageddon, and is part of a long tradition of eschatology and prophesying in the US.<sup>13</sup> As Kevin Phillips, one of the most astute observers of contemporary America points out, there are striking parallels between the plots of the *Left behind* series and recent American foreign policy.<sup>14</sup> I am not suggesting that the Bush administration is

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Kinzer, *Overthrow: America's century of regime change from Hawaii to Iraq* (New York: Times Books, 2006), p. 47.

<sup>11</sup> Cited in Anatol Lieven, *America right or wrong: An anatomy of American nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 33.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Harris, 'Bush says God chose him to lead his nation', *Observer*, 2 November 2003.

<sup>13</sup> See Paul Boyer, *When time shall be no more: Prophecy belief in modern American culture* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1992).

<sup>14</sup> The *Left behind* novels feature a duplicitous United Nations and the emergence of demonic figures in Babylon (Iraq) and—rather more surprisingly—France. See Kevin Phillips,

diligently following the plot of LaHaye's novels, but it is clear that these books resonate with millions of Americans who believe that history is unfolding, not because of mundane, contingent and all too predictable conflicts between human beings, but as a consequence of God's divine plan and His active involvement in the world.

While not all Americans are Christians, and not all evangelicals hold millenarian beliefs, one poll suggested that more than a third of Americans think that the Book of Revelations is not a metaphor but a literal prophesy about the 'end times'.<sup>15</sup> This is remarkable enough in itself, but when coupled with America's underlying demographic and electoral realities, it has the potential to be politically decisive. Although many Americans are not 'born again' or motivated primarily by religious beliefs, many are, and their geographical distribution is giving them an added political significance: Americans who attend church most often overwhelmingly vote for Bush. Moreover, a substantial majority of Republican voters (62 per cent) think that political leaders should rely on religion when making policy decisions.<sup>16</sup> Again, such views might only be of sociological interest if they were not translated en masse into political influence. Increasingly, however, they are—in ways that are reshaping America's political landscape.

Not only is Bush a born again Christian, but he's a born again Texan. Bush's political base is in the 'bible belt' south of the Mason–Dixon line, where witches' brew of race, resentment and—more recently—renaissance have seen the South with all its political and religious baggage come to assume an increasingly prominent place in Washington.<sup>17</sup> Many of the key figures of American politics over the last decade or so—Bush, Bill Clinton, Condoleezza Rice, Dick Cheney, Ross Perot, Tom Delay—have been from the South, and most have been careful to parade their religious credentials.

Former attorney general John Ashcroft, for example, was a prominent member of, and preacher in, the Pentecostal Assembly of God, who had himself anointed in the manner of King David on taking office. Likewise, Lieutenant General William Boykin, while deputy under-secretary of defense intelligence, claimed that the 'war on terror' was being waged against Satan; that Bush had been elevated to the presidency by a miracle; and who famously informed a Somali warlord that 'my God was a real God and yours is an idol'. Far from being

*American theocracy: The peril and politics of radical religion, oil, and borrowed money in the 21<sup>st</sup> century* (New York: Viking, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> Lieven, *America right or wrong*, p. 144.

<sup>16</sup> Phillips, *American theocracy*, p. 196.

<sup>17</sup> See Michael Lind, *Made in Texas: George W. Bush and the southern takeover of American politics* (New York: Basic Books, 2003).

disciplined for such bizarre and intemperate remarks, Boykin was put in charge of the spectacularly unsuccessful hunt for Osama bin Laden.<sup>18</sup> All of this is indicative of a form of ‘theological correctness’ that has now come to dominate political life and profoundly influence policy-making toward the Middle East and a range of other issues from AIDS to abortion.<sup>19</sup> The collective prayers that routinely precede White House meetings are indicative of just how pervasive overt religiosity has become at the highest levels of government.

And the Bush administration does have a lot to be thankful for—although whether the Almighty deserves the credit is a moot point. Crucially, it has been the capacity of the Republicans to mobilise the religious vote that has proved decisive in the last two presidential elections, something that has been given particular significance by low voter turn-out in the US. The sophistication, professionalism and hence political importance of organised religion is evident not just in its sheer size, as in the massive Southern Baptist Convention that dominates the South, but also in the array of think tanks and lobby groups that relentlessly promote faith-based issues.<sup>20</sup> In this regard there are striking parallels with the organisational logic and rise to prominence of the neoconservative thinkers and organisations that have exercised such a profound influence on the foreign policy agenda of the Bush regime.<sup>21</sup> There are also significant interactions between the two in a ‘Frankensteinian operation [that] stitched the bodiless head of Northeastern neo-conservatism onto the headless body of Southern fundamentalism’.<sup>22</sup> Grotesque and unlikely as this coalition may have been, it has exerted a profound influence on America’s domestic politics and the course of international relations in the wider world.

#### **FULFILLING THEIR DESTINY?**

The Middle East generally and the Holy Land in particular occupy a pivotal place in a number of the world’s religions. They are also the location of some of the world’s most destructive, dangerous and seemingly intractable conflicts. Even if such conflicts were merely defined by the quotidian struggles over resources that are the stuff of national and international politics, they would be difficult enough to resolve. But when some of the participants are animated by the most fundamental,

<sup>18</sup> Harris, ‘Bush says God chose him’.

<sup>19</sup> Phillips, *American theocracy*, p. 236.

<sup>20</sup> Membership of the Council for National Policy, for example, includes Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Jesse Helms, Tom DeLay, John Ashcroft and Tim LaHaye of *Left behind* fame.

<sup>21</sup> See Mark Beeson, ‘The rise of the “neocons” and the evolution of American foreign policy’, in Vedi Hadiz (ed.), *Empire, neoliberalism, and Asia* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 69–82.

<sup>22</sup> Lind, *Made in Texas*, p. 115.

non-negotiable questions of identity and belief, then the prospects for resolution become ever more remote. Even more troublingly, we have to confront the very real prospect that some of the most influential players in these struggles may believe their resolution is literally impossible. Indeed, many Christians in America believe that an intensification of the conflict is inevitable, unequivocally foretold in the Bible, and thus welcome.

The marriage of convenience between the neocons and the Southern fundamentalists has spawned some unlovely offspring. One of the more remarkable aspects of fundamentalist Christian theology—and by extension American foreign policy—has been the unswerving support for Israel. At one level, this has been a consequence of the efforts of the highly effective ‘Israel lobby’ which has exerted a powerful influence over the course of American foreign policy, and which has recently attracted some unwelcome but overdue attention.<sup>23</sup> At another level, however, America’s relentlessly partisan support of Israel has other, even more disturbing roots. It would be noteworthy enough, perhaps, if America’s unconditional support of Israel was ‘only’ a consequence of the efforts of prominent Jewish neocons like Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Perle, two of the principal architects of, and advocates for, America’s recent unilateral pursuit of military dominance and the remaking of the Middle East. It is not—although some will think it so—anti-Semitic to point out that both men have strong, long-standing connections with Israel. Remarkably enough, however, a disturbing kind of anti-Semitism can be found amongst some of the very Christians who have formed an opportunistic alliance with the architects of recent American foreign policy.

