Civil Religion, Fundamentalism, and the Politics and Policies of George W. Bush

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Countless observers, especially in Europe, tend to view the politics of George W. Bush as being strongly inspired by Christian "fundamentalism" and powered by "missionary" zeal. This article examines the justice of such an assessment. It comes to a different conclusion, arguing that in his speeches, the current President of the United States mostly uses "civil religious" metaphors and images, but rarely those of Christian denominations; that he only adopts the domestic policy agenda of his party's Christian Right wing where this seems expedient on electoral grounds; and that his foreign policy is based on American security interests, and not on any "fundamentalist" dogmas.

When the preparations for military intervention in Iraq were in full swing, many church leaders in Europe were heard to voice criticism of the course taken by the US government. The head of the Protestant Church in Germany, Manfred Kock, described President George W. Bush as a "religious fundamentalist" who gave the impression of believing he had a religious mission to fulfill. "This kind of rationale," said Kock, "makes me terribly afraid."¹ The President of the Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau, Peter Steinacker, viewed US policy as an amalgamation of the battle against terrorism and a

¹ Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 3 February 2003, p. 6.
striving for hegemony that was ultimately motivated by religious grounds, saying

America has for some considerable time shown a religious tendency to divide the existing world into 'good' and 'evil' regions, nations or systems, as a consequence of its eschatological mission. America maintains this self-image across the boundaries of all faiths and all religions, and perceives the thousand-year kingdom of the Apocalypse of John that is set to dawn with its experiment as the historico-theological task of fighting evil on a mission of global politics, and promoting freedom and progress throughout the world. Since the end of the Cold War, this self-image has consolidated into a renewed striving for hegemony.

President Bush, continued Steinacker, pursues this route with "enthusiastic support from the fundamentalism of evangelical groups, principally in the South of the United States."

These views were publicly affirmed by individual politicians in the German Christian Democratic Union such as Heiner Geissler, who described Bush as a "Christian Ayatollah."

These and other characterizations of the US President as a "crusader" pursuing a "mission of salvation," were heard increasingly in Europe from representatives of the churches, politicians, and intellectuals during the war in Iraq. Bush's statements are also occasionally interpreted thus in the US: In November 2003, Joan Didion published an essay in the New York Review of Books claiming that the hidden agenda of Bush's policies can be found in the apocalyptic "Left Behind" novels by Timothy La-

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3 Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 3 February 2003, p. 6.
Haye and Jerry B. Jenkins. Didion and others impute a dimension to George W. Bush’s policies (on Iraq) that is ultimately a religious one and can be described as “fundamentalist.” This essay examines the grounds for such evaluations against the backdrop of the special relationship between politics and religion in the USA and the role played by the ‘fundamentalist’ “Christian Right” in US domestic and foreign policy.

**Patriotism and Missionary Zeal in the US**

It was the Puritans, the first settlers in the early seventeenth century, who originally furnished the Biblical rhetoric still used today in the US to characterize the “American myth,” and applied by Americans chiefly in times of crisis; America is described as the land of “hope” and “glory,” as “God’s own country,” for which everything will turn out well both now and in the future (Bercovitch 1983).

To the colonists, the journey to America was neither emigration nor flight, but a “pilgrimage” and a prophetic event. Devout Christians, called by God to a historic “mission,” set out to found the “city on the hill” on the shores of the New World. This rhetoric fulfilled the function of portraying the theft of the native Indian peoples’ territory as nothing more than the appropriation of land already promised, and of weakening the immigrants’ ties of genealogy and national history in favor of a specifically “American” identity. The settlers were no mere European emigrants, but the New People of Israel, and America was not a European colony, but the Promised Land of Canaan. No underlings of an aristocracy, these free and equal citizens submitted only to the authority of God; they were confident of God’s mercy since he

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demonstrably blessed their actions. They perceived their venture as an “errand into the wilderness,” the fulfillment of the task of establishing the “New Jerusalem” in still “wild” and boundless territory, that was interpreted from the outset as a moral and spiritual, rather than a geographical, venture, a viewpoint that simplified its cross-border scale: first America, later to be known as the “United States,” then the world.

