

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 relations¹. 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'². 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»³. 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

¹ Javier Solana, *The Transatlantic Rift. Us Leadership After September 11*, «Harvard International Review» Winter 2003, 24:4, p. 63. See also Judy Dempsey, *Solana Laments Rift between Europe and «Religious» Us*, «Financial Times», 8 January 2003.

² In this context, the literature often refers to the importance of the operational-code beliefs of decision-makers. The operational-code contains on the one hand philosophical beliefs and basic images about international politics and on the other hand instrumental beliefs on how to cope with and react to political information and events. See Alexander L. George, *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy: The Effective Use of Information and Advice*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1980, p. 45; Ole R. Holsti, *Making American Foreign Policy*, New York, Routledge, 2006, p. 335; Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Relations*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1976, pp. 181-202; Yaacov Y.I. Vertzberger, *The World in Their Minds. Information Processing, Cognition, and Perception in Foreign Policy Decision-making*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1990.

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 compromise⁴.

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 successor⁵. 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 exploitation⁶. This contrasts with Western Europe’s increasing secularization⁷. 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»⁸. As historian Walter A. McDougall has described, during the first century of its

⁴ Solana, *The Transatlantic Rift*, p. 63. Solana was not alone in his observation that the religious divide has contributed to political difficulties between the United States and Europe. See, for instance, Madeleine Albright, *The Mighty and the Almighty. Reflections on Power, God, and World Affairs*, London, Pan Books, 2006, pp. X-XI.

⁵ Timothy J. Lynch, Robert S. Singh, *After Bush: The Case for Continuity in American Foreign Policy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 44-45.

⁶ Robert N. Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992; Seymour Martin Lipset, *The First New Nation: The United States in Historical and Comparative Perspective*, London, Heinemann, 1964, pp. 140-169; Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We? America’s Great Debate*, New York, Free Press, 2004, pp. 81-107.

⁷ Mathias Bös, Kai Hebel, “Religion”, in Alberto Martinelli (ed.), *Transatlantic Divide. Comparing American and European Society*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 198-217; Ronald Inglehart, Pippa Norris, *Sacred and Secular. Religion and Politics Worldwide*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 71-95.

⁸ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1948, p. 314.

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 world⁹. 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 world¹⁰. During the presidency of George W. Bush, the role of religion as an important factor in American foreign policy formulation reached new heights¹¹. 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 instrument¹². 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 associations¹³.

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»¹⁴. 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 West¹⁵. Even after the crusade firestorm, Bush

⁹ Walter A. McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State. The American Encounter with the World since 1776*, Boston, Mariner Books, 1997, p. 5.

¹⁰ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Cycles of American History*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1986, p. 14.

¹¹ For an insight in the religious inspiration of Bush’s foreign policy, see Joan Hoff, *A Faustian Foreign Policy. From Woodrow Wilson to George W. Bush*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 188-191; Lee Marsden, *For God’s Sake. The Christian Right and Us Foreign Policy*, London, Zed Books, 2008; Garry Wills, *A Country Ruled by Faith*, «New York Review of Books», 16 November 2006, pp. 8-12; John B. Judis, *The Chosen Nation: The Influence of Religion on Us Foreign Policy*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Policy Brief 37, March 2005; Andrew J. Bacevich, Elizabeth H. Prodromou, *God Is Not Neutral: Religion and Us Foreign Policy after 9/11*, «Orbis», Winter 2004, 48:1, pp. 43-54; Ron Suskind, *Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush*, «New York Times Magazine», 17 October 2004.

¹² Hoff, *A Faustian Foreign Policy*, cit., pp. 188-189; Albright, *The Mighty and the Almighty*, cit., p. 158; Bacevich, Prodromou, *God Is Not Neutral*, cit., p. 49.

¹³ Huntington, *Who We Are?*, cit., pp. 354-355.

¹⁴ Bush made his ‘crusade’ comment on 16 September 2001 in remarks to journalists on the White House lawn. Cited by John W. Dietrich (ed.), *The George W. Bush Foreign Policy Reader. Presidential Speeches with Commentary*, Armonk, NY, M.E. Sharpe, 2005, p. 41; Sandra Silberstein, *War of Words: Language, Politics and 9/11*, London, Routledge, 2007, p. 149; Manuel Perez-Rivas, *Bush vows to rid the world of «evil-doers»*, CNN.com, 16 September 2001; *Bush urges Us back to work*, BBC News, 17 September 2001.