To understand how this most bizarre of unions between supporters of Israel and Christian fundamentalists has come about we need to look beyond some of the usual suspects at the Project for the New American Century or Likud Party,<sup>24</sup> and revisit the Book of Revelations—which so many Americans take to be a literal statement about the inevitable course of world history. For the 20 million or so Christian Zionists in the US their eschatological beliefs determine their policy preferences and political alliances. Their numbers, domestic influence, and close links to Israeli political organisations promoting ‘greater Israel’ makes them a force to be reckoned with.<sup>25</sup> Christian Zionists believe that the modern state of Israel is the fulfillment of God’s covenant with

<sup>23</sup> John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, ‘The Israel lobby’, *London Review of Books*, 28(6), 23 March 2006.

<sup>24</sup> Having said that, there are important, long-standing connections between the ‘neocons’ and a more aggressive and unilateral Israeli foreign policy. See Beeson, ‘The rise of the “neocons”’.

<sup>25</sup> Jane Lampman, ‘Christian Zionists soldier to prophecy’, *Washington Times*, 14 July 2004.

Abraham and a necessary precursor of Christ's Second Coming. While this may explain their otherwise unlikely support of Israel, the Christian Zionists are essentially anti-Semitic: they believe that during the Last Days Jews must either renounce their beliefs and become Christians, or perish in scenes of hallucinatory violence along with the rest of humankind that has been 'left behind'. However delusional and unlikely such beliefs may be, for millions of Americans they are—or will be—literally true, and help to explain the unequivocal support for Israel which plays such a pivotal part in the divine plan.

American foreign policy may not be following a divinely-inspired script, much less one written by the Israel lobby, but questions of religion are surprisingly prominent—surprising, that is, for a Western country that is a direct product of the Enlightenment. In this regard, paradoxically enough, the US has more in common with radical Islam than it does with the more secular parts of the developed world. Indeed, Philips provocatively argues that the US is moving toward a new 'disenlightenment', in which scientific knowledge and rationality are being replaced by theology—something the current furore over 'intelligent design' seems to confirm. Be that as it may, it is clear that when many of the protagonists in the 'war on terror' derive their understandings of contemporary reality from incompatible, theologically-inspired readings of the international order, then the prospects for political resolution are highly circumscribed.

Some students of international relations might claim that religion simply provides a convenient mobilising and legitimating discourse for more familiar struggles over power and resources. Gloom-inducing as such analyses tend to be, we must hope they are right. For if American policy in Iraq—no matter how ill-conceived and hubristic it may be—is part of a conventional, historically-established pattern of attempting to secure vital resources for American interests,<sup>26</sup> then it is at least comprehensible and familiar. But if American policy is increasingly fuelled by a toxic cocktail of religious politics, fundamentalism and faith, then the idea that countries rationally calculate their 'national interests' in predictable, time-honoured ways looks increasingly at odds with reality. When the most powerful man in the world accompanies the order to attack Iraq with the observation that 'I pray that I be as good a messenger of His will as possible',<sup>27</sup> then it is not unreasonable to claim that there may, indeed, be unseen forces at work in the making of American foreign policy—even if they are only at work in the heads of its policy-makers.

<sup>26</sup> Kinzer, *Overthrow*.

<sup>27</sup> Bob Woodward, *Plan of attack* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), p. 379.

## Islam and global politics

SHAHRAM AKBARZADEH

In conventional wisdom, Islam and the West are seen as locked in a dichotomy of mutually exclusive systems. One is seen as representing tolerance, order and international law and the other intolerance, destruction and mayhem. This stereotypical picture, needless to say, obscures significant evidence to the contrary and blocks out underlying considerations that are common between the Islamic and Western value systems. The Islamic perspective on global politics and the role that the United States and its Western allies play in setting the global agenda is not uniform—just as there are periodic disagreements between Paris, Berlin, London and Washington. The diversity of the Islamic perspective may be conceptualised on the two axes of state and non-state actors. Just as Tehran and Ankara pursue radically different foreign policies and maintain incongruous views on global politics, non-state Muslim entities relate to world events and Western powers in markedly different ways. This diversity makes it difficult to identify a single, uncontested Islamic perspective. All Muslim actors (state and non-state) draw on their Islamic heritage and understandings of the Islamic value system to justify their positions. These understandings can be contradictory, for example in relation to the permissibility of suicide bombing. But there is a common thread that extends from the most fervent Islamist firebrands to liberal and moderate Muslim groups, and even further to Western players.

Muslims of all political persuasions share a deep sense of hurt and complaint about the unjust nature of the global order. In the contemporary literature, this grievance is sometimes linked to the historical decline of the Islamic civilisation marked by the abolition of the Caliphate under the rule of Mustapha Kemal Ataturk. Bernard Lewis is the best known Western scholar whose work on Middle Eastern history has set the parameters of this historical explanation for Muslim alienation.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, Muslims maintain an expansive historical memory which spans centuries and colours the contemporary interpretation of global affairs. Muslim alienation in the current global order is explained in this historical paradigm as a combination of nostalgia for the greatness of the lost Islamic civilisation and frustration at the apparent vulnerability of Muslim societies to Western influences in the present time. This paradigm tends to explain tension between Islam and the West as an

<sup>1</sup> Bernard Lewis, 'The roots of Muslim rage', *Atlantic Monthly*, 266(3), 1990, pp. 47–58.

enduring historical legacy, somewhat oblivious to the contemporary issues that stoke the fire of Muslim alienation.

No doubt history influences contemporary perceptions. But Muslim history is not an uncontested story of conflict with Judea–Christianity. Even if it was, remembering history is a subjective exercise. Contemporary experiences have the real potential to mould and re-mould historical memories. What concerns Muslims of different political inclinations is the perceived unequal power relations between the Muslim world and the West at the present time. Muslims reject the global order as unjust and feel alienated because they find no meaningful mechanism to address it. The Muslim cry for justice is not so much about restoring the glory of the Caliphate, but for dignity and equity in modern times. It rests on tangible grievances and can therefore be addressed with relevant policies.

#### **FAIRNESS AND PARITY?**

A perception of injustice is at the heart of current Muslim attitudes towards the global order that the US and its Western allies uphold. Iran's attitude towards the US is a case in point. Relations between Tehran and Washington suffered a blow in 1979 when Islamist students took US embassy staff hostage, an episode that lasted 444 days. But contrary to conventional wisdom, even at the height of the hostage crisis and certainly after the saga, Iranian foreign policy-makers did not reject direct bilateral links between Iran and the US. Instead they emphasised their desire to be treated as equals as a pre-condition for any improvements in relations. Tehran's portrayal of Washington as a bully and domineering power reflected Iran's vivacious revolutionary domestic setting. This conjured up the image of David versus Goliath with reverberations that affected the Muslim Middle East and beyond. Iran's revolutionary fervor may have cooled as the population has become increasingly disillusioned with the promises of the Islamic regime. But the logic of Iranian foreign policy has not.