In the nineteenth century, the “errand into the wilderness” became America’s “manifest destiny,” appointed by Providence “to manifest to mankind the excellence of divine principles, to establish on earth the noblest temple ever dedicated to the worship of the Most High—The Sacred and the True” (John L. O’Sullivan, 1839; quoted from Kühnel 1996, 454). The “New Nation” had been entrusted with a superhistorical ‘truth’: the concepts of ‘freedom’ and ‘self government,’ upon the realization and implementation of which—according to the country’s self-image—the salvation of humanity depended. This idea initially furnished legitimacy for the expansion westward, and subsequently—in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—for American imperialism. The conviction of setting an example to the world gave rise to the right, indeed the duty, to reshape that world in compliance with this exemplary role. In his April 1917 declaration of war against Germany, President Woodrow Wilson justified the involvement as “an act of high principle and idealism” and “a crusade to make the world safe for democracy.” The American understanding of freedom and democracy was if possible to be shared among all the peoples of the world. The original concept of a religious mission was thus transformed into a missionary zeal for democracy.

Interesting parallels might be drawn between the foreign policies of Woodrow Wilson and George W. Bush—a task, however, that cannot be undertaken here.
Civil Religion

This having been said, we should not assume that early America was ruled by a homogeneous, or even monolithic, culture that united its immigrants into a single nation. On the contrary, from the outset American society was strongly fragmented (with respect to regional, ethnic, social, and religious differences), and this fragmentation grew as the centuries passed. The ties that bound this disparate society were initially comprised of a narrow band of commercial exchange and the free traffic of goods, which triggered a rapid rise in national income. However, a further and primary social tie was the conglomerate of ideas, attitudes, and behaviors so impressively described by Alexis de Tocqueville at the start of the nineteenth century. Despite their many differences, including religious ones, the inhabitants demonstrably shared a common ‘doctrine,’ known as “civil religion” or the “American creed” (Myrdal 1944, 3).

“Civil religion” is the term denoting a collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals that bind citizens to a political community and ultimately permits the claim of religious legitimacy to be raised by that community, its institutions, and representatives. This collection of beliefs publicly identifies and acknowledges within the political system those elements that in principle men are not free to change. It also links the nation’s history and its destiny in a meaningful and publicly communicated relationship (Lübbe 1981, 56). Civil religion empowers citizens to view their political community in a specific light, and articulates the vision that unites the nation into an integrated whole (Pierard 1996, 158). It is concerned with the “civitas terrena,” not the “civitas dei” (Marty 1986). American civil religion thus stands not for

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diluted Puritanism or Protestantism, but for an independent consensus of values guaranteeing the solidarity and stability of its highly disparate, strongly fragmented society—a task which no one faith or religion could have fulfilled. If, say, Protestantism in the eighteenth century had been granted legal privileges or even been elevated to the status of national religion, sooner or later this would have resulted in the breakdown of a society that increasingly numbered not only non-Protestants, non-Christians and non-believers, but also hundreds of Protestant churches and sects that would probably never have found a consensus over the content of a common “national religion.”

It is thus no coincidence that American civil religion adopts a strict separation of church and state (Levy 1994), a stricter separation even than that found in Europe’s most widely secularized countries today. To this day, state aid for religions and favoritism of a specific faith are prohibited by the First Amendment to the United States Constitution which—according to the Supreme Court’s interpretation (Alley 1999, Hitchcock 2004)—prohibits state institutions and representatives from financially supporting churches and church organizations and publicly exhibiting religious symbols. After the Second World War in particular, this constitutionally rooted stipulation of the separation of church and state was enforced with increasing rigor as the number of religions and philosophies in the US grew—the result partly of immigration, partly of indigenous developments.