¹⁵ Anne E. Kornblut, Charles Radin, *Bush Image of Crusade Upsets Some Potential Allies*, «Boston Globe», 18 September 2001; Peter Ford, *Europe cringes at Bush «crusade» against terrorists*, «Christian Science Monitor», 19 September 2001; William Safire, *On Language: Words At War*, «New York Times», 30 September 2001.

continued to build his speeches on religious metaphors and references to the United States as the blessed country in a struggle against the evil terrorists¹⁶. 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»¹⁷. 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»¹⁸. 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 Islam¹⁹. The frequent use by Bush's neoconservative supporters of the term Islamofascists to designate the enemy only reinforced this impression in the Muslim world²⁰.

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 dialogue²¹. 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 buckles 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»²².

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/landing?id=content_9217 and <http://men.style.com/gq/features/topsecret>.

¹⁷ George W. Bush, *Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People*, Us Capitol, Washington, D.C., 20 September 2001.

¹⁸ George W. Bush, *Inaugural Address*, Us Capitol, Washington, D.C., 20 January 2005. See also *The Chosen Nation*, p. 1.

¹⁹ Kylie Baxter, Shahram Akbarzadeh, *Us Foreign Policy in the Middle East. The Roots of Anti-Americanism*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2008, p. 160-173; Hoff, *A Faustian Foreign Policy*, cit., p. 188-189; Mel Gurtov, *Superpower on Crusade. The Bush Doctrine in Us Foreign Policy*, Boulder, Lynne Rienner, 2006, p. 14, 36; Gary Wills, *With God on His Side*, «New York Times», 30 March 2003.

²⁰ See, for instance, Norman Podhoretz, *World War IV: The Long Struggle Against Islamofascism*, New York, Doubleday, 2007.

²¹ For an excellent overview of the European initiatives, see Bichara Khader, *L'Europe pour la Méditerranée: de Barcelone à Barcelone (1995-2008)*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2009.

²² Karsten D. Voigt, *Religion is the wild card in transatlantic relations*, «Europe's World», Summer 2006, p. 47.

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.

²³ George W. Bush, *Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People*, Us Capitol, Washington, D.C., 20 September 2001.

²⁴ *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, Washington, D.C., The White House, September 2002, foreword by George W. Bush.

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

²⁶ George W. Bush, *Farewell Address to the Nation*, White House, Washington, D.C., 15 January 2009.

²⁷ Stephen Chan, *Out of Evil. New International Politics and Old Doctrines of War*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2005, p. IX. On Bush's Manichean worldview, see also Glenn Greenwald, *A Tragic Legacy. How a Good vs. Evil Mentality Destroyed the Bush Presidency*, New York, Crown, 2007; David Ryan, *Frustrated Empire. Us Foreign Policy, 9/11 to Iraq*, London, Pluto Press, 2007, p. 39; Elisabeth Kiss, "Combining Clarity and Complexity. A Layered Approach to Cross-Cultural Ethics", in Ruth W. Grant (ed.), *Naming Evil, Judging Evil*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2006, pp. 141-143.

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 Protestantism³². 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 Satan³³.

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

²⁹ Lynch, Singh, *After Bush*, cit., p. 44.

³⁰ Seymour Martin Lipset, *Continental Divide. The Values and Institutions of the United States and Canada*, London, Routledge, 1990, cit., p. 77; Id., *American Exceptionalism. A Double-Edged Sword*, New York, W.W. Norton, 1996, p. 63.

³¹ Lipset, *Continental Divide*, cit., p. 78-79; Lipset, *American Exceptionalism*, cit., p. 66.

³² Walter Russell Mead, *God's Country?*, «Foreign Affairs», September/October 2006, 85:5, p. 27.

³³ *Idem*, pp. 27-29.

for the common good, thus enhancing the prospect for stable, international – as well as transatlantic – cooperation³⁴.

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»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 Muslims³⁶. 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»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 Islam³⁸. 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»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

³⁴ *Idem*, p. 31.

³⁵ Barack Obama, *Remarks on Final Primary Night*, St. Paul, Minnesota, 3 June 2008. My attention to this quote was drawn by Anne-Marie Slaughter, Tod Lindberg, *Back to Basics; Religion and America*, «International Herald Tribune», 21 June 2008.

³⁶ Barack Obama, *Inaugural Address*, Us Capitol, Washington, D.C., 21 January 2009; Barack Obama, *Full transcript of interview on Al Arabiya TV*, www.alarabiya.net, 27 January 2009; Barack Obama, *Remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast*, Washington Hilton, Washington D.C., 5 February 2009; Barack Obama, *Videotaped Remarks in Celebration of Nowruz*, White House, Washington D.C., 20 March 2009; Barack Obama, *Remarks to the Turkish Parliament*, Ankara, Turkey, 6 April 2009; Barack Obama, *Remarks on a New Beginning*, Cairo University, Egypt, 4 June 2009.