Under the leadership of former President Muhammad Khatami, policy-makers embarked on a serious attempt to revamp Iran's international image. The notion of 'dialogue among civilisations' gained international acclaim as the United Nations declared it the theme of global celebration in 2001. The notion of dialogue as a remedy to global tensions between the West and the Muslim world advanced the protagonists towards a constructive resolution on a number of key issues. First among them was the idea of openness to hear and acknowledge the position of the other side which facilitated the second: empathy and acknowledgment of genuine grievances. The third, and arguably the most important element of Khatami's notion of dialogue, was the parity of interlocutors. Genuine dialogue is only possible between equals. Khatami's foreign policy initiative, moderate and flexible as it seemed,

still contained the crux of the Islamic revolutionary ideas that had stirred Islamist hostage takers in 1979.

Iranian foreign policy doctrine appears to have become more rigid and confrontational with the ascendancy of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the presidential office. The diplomatic *cul de sac* over Iran's nuclear energy ambitions has brought international tensions to boiling point. But Ahmadinejad's policies do not represent a qualitative departure from those of his predecessor. Iranian authorities justify Tehran's nuclear ambitions as purely civilian-oriented and consistent with the rights reserved for all sovereign states in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Iran's pursuit of atomic energy, the argument goes, is a manifestation of its national sovereignty, harking back to the same desire to be treated as an equal among the community of equal states.

Iran's nuclear ambitions may have a hidden agenda. But what makes it justifiable for the Iranian population (and perhaps other parts of the Muslim world), and discredits Washington's opposition to it, are the above mentioned references to the equal claim of all states to nuclear technology and the obvious hypocrisy of the US in dealing with the issue. Washington has proven ready to provide nuclear technology to India, an open nuclear renegade state which openly snubbed the international community to develop nuclear bombs. In relation to Israel's nuclear program, widely believed to be directed at developing the bomb, Washington has been conspicuously silent. In contrast, the US went to war in Iraq under the questionable pretext of hidden weapons of mass destruction, and has highlighted the real possibility that Iran may be the next target. These very different policies suggest to the Iranians, and the rest of the Muslim world, that Washington pursues one set of objectives in relation to Muslim states, especially those that are not US allies, and another for the rest of the world. This apparent duplicity lends itself to the common grievance that the US, and international agencies that are often dominated by Washington, lack fairness and parity.

#### **DEMOCRACY OR CHARADE?**

Washington's military intervention in Iraq and the neoconservative doctrine of 'regime change' have become the latest examples of first, the selective application of the proclaimed US democratic ideals for the Middle East and, second, the ability of the US to act above international law with immunity. None of these help generate trust in the fairness of global politics. The ostensible US push for democracy in the Middle East has done little to increase Washington's soft power as a champion of political openness and public accountability. The US intervention in Iraq has thrown up a number of pertinent questions: can democracy be built under the shadow of the gun? Would Washington respect the sovereign rule of Iraqis even if the emerging post-Saddam regime tends

to be close to Tehran? And if the US proves itself to be constrained in response to a potentially pro-Iran regime in Iraq for the time being, what guarantees are there to ensure against a reversal to the familiar pattern of undermining unfriendly regimes? In an unusually frank public address, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice presented a critique of past US policy that had been overwhelmingly concerned with the security agenda and that had allowed the US to be drawn into sustaining and bolstering authoritarian regimes.<sup>2</sup> Rice noted that this policy has had the adverse affect of generating a pool of resentment and a breeding ground for anti-US mobilisation in the affected countries. She could not be more to the point. Yet, there has been nothing in the US policy towards the Middle East to suggest a shift in Washington's priorities. As might be expected, this failure to reorient policy has exacerbated mistrust of the US.

Rice chose her visit to Egypt in 2005 to make this bold statement. At the time Egypt was poised for two major electoral polls and optimists might have been forgiven for seeing this as a significant signal on US policy reorientation. The widely popular, but illegal, Muslim Brotherhood was clearly trying to take advantage of the renewed international interest in democratic reforms and the ostensible US push for political openness. At this point Washington was publicly encouraging political reforms in Egypt and hailing President Hosni Mubarak's promise of multi-party elections. The presidential election of September 2005 and the subsequent parliamentary elections of November 2005, however, proved to be little more than cosmetic *glasnost* as Mubarak secured his fifth term in office and his ruling party retained its hold on the National Assembly by maintaining the ban on the Muslim Brotherhood. Much to the chagrin of those who had put stock in the declared US commitment to democratic openness, Washington's response to Egypt's controlled elections was muted. The fire that made Rice's address shine seemed to have gone out, and with it the flicker of hope in the Muslim Middle East that the US might be revising its policies.

Hot on the heels of the Egyptian experience came the electoral victory of Hamas in the Palestinian Occupied Territories in January 2006. Hamas managed to surprise observers, and some of its supporters, by dethroning the ruling Fatah party and dominating the National Assembly. This victory rested on the growing gap between Fatah's promises of impending Palestinian statehood and the reality on the ground, marked by Israeli checkpoints, blockades and targeted assassinations. The

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Donovan, 'Middle East: Reactions mixed on Rice's democracy message', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 21 June 2005.

Hamas victory was the Palestinian electorate's response to the humiliation of living under the shadow of Israeli guns and Fatah's perceived incompetence in remedying it. The Palestinian people had spoken, but the US was in no mood to listen. In what seemed like a blatant contradiction of earlier public statements regarding popular rule, the US administration rejected any possibility of dealing with a Hamas-dominated government and advocated the suspension of international aid to the Hamas-run Palestinian Authority. Popular elections, it seems to Muslims in the Middle East, are only advocated if the outcome suits US interests. An avowedly Islamic and anti-Israeli government does not.

This blatant hypocrisy is proof to the Muslim world that justice has no place in global politics; that the US can act above all laws and principles, even those enshrined by US policy-makers; and that this violation of international norms can be carried out without fear of sanctions. If the US behaves as if it stands above international law, demonstrated most vividly in Washington's decision to go to war with Iraq in the face of significant reservations from the United Nations, the principal US ally in the Middle East has behaved with the same disdain in its own backyard. The controversial Israeli security wall that is being constructed on the Palestinian Occupied Territories to protect Israeli settlements and the state of Israel against terrorist attacks has been condemned by the international community as counter-productive and illegitimate. The issue came to the fore in July 2004 when the International Court of Justice in The Hague declared the wall to be illegal and in violation of international law. This ruling was subsequently endorsed by the UN General Assembly. Yet, Israeli authorities dismissed this decision as ignorant and irrelevant. No international sanctions have been put in place to halt the construction of the 5-metre high wall that cuts deep into the Palestinian West Bank, or to halt the expansion of Israeli settlements around East Jerusalem in violation of numerous UN resolutions and, note, US declarations. It appears that Israel has immunity from international law.