Linked to the strict separation of church and state is the guarantee of almost unlimited freedom to practice religion (Choper 1995; Hammond 1998), largely shielded from intervention by state bodies—in the same way that the protection of personal freedom is generally at the core of political concepts of order. A basic element of American civil religion is that its citizens’ scope of freedom must be acknowledged and secured as far as possible, and that the degree of success in fulfilling this task is the yard-
stick by which the legitimacy of all exercise of state power is measured. The American people’s vibrant patriotism draws its greatest strength not least from being at home in the “freest land on earth” in which everyone can ‘be happy according to his own countenance.’

Ideas of civil religion are widespread among the American people. In surveys, the majority regularly agrees with statements such as “I consider holidays like the Fourth of July religious as well as patriotic” and “We should respect the president’s authority since his authority is from God” (Wimberley 1976; Wald 1997, 61; Wilcox 2000, 16-19).

American presidents make frequent reference in their speeches to the specific world of ideas and symbols belonging to American civil religion (Germino 1984; Lejon 1988). George Washington already applied them when addressing the Congress and the American people at his inauguration in 1789: “No People can be bound to acknowledge and adore the invisible hand, which conducts the Affairs of men more than the People of the United States. Every step, by which they have advanced to the character of an independent nation, seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency” (Washington 1939, 293).

Such “sermons of civil religion” have frequently been held by American presidents since Washington’s time. Abraham Lincoln and Ronald Reagan in particular were gifted “high priests” of the “American creed.” Ronald Reagan publicly expressed his conviction that the United States was a chosen nation singled out for a specific mission: “We are a nation under God. I’ve always believed that this blessed land was set apart in a special way, that some divine plan placed this great continent between the oceans” (quoted from Lejon 1988, 80).

Terms such as “divine plan,” “Providence” and “Creator” are part of the standard rhetorical repertoire of American presidents,
who are regarded not only as "Head of State" and "Commander in Chief," but also as the nation's "Chief Preacher," charged with the task of spreading hope and confidence in times of crisis.

The "preaching" of the forty-third President of the United States, George W. Bush, whose speeches are repeatedly peppered with scraps of American "civil religion," is no exception. "Liberty is God's gift to every human being in the world... We're called to extend the promise of this country into the lives of every citizen who lives here. We're called to defend our nation and to lead the world to peace, and we will meet both challenges with courage and with confidence" (Bush 2003a).

When Bush endeavors to speak words of comfort after tragic events such as the attacks of September 11 or the Columbia space shuttle disaster, he fuses secular and religious rhetoric into a whole dominated by a metaphorical style that is active, future-oriented, and optimistic—in conformity with American civil religion. Disasters are ultimately only a "test" of America's "resolution" and "will" to proceed down its allotted path of "progress" and "liberty." Strengthening "faith," they are at worst mere "setbacks" on the road to prosperity and "fortune," the price exacted for scientific and technological triumph, for military victory, for "liberty," etc. Almost every speech by Bush ends—also in accordance with tradition—with the statement "[May] God bless America," expressing the hope and confidence that God's blessing rests on the United States.

Bush is thus merely continuing rhetorical tradition in his speeches, which many European observers feel have an unusually strong "religious" tone. The majority of "religious" references and connotations in his current public speeches present familiar civil religious ideas in more or less new combinations. Bush invokes common values and proffers—in the manner of the Roman Republic—the moral convictions of the nation's forefathers ("mos maiorum") to mobilize support for political inten-
In this respect, his speeches and public addresses are not a novel phenomenon.

European observers nevertheless claim that Bush differs from his predecessors by using more religious references and Biblical quotations than, say, his father George Herbert Walker Bush or William Jefferson Clinton. They point out that Bush begins almost every working day in the White House with a Bible reading, opens his Cabinet meetings with a prayer, and frequently invites members of the clergy to visit the White House. When, in the wake of the Columbia disaster at the beginning of February 2003, Bush addressed the shocked nation in a televised speech and declared, “The same Creator who names the stars also knows the names of the seven souls we mourn today,” following this by a direct quotation from the Book of Isaiah; critics thought this an unusual move for an American president who should represent all American people regardless of their creed. In the aftermath of September 11 in particular, when his aim was to put fresh heart into the nation and prepare it