³⁷ Barack Obama, *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, *Press Availability with Turkish President Gul*, Ankara, Turkey, 6 April 2009.

³⁸ Michael D. Shear, Kevin Sullivan, *In Turkey, Obama Reaches Out to Muslim World*, «Washington Post», 7 April 2009; Helene Cooper, *America Seeks Bonds to Islam, Obama Insists*, «New York Times», 7 April 2009; Sabrina Tavernise, Sebnem Arsu, *Obama Impresses Many on Both Sides of Turkey's Secular and Religious Divide*, «New York Times», 7 April 2009.

³⁹ Obama, *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 religion⁴². 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 line⁴⁷. 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..

⁴² Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, cit., pp. 206-207.

⁴³ Obama, *Remarks at National Prayer Breakfast*, cit..

⁴⁴ Anne-Marie Slaughter, *The Idea That Is America. Keeping Faith with Our Values in a Dangerous World*, New York, Basic Books, 2007, p. 209.

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..

⁴⁷ In line with the prescription by Slaughter, *The Idea That Is America*, cit., p. 210.

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..

⁵³ Hillary Rodham Clinton, *Interview With Suttichai Yoon and Veenarat Laohapakakul On World Beat*, Bangkok, Thailand, 22 July 2009.

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 responsibilities⁵⁶. 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 isolation⁵⁸. 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

⁵⁵ Hillary Rodham Clinton, *Foreign Policy Address*, Council on Foreign Relations, Washington, D.C., 15 July 2009.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*. See also Glenn Kessler, *Clinton: Us Urges Multi-Partner World*, «Washington Post», 16 July 2009.

⁵⁷ Joe Biden, *Statement after Meeting with President Viktor Yushchenko of Ukraine*, Kyiv, Ukraine, 21 July 2009.

⁵⁸ Solana, *The Transatlantic Rift*, cit., p. 63.

⁵⁹ *Idem*, p. 65.

⁶⁰ Gordon Brown, *Press Conference with President Barack Obama*, London, 1 April 2009.

⁶¹ Javier Solana, *Remarks to the Press on President Obama's Speech in Cairo: A New Page in Relations with the Arab-Muslim World*, Council of the European Union, Brussels, 4 June 2009.

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 issue⁶². For José-Manuel Barroso, the President of the European Commission, Obama’s worldview was leading to a «growing convergence of European and American positions»⁶³. German Chancellor Angela Merkel expressed herself in the same vein⁶⁴.

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 period⁶⁵. 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.

⁶³ José Manuel Barroso cited in Fabrice Randoux, Anne Eckstein, *Eu/Us: Us President Says «There is Only a United Europe»*, «Europolitics», 7 March 2009, p. 12.

⁶⁴ Angela Merkel, *Remarks with President Obama in Press Availability*, Dresden Castle, Germany, 5 June 2009. See also Nicholas Kulish, Jeff Zeleny, Alan Cowell, *Merkel Backs Obama on Push for Accord in Middle East*, «New York Times», 6 June 2009; Chris Bryant, *Merkel: Obama Offers «Unique Opportunity» for MidEast*, «Financial Times», 5 June 2009.

⁶⁵ Pew Global Attitudes Project, *Confidence in Obama Lifts Us Image Around the World. Most Muslim Publics Not So Easily Moved*, Washington D.C., Pew Research Center, 23 July 2009. See also Brian Knowlton, *Global Views of Us Helped by Obama, Survey Says*, «New York Times», 24 July 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 Brundtland⁶⁶. Logically, for Solana, President Obama's agenda for change – with its emphasis on traditional European and social democratic concerns – was «immensely welcome»⁶⁷. 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 option⁶⁸. 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.

⁶⁶ See *North-South: A Programme for Survival. Report of the Independent Commission on International Development Issues under the Chairmanship of Willy Brandt*, London, Pan Books, 1980; *Common Security. Report of the Independent Commission on Disarmament and Security Issues under the Chairmanship of Olof Palme*, London, Pan Books, 1982; *Our Common Future. The Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development under the Chairmanship of Gro Harlem Brundtland*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1987. My attention to the similarity in language between these reports and Obama's statements was drawn by Rik Coolsaet, *Nieuwe dageraad voor Amerika en voor de wereld?*, «Samenleving en Politiek», 2008, 15:9, p. 9.

⁶⁷ Javier Solana, *Europe's Global Role – What Next Steps?*, Ditchley Foundation annual lecture, Oxfordshire, United Kingdom, 11 July 2009.

⁶⁸ Lynch, Singh, *After Bush*, cit., p. 45.