As far as the Muslim world is concerned, the stumbling block to the universal application of international law, therefore, is the US. The late Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran encapsulated this feeling when he labelled the US as the 'great Satan'. Not everyone in the Muslim world would share Khomeini's cataclysmic depiction of the remaining superpower, but the sense of alienation that arises from US policies and arrogant behaviour is much more widespread than US policy-makers would be prepared to admit.

#### **GLOBAL (IN)JUSTICE**

Pursuit of justice and respect is a natural human desire and has a prominent place in Islamic political thought. The current power politics in the international arena has made justice of immediate relevance for

Muslim actors. Whether state or non-state-based, Muslim actors see the odds stacked against them in the international arena and feel aggrieved by the absence of recourse to an impartial arbitrator. Richard Falk, in his seminal work on *Human rights horizons*, has pointed to the very tangible sources of Muslim discontent.<sup>3</sup> Whether it is the US bias in its dealings with Israel and the Arab world, or the selective application of the nuclear non-proliferation measures, or interventionist policies under the cover of promoting democracy, Muslim alienation is rooted in real policy related issues of the twenty-first century. The call for justice, therefore, does not imply a desire to turn back the clock and return to idealised glory days of the expansive Islamic rule. But it does demand genuine attention to current issues that affect the world's Muslim population. These contemporary issues have served radical Islamic groups with ready made proof of a global anti-Islam conspiracy.

Islamists have a preference for rejecting the existing international order as inherently unjust. Instead they claim that justice may only be possible in an Islamic framework. Muslim state actors maintain a much less categorical position, but tend to suggest that Islamic teachings contain ideas and principles that make a significant difference to global politics. These actors suggest, some more forcefully than others, that justice is an Islamic concept. This claim rests on the notion of consultation in decision-making, exulted in the Qur'an as essential for Muslim rulers. In this sense, the literature on Islamic justice is very much focused on domestic rule, not international affairs.

In the context of global politics, contemporary points of reference for Muslim actors in this debate on the absence of justice relates to tangible grievances that have occurred in the course of power politics. Whether it is the Pakistani complaint about the international community's inaction over Kashmir, or the ongoing Israeli occupation of Arab lands, or the harsh international position on Iraq, Iran and other anti-US regimes in the Middle East, or Washington's reluctance to push the democratic ideal in pro-US states, these grievances are rooted in real policy related issues. They are not founded on ideological grounds. Quite the reverse: a seemingly timeless ideology is constructed around contemporary issues. This process has masked the core challenge as Muslim grievances and calls for justice are taken at face value and erroneously understood as expressions of the internally coherent and self-contained Islamic 'worldview'.

In reality, there is no 'Islamic position' on global justice as a body of thought distinct from Western concepts. Instead there are a series of

<sup>3</sup> Richard A. Falk, *Human rights horizons: The pursuit of justice in a globalising world* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

tangible Muslim grievances that are expressed with reference to Islam. Unveiling 'Islamic justice' is the very first and essential step in incorporating Muslim grievances on the international agenda.

Bringing justice to global politics is not an impossible task. The United Nations was formed to deal with questions of peace and equity among states. The notion of global justice is not removed from this equation and successive Secretary-Generals have attempted to address this very point. Kofi Annan's support for Dialogue among Civilisations and efforts to take Israel to task over its illegal security wall suggest that the United Nations and the international community can work with Muslim actors towards a common goal. This is not going to be a smooth ride. Great power interests, especially Washington's tendency to override the United Nations, pushes this objective beyond immediate reach. But the international community has a genuine interest in addressing legitimate grievances and championing global justice to guide policy-making and inter-state relations on the basis of fairness, equality and equity.

## Islam and diplomacy in Southeast Asia: Less than it seems

GREG FEALY<sup>1</sup>

Over the past year, much of the diplomatic news coming from Southeast Asia has given an impression that the region's two largest Muslim nations—Indonesia and Malaysia—were pursuing a more Islamically-oriented foreign policy agenda. Both countries have supported Iran's right to develop nuclear power and criticised the George W. Bush administration's policies on this issue. They have also criticised the war in Iraq. The Indonesian and Malaysian governments have pledged humanitarian support to the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority and President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (commonly known as SBY) has offered to mediate in the Palestine–Israel conflict. Indonesia hosted the D8 (Developing 8) summit for 'developing' Muslim nations in May, at which Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad received a rapturous welcome from local Islamic groups. Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi is the current chair of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC), the main international forum for Muslim nations, and has also spoken out against Western policies which he portrayed as worsening rather than solving the problem of terrorism.

This impression of Islamically-driven foreign policy is, however, misleading. While Islam has been an important element in Indonesian and Malaysian diplomacy, it has not been a primary factor. Recent diplomatic initiatives by the two countries are, in part, responses to genuinely held beliefs regarding issues such as Palestinian rights and irritation at perceived US double standards on nuclear non-proliferation, but they also result from domestic political considerations. Other less publicised aspects of their foreign relations indicate that 'secular' nationalist interest remains the dominant factor in Indonesian and Malaysian thinking.

### **SOUTHEAST ASIAN ISLAM**

Muslims are the largest single religious community in Southeast Asia. Some 215 million or 40 per cent of the region's 543 million people profess Islam as their faith (Buddhists and Christians are the next two largest groups at 36 per cent and 21 per cent respectively). Almost 90 per cent of Southeast Asia's Muslims live in Indonesia (190 million) and another 7 per cent are in Malaysia (14 million). These two countries,

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Dr John Funston for his assistance in providing materials for and comments on this article.

along with Brunei Darussalam, are the region's only Muslim-majority nations, but there are significant Muslim minorities in the Philippines (4.3 million), Thailand (3 million), Burma (1.7 million) and Cambodia (700,000).

Southeast Asian Muslims have a reputation for being among the most peaceable and tolerant in the Islamic world. In general, there is a good deal of validity to this view. Most Muslims live harmoniously in religiously diverse communities and there is a cultural tradition of syncretism and hybridity. However, both Malaysia and particularly Indonesia have long histories of radicalism among fringe communities, which has at times been expressed through violence. Also, in two of the minority-Muslim communities—those of Thailand and Philippines—there are well-established insurgency movements seeking either significant autonomy or independence. These struggles are usually couched in Islamic terms, though ethnic and cultural identity as well as political and economic grievances remain powerful factors.

In this essay, the focus will be on Indonesia and Malaysia. As the two dominant Muslim-majority states in Southeast Asia, they are ones whose foreign policy has the most obvious Islamic content.

#### **PAST INFLUENCE OF ISLAM IN DIPLOMACY**

Since Indonesia and Malaysia achieved independence (in 1945 and 1963 respectively), there have been several common features regarding the relationship between foreign policy and Islam. The most important of these is that, insofar as Islam impacts on external policy, it is more often in response to domestic political sensitivities than transnational or Islamic ideological concerns. Malaysian and Indonesian governments have repeatedly taken up 'Islamic issues' internationally either to deflect criticism from Muslim opposition groups at home or to bolster their own legitimacy as defenders of the faith. Not surprisingly, then, the Islamic aspects of foreign policy are more to do with form than substance. Successive Indonesian governments, in particular, have been inclined to pursue initiatives that give the appearance of championing Islamic causes while in reality requiring limited commitment of resources or risk to 'national interest'-related policies. Growing Islamisation of Malaysian and Indonesian societies from the 1970s and 1980s has, however, led both nations to give Islam greater prominence in their external affairs.

Another feature is that Malaysia and Indonesia have consistently given greater priority to intra-ASEAN diplomacy than to international Islamic issues. There are several manifestations of this. First, both countries have proceeded cautiously in regard to the oppression of Muslim minorities in fellow ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) members such as Burma, Thailand and Philippines. For the most part, Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur have adhered to the ASEAN

convention of not interfering in the internal affairs of other member nations, even when there have been major human rights abuses against Muslims such as with the Rohingya in western Burma or significant Islamic insurgencies such as those in southern Thailand and southern Philippines.

Last of all, Malaysia and Indonesia have only limited economic integration with the broader Islamic world. Indonesia's trade with fellow OIC members is less than 10 per cent of its total trade; Malaysia's is less than 7 per cent. No Islamic nation features in the top six trading partners of either country. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that both nations have significantly increased their economic relations with the Middle East in the past two decades, though this is far less than the growth in trade with North Asia. Thus, whatever sympathies Malaysia and Indonesia might have with the broader Muslim world, economic interest lays predominantly with non-Muslim countries.<sup>2</sup>

Historically, Islamic sentiment has always been evident in the foreign policies of Malaysia and Indonesia. Both countries, for example, have expressed strong support for the Palestinian struggle and have not only been critical of Israel but have also refused diplomatic and direct trading relations with the Jewish state. Malaysian and Indonesian representatives also attended the founding meeting of the OIC in 1969, which sought to create an institution capable of improving cooperation between and solidarity among Islamic nations following the humiliations of the 1967 Arab–Israeli War. Despite this, Malaysia and Indonesia were tepid in their practical support for these causes. The Soeharto government turned down repeated requests from the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) to have diplomatic representation in Jakarta for some 15 years, and only allowed a PLO office to open in 1989. It rarely spoke on international Islamic issues and also refused to sign the OIC charter in 1972, seemingly to avoid alienating its Western aid donors. Soeharto, himself, did not attend an OIC summit till 1991.<sup>3</sup> Malaysian governments showed a somewhat greater commitment to the OIC and to the Palestinian cause but, in the case of the latter, based its arguments on international law rather than religion.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Greg Fealy, 'Islam in Southeast Asia: Domestic pietism, diplomacy and security', in Mark Beeson (ed.), *Contemporary Southeast Asia: Regional dynamics, national differences* (London: Palgrave, 2003), pp. 136–55.

<sup>3</sup> Rizal Sukma, *Islam in Indonesian foreign policy* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), pp. 43–88.

<sup>4</sup> Shanti Nair, *Islam in Malaysian foreign policy* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 59–61; Robert S. Milne and Diane K. Mauzy, *Malaysian politics under Mahathir* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 135.

Indonesia and Malaysia have had no such equivocation on ASEAN-related issues. Malaysia's Deputy Prime Minister, Datuk Musa Hitam, made this clear in 1983 when he said that his country's commitment to ASEAN 'is paramount', whereas the OIC was secondary. There were many practical examples of this, one of which was the role of Indonesia and Malaysia in thwarting Libyan efforts to have the OIC investigate Philippines government treatment of Muslim insurgents in Mindanao.<sup>5</sup>

### DOMESTIC ISLAMISATION AND FOREIGN POLICY

Islam has had a greater impact on Indonesian and Malaysian foreign policy since the 1980s. This was in large part a reflection of the accelerating Islamisation taking place in both societies, particularly among the urban middle classes. These increasingly important sectors of the electorate were better informed about global events and pressured their governments to have a more self-consciously Islamic foreign policy.

Mahathir Mohamad, following his rise to the prime ministership in 1981, quickly gained a high profile on Islamic diplomatic issues, especially through his championing of various foreign Muslim struggles. He attacked Israel over its treatment of Palestinians and strongly criticised what he saw as the 'pro-Zionist' policies of the West. He supported the *mujahideen* war against Soviet forces in Afghanistan, facilitating the passage of would-be fighters from Malaysia to Central Asia. He was especially outspoken about the violence against Bosnian and Kosovar Muslims and he sent more than 1,000 Malaysian peacekeepers to Bosnia-Herzegovina. Mahathir also gave much greater prominence to international Islamic fora such as the OIC and D8 as settings for conveying major foreign policy statements.

Soeharto was also more attentive to domestic demands for an Islamically-oriented foreign policy from the 1980s. This was a period of tension between the president and the armed forces and Soeharto sought to cultivate the Islamic community in order to buttress his power base. Not only did he, in 1989, drop his earlier objection to a PLO mission in Jakarta, but three years later he hosted a visit of Yasser Arafat to Indonesia. In the early 1990s, he opened diplomatic relations with Libya, accepted the rotating chairmanship of the OIC and played a leading role in brokering peace talks between the Philippines government and the Moro National Liberation Front. In 1997, he also attended the founding meeting of the D8.

<sup>5</sup> James Piscatori, 'Asian Islam: International linkages and their impact on international relations', in John L. Esposito (ed.), *Islam in Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 236–7.

Both the Mahathir and Soeharto governments, despite their growing concessions to Muslim sentiment, were also careful not to alienate their major non-Muslim diplomatic and economic partners. This was particularly true of Soeharto, whose heavy reliance on Western and Japanese aid as well as diplomatic orientation with the US and other major non-communist powers gave him a powerful vested interest in doing so. His policies were largely continued by the Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie, Abdurrahman Wahid and Megawati Sukarnoputri governments (1998–2004).

#### **BADAWI AND SBY**

Badawi and SBY have been in office for three and two years respectively. Both have brought subtle changes to their nation's foreign policy but the underlying secondary role for Islamic issues remains little altered from that of their predecessors.

Badawi retained chairmanship of the OIC after succeeding Mahathir in October 2003 and he has continued some of the themes of his predecessor. He criticised the European and US ban on aid to Hamas saying: 'The denial of much-needed international aid to the hapless Palestinian people is unconscionable and likely to be counter-productive to an early solution to the conflict'.<sup>6</sup> He went on to pledge US\$16 million in assistance to the Palestinians. Despite Badawi's criticisms, Western countries have regarded him as a more congenial figure than Mahathir. They note that he has avoided his predecessor's resort to inflammatory anti-Semitic rhetoric and has also been less strident in tone when referring to the West. Badawi's relative moderation is due not only to his personality but also his public persona. Unlike Mahathir, who had been deeply suspicious of Western motives and was quick to take offence at perceived slights, Badawi is of a more equable disposition. Importantly, he is also seen as having considerable Islamic learning and is thus less prone to Islamist jibes than was the secular-educated Mahathir.

The SBY government has undertaken similar action, though it has expressed opposition to the Western aid boycott more circumspectly and has placed greater emphasis upon peace processes. Not only has it promised food, medical and financial assistance, it has also urged the Hamas-led government to cooperate with the Fatah faction, including Palestinian President, Mahmoud Abbas. Moreover, SBY has appointed former Foreign Minister and part-Arab Dr Alwi Shihab as 'special peace envoy' to the Middle East and has also offered his own services

<sup>6</sup> 'Terror fight illegal, uncivilised: Abdullah', *Straits Times*, 30 May 2006.

as a mediator in any peace dialogue between the Palestinians and Israelis.<sup>7</sup>

SBY's initiative would appear to result from a combination of statesmanly ambition and political calculation. Since becoming president in October 2004, SBY has travelled abroad frequently and has gained highly favourable responses from foreign officials and the media, particularly in the West. He aspires to a greater role in international affairs and has growing confidence in his capacity to play honest broker. (Indonesia has sought, with little success, to assume a mediating role between North and South Korea.) He must also be mindful of the strong Muslim community feeling on the Palestinian issue, and opposition to the Western ban on aid to Hamas. In early May, an estimated 100,000 people demonstrated in Jakarta in solidarity with the Hamas administration and in protest at US and European Union policies towards the Palestinian Authority. Furthermore, Islamic parties raised more than US\$100,000 in donations for Palestinian welfare during May.<sup>8</sup> SBY has always felt vulnerable to criticism from Islamist groups, perhaps because he is seen as a leader lacking Islamic credentials. During the 2004 election campaign he was stung by rumours that his wife was a non-Muslim (her name is Kristiani, though she is Muslim) and he has been accused of not defending the interests of Muslims. Thus, his Middle Eastern initiatives allow him to deflect criticism that he is neglecting Islamic issues while also offering the prospect of a higher international profile.

The Indonesian government's peace and aid efforts in the Middle East have a hollow ring. Indonesia does not have diplomatic relations with Israel and while the Israeli government may well regard SBY favourably, the practical difficulties of peace brokering without a permanent mission or well established networks on the Israeli side would seem considerable. Moreover, while SBY has been well received during his visits to Arab countries, there is little indication that he has a special relationship with any of the region's governments. In this case, he may regard it as more important to be seen as trying to do something rather than achieving anything.

Indonesia and Malaysia also have similar positions on Iran's nuclear program. Badawi said that '[a]llowing Israel to develop nuclear weapons with impunity—which it does not deny—while others in the region are prohibited from doing so, is a blatant case of double standard.

<sup>7</sup> 'Menlu Palestina galang bantuan', *Jawa Pos*, 27 May 2006; 'RI asks Palestine to seek peaceful solution', *Jakarta Post*, 27 May 2006.

<sup>8</sup> 'PKS Kecam Amerika', *Jawa Pos*, 8 May 2006.

It has created a destabilising asymmetry in a volatile part of the world'.<sup>9</sup> The SBY government has consistently supported Iran's right to develop 'peaceful nuclear technology' and has criticised US threats against Tehran. Indonesia abstained from voting in the International Atomic Energy Agency meeting last February which considered sanctions against Iran.<sup>10</sup> Indonesia's Vice-President Jusuf Kalla has condemned reported US consideration of an attack on Iran, asking why, if it was concerned about nuclear weapons, it was not planning military action against Israel and Pakistan.<sup>11</sup> SBY expressed confidence that Iran had no belligerent intentions in developing nuclear power and he again offered himself as a mediator, this time between Iran and Western countries on the nuclear issue.<sup>12</sup>

In Indonesia, in particular, Iran has acquired potent symbolic significance, despite the fact that most Indonesian Muslims are wary of Shi'ite Islam. This was evident during Ahmedinejad's visit to Jakarta in early May, where he was greeted enthusiastically by many Muslim groups. More than a few Muslim leaders praised his resolution in the face of 'Western intimidation' and regretted that Indonesia did not show a similar steadfastness. In addition to this, Iran's Vice-President and Foreign Minister have been warmly received in Jakarta in recent months and the Indonesian parliament has sent a high-level delegation to Tehran to show support for Iran's nuclear program and will also lobby Washington on Iran's behalf. Again, SBY is careful not to be cornered on these issues. Noting the strength of public support for Iran, he seeks to demonstrate his sympathy and involvement but not in a way which would alienate Western governments and particularly the investors that he so badly needs to spur a sluggish Indonesian economy.

So, recent events have again shown that Islam continues to be a significant element in Indonesian and Malaysian foreign policy but not a determining factor. Governments past and present in both countries have been keen to appear responsive on international Islamic issues but rarely has this been at the expense of more fundamental diplomatic and economic priorities. Their foreign policy settings remain realist, despite their efforts to appear Islamic.

<sup>9</sup> 'Terror fight illegal, uncivilised'.

<sup>10</sup> 'Pimpinan Dewan Desak Menlu Dicapot', *Jawa Pos*, 16 February 2006.

<sup>11</sup> 'Kalla irked by talk of Iran attack', *Jakarta Post*, 10 February 2006.

<sup>12</sup> 'Indonesia Siap Tengahi Nuklir Iran', *Suara Merdeka*, 11 May 2006.

# Religion, politics and foreign policy: A contemporary diplomatic challenge

STUART HARRIS<sup>1</sup>

Interest in the impact of religion internationally has grown since 11 September 2001. Osama bin Laden painted the attack by Islamic extremists as a religious war on America. George W. Bush, the first US President to see himself as an instrument of God's master plan, has discursively framed his responses in religious language. Yet the worldwide resurgence of religion began well before 11 September, and it is not limited either to Christianity or Islam. While the discussion here focuses on Islam and on the 'Religious Right' associated with Christianity, the rise of conservative religious forms has occurred in Christian, Islamic, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist and Sikh religions with increased influence on public debate and the policies, including foreign policies, of governments. This resurgence is also geographically wide-spread, including in post-Soviet Russia and China.

The resurgence of religion and religion-based politics appears contrary to beliefs long held in the West that religion is dying in the face of secular modernisation. This secularisation thesis is grounded in the consequences of the establishment, after the seventeenth century Treaty of Westphalia, of an international order of sovereign states that left religious authority as the prerogative of individual states.<sup>2</sup> The subsequent Enlightenment, which emphasised rationality and scientific knowledge, saw the spiritual element of the temporal-spiritual dualism move substantially from the public and political to the private sphere. Yet in the twenty-first century, religion is likely to be increasingly important in international relations and global politics. That it is *already* important is illustrated in the foreign policy impacts of religiosity in the US and in its influence on political Islam. Its potential future impacts are canvassed through reactions there and elsewhere to Western modernisation and liberalism.

Religion is explored here in terms of its functional characteristic: a belief about salvation that is otherworldly. Religion says how people should live on earth but also when they should be willing to kill and to

<sup>1</sup> The ideas in this paper are developed at greater length in the working paper, Stuart Harris, 'A future of faith-related foreign policies? Bush, bin Laden and ...?', Working Paper 2006/5 (Canberra: Department of International Relations, Australian National University, forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Philpott, 'The challenge of September 11 to secularism in international relations', *World Politics*, 55(1), 2002, pp. 66–95, at p. 83.

die for their faith. Historically, religious thinking has helped in emphasising human rights, poverty eradication and political freedoms in the international sphere. Secularised Christian ethics underpin much of Western foreign policies. Views on what constitute just wars and the rules of war themselves have been established in Christian and Muslim societies on the basis of religious principles. But religion frequently rides on the back of existing conflicts, or legitimises or creates conflicts as well as intensifying their violence. It is not always easy to isolate religion from ethno-cultural, political, economic or territorial influences or from national projects as found, for example, within Hindu, Buddhist or Serbian Orthodox nationalism.

In this sense, then, faith and foreign policy interact in several ways. The first arises from a country's sense of identity. What is important is which one of its multiple identities a state asserts. A recent survey of global trends argued that religious identity is likely to become an increasingly important factor in how people globally define themselves.<sup>3</sup> Religious belief is a critical element of US identity. Recent polls suggest that some 85 per cent of the US population claim some form of religious belief, nearly 60 per cent claim to attend regularly religious services (compared with 12 per cent in France and 10 per cent in Britain) and over 40 per cent say they believe the literal word-for-word truth of the Bible. As a faith-based nation, US nationalism embraces a self-congratulatory view of its exceptionalism and its prosperity. For the European Union's Javier Solana, America's tendency to view international events through a strictly religious focus helps to divide the US from Europe.

The second point of interaction between faith and foreign policy lies in who participates legitimately in foreign policy-making. The US Religious Right, largely conservative evangelicals, has been particularly influential within as well as supported by the present Bush administration. There is, of course, a pre-Bush history to this as well. When Jerry Falwell established the Moral Majority in 1979, its target was not just godless liberalism at home but also atheistic communism abroad. In the aftermath of Vietnam, the Religious Right supported a strong military when the established churches turned against the use of US military power. In some Muslim countries, religious leaders also play major roles in general foreign policy approaches: Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the erstwhile Taliban in Afghanistan are obvious cases.

A third interaction arises in the basic beliefs and interests that can be brought to bear on foreign policy. The biblical beliefs of the US evangelical

<sup>3</sup> National Intelligence Council, 'Mapping the global future: Report of the National Intelligence Council's 2020 project', December 2004, p. 79, <[www.dni.gov/nic/NIC\\_globaltrend2020.html](http://www.dni.gov/nic/NIC_globaltrend2020.html)>.

Christians and their related support for Israel, both of which are explored in Mark Beeson's piece in this *Keynote*, illustrate this. So does fundamentalist Muslim support for the application of the Shari'a. Other examples include opposition to international aid policies that support family planning, contraception and birth control (other than abstinence) or that might link with gay issues (such as HIV/AIDS policies), or suspicion of multilateral institutions ranging from the United Nations to the EU. As the discussion below reveals, these views are sometimes held in common by Christian and Muslim religious conservatives.

In drawing out some of these themes about the influence of religion on foreign policy, the discussion here examines the symmetry between aspects of conservative US and Islamic faiths, traditionalist reactions to modernity and liberalism and, more briefly, the potential significance of demographic trends.

#### **US AND MUSLIM FAITHS: ELEMENTS OF SYMMETRY**

There is obviously a wide chasm between the Bush and bin Laden religious worldviews. Yet there is also a symmetric dualism. The US claims to constitute the 'chosen people' with a widely held belief in an exclusive and superior understanding of a Christian God's design. Bin Laden wants to target the US for its crimes but also to establish the superiority of the God of Islam as he sees it. Like Bush, bin Laden constructs the struggle as Manichean, suggesting a zero-sum outcome. Moreover, in a cosmic war it becomes almost unpatriotic to seek to understand the enemy. So the Western debate is largely couched in vague and unhelpful generalities such as 'they hate our values' even though surveys suggest little difference between Muslim acceptance of political values such as democracy and that of Western countries.<sup>4</sup>

While differences do exist with much of the secular West on social issues such as gender equality and sexual liberalisation, these differences are less pronounced with the US and other conservative religious groups. Generally, bin Laden and the US Religious Right in particular share concerns about the decline of 'family values' and over issues such as sexual appearance and behaviour. Moreover, like the US Christian Right, bin Laden is opposed to the UN but for different reasons, among them Israel, Iraq and East Timor.

Religion is one explanation given for the rise of Islamic terrorism. Yet the evidence does not suggest that religiosity has been a significant

<sup>4</sup> Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and secular: Religion and politics worldwide* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 133–55.

causal factor, however much it might be linked to terrorist processes.<sup>5</sup> We need to look therefore for more complex explanations. Political Islam is diverse and so are the reasons for the extreme reactions found within it. Moreover, many deep political grievances might have stayed dormant without experienced militants returning from Afghanistan—and now Iraq—and seeking to justify an Islamic violence that is offensive and not just defensive.

It is important to understand the complex political dimensions of what are often portrayed as more straightforward religious actions. The perpetrators of the attacks of 11 September, Mohamed Atta and his 18 comrades, were a small middle class and educated group who were ultimately motivated by religious zeal. But their objective, and that of bin Laden, was political in the sense that their anger was directed against US policies. Yet bin Laden's worldview lacks a clear political program,<sup>6</sup> and his political statements lack a clear consistency. Bin Laden has spoken of Islam taking over 'the whole world and all the other false religions'. But he has also called for the US to deal with the Islamic world and interact with it on the basis of mutual interests, reflecting more of a 'live and let live' approach. Apart from the religious symbolism of the Al Aqsa Mosque, bin Laden has seen Palestine as more a territorial than religious issue. Because of his pan-Islamic political and religious objective, he has opposed a Palestinian state. In general, however, for bin Laden, the religious component remains central. This is particularly so for the issues of US troops on the Arabian peninsula (notably Saudi Arabia) which is explicitly against the Koran; US occupation of Afghanistan and to a lesser extent Iraq; US support for corrupt Muslim governments who do not follow Islamic beliefs; and US support for Israel.

Bin Laden often seems to want to restore the Islamic Caliphate which effectively ended following the First World War. These idealistic aims ignore the history of the Caliphate for much of its existence and the lessons of failed attempts to restore it in face of the highly variable nature of Muslim societies. His pursuit of a pan-Islamic Muslim world that applies Shari'a law means rejecting the role of the state both because of the limitations of 'illegal' borders that divide Muslims unnaturally in the Middle East and the unacceptable implications of giving preference to man-made rather than God's laws. All this challenges an existing international order linked to the sovereignty of the nation-state.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Pape, *Dying to win: The strategic logic of suicide terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2005), particularly pp. 102–25.

<sup>6</sup> Bruce Lawrence, 'Introduction', in Bruce Lawrence (ed.), *Messages to the world: The statements of Osama bin Laden* (London and New York: Verso, 2005).

Of course in assessing the influence of bin Laden's political theology, it is now understood that al Qaeda is not a cohesive and structured terrorist organisation. Jihadist extremist groups emerged well before al Qaeda and al Qaeda is not monolithic. Islamic militancy is still critical to contemporary world politics but its operational fragmentation makes it harder to fight. Although al Qaeda is now less central and significantly weaker organisationally since the US attack on the encampment at Tora Bora in 2001, that bin Laden has become disproportionately more important as a symbol has to a degree fragmented traditional Islamic structures of authority.

In the Muslim world beyond bin Laden, Muslim states have various worldviews and diverse foreign policies. Some pursue primarily national interests and find accommodation with the West and the existing international order in various ways. Some have worldviews predominantly determined by religious identities. Yet, even in Islamic Iran national interests at times come first—leaning towards Christian Armenia, for example, rather than Muslim Azerbaijan. Many militant groups also have (or have had) objectives more concerned with local political struggles—whether in Kurdistan, Algeria or Palestine—rather than with religious objectives.

#### **THE REACTION TO MODERNITY AND LIBERALISM**

As noted above, despite their differences on a range of issues, on social values there are certain symmetries between the Christian conservatives and political Islam. In addition, in their foreign policy attitudes, neither the Christian Right nor political Islam supports the existing structure of the international order and its institutions. The idea of an international society with common norms and values fares little better.

For an international society, based on secular states with common norms and values, religion as a set of ethical and moral propositions needed to be detached from the values of established churches and the church-based communities. In Scott Thomas's terms, international society needed to invent religion as largely private beliefs or doctrines as distinct from a community of believers.<sup>7</sup> The problem is that while liberal modernists, mainly European, have sought to separate the state from religion and ethics from theology, many non-Western societies have not yet made this transition. Societies outside Europe, in particular, are less likely to identify with the secular form of liberal modernity including its international policies and institutions—regardless of

<sup>7</sup> Scott Thomas, *The global resurgence of religion and the transformation of international relations: The struggle for the soul of the twenty first century* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 24–5.

whether their elites do or not. Even in modern secular states, the fact that many societies are still grounded in often religiously based cultures inevitably affects their worldviews.

Hedley Bull acknowledged that the nascent cosmopolitan culture of his international society, although based on a liberal modernity, might have to absorb non-Western elements to a much greater degree to be genuinely universal and to provide a foundation for a universal international society.<sup>8</sup> Bull anticipated a revolt against the West and against the dominance of what were seen to be Western values that drew on equal sovereignty, economic justice and racial equality. The struggle for cultural liberation against the West, he suggested, included Islamic fundamentalism.<sup>9</sup> However the rise of the US Religious Right suggests that the religious resurgence is more than simply a revolt against the West. Much of the Islamic opposition to the West is opposition to liberal modernity particularly in the form pursued by progressive liberals. But such opposition also explains much of the rise of the Christian Right in the US and indeed other conservative forms of existing religions. In these cases, much of the conflict is 'within'—conflicts of tradition versus modernism. Liberal secularism therefore appears to provide much of the underlying stimulus to resurgent religion. In part, that resurgence is a reaction against the pressure of progressive liberal views on social issues and the spread, through globalisation, of what is regarded as a threat to those traditional—often called family—values, however narrowly defined. In part, this resurgence arises because religion and those who profess it are increasingly unwilling to have it regarded as a marginal, privately held doctrine or belief. This is where the US Religious Right and political Islam have much in common not only between themselves but with other resurgent beliefs. Just as political Islam claims a religious role in public matters, evangelicals in the US do not accept barriers put around religion in public matters, including in foreign policies.

There is also a demographic aspect to the resurgence of religion in global terms. Although the religious revival is not limited to traditional societies, given the reaction to modernity we have discussed, the implications of these demographic changes are important. The secularisation thesis referred to earlier is not totally wrong. Post-industrial societies and basically secure countries are generally characterised by growing secularity and low birth rates. These processes influence western Europe, Australia and other advanced countries

<sup>8</sup> Hedley Bull, *The anarchical society* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1977), p. 317.

<sup>9</sup> Hedley Bull, 'The revolt against the West', in Hedley Bull and Adam Watson (eds), *The expansion of international society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 223.

including, to a degree, the US. A consequence is that these societies as a whole are becoming a smaller proportion of the global population. Demographic trends show that populations in the developing world that are likely to retain or intensify traditional (often tribal) religious views and cultures are growing and continue to demonstrate high birth rates. There will thus be a growing proportion of the global population that holds deeply held traditional religious beliefs and cultures.<sup>10</sup>

### IS CHANGE LIKELY?

Faith-related foreign policies will remain influential. In the US, while the direct centrality of evangelical religion to US policy may diminish post-Bush, the likelihood is that given the religious themes in US identity, and religion's current vitality and political value, it will remain a substantial influence in US politics and on US foreign policy. Moreover, it is significant that those religions and churches that are growing in the US are, as elsewhere, frequently led by charismatic leaders who are welcomed because they offer more emotional involvement and more demanding forms of religious practice than the traditional churches that mostly have tried to accommodate modernity.

For its part, political Islam is also likely to remain important, and not only in the form of a widespread uncontrolled insurgency directed mainly against the US. Extreme methods are supported by a very small minority of Muslims. Yet, sympathy with bin Laden's objectives is more widespread. Many, while morally against violence, would accept the efficacy of violence as a means of articulating the concerns of their co-religionists that include what Abdullah An-Na'im sees as the lack of credibility of liberal ideas about democracy and human rights.<sup>11</sup> The insurgency's intensity will possibly diminish but there are offsetting factors. Reactions to the West will continue given long term US interests in the Middle East and other Muslim countries, linked to US policy concerns over energy security and the continued existence of the state of Israel.

Although Christianity and Islam in their many forms are the most important faiths in contemporary world politics, religious resurgence extends beyond those two religions. The gap between secular or cosmopolitan values and religious or cultural values is growing. Conservative movements reacting to modernisation are already evident, including incipiently in Australia. Since globalising pressures on

<sup>10</sup> Norris and Inglehart, *Sacred and secular*, pp. 231–9.

<sup>11</sup> Abdullah A. An-Na'im, 'Political Islam', in Peter L. Berger (ed.), *The desecularization of the world: Resurgent religion and world politics* (Washington, DC: Erdmans/Ethics and Public Policy Centre, 1999).

societies worldwide to modernise will remain, reactions are likely to be widely antagonistic to those social pressures, and social movements including those based on religion are likely to continue to arise to counter them.

Of course, not all conservative movements are internationally significant. Nevertheless, we need to take the resurgence of religions—and of religious or spiritual nationalisms—more generally into our thinking about international relations. Classical realism and liberal institutionalism do not deal easily with transnational organisations like al Qaeda or more generally with the influence of religious cultures. One approach to doing this would be to acknowledge that modernising processes may differ from country to country, from religious culture to religious culture. As noted above, Bull suggested that international society might have to absorb non-Western elements to a much greater degree to provide a foundation for a universal international society. The question is whether it will be possible to achieve a Western model of such a society rather than accept a more multifaceted international society with differing responses to modernity that could perhaps provide a minimum set of norms reflecting compatible if not necessarily universal values.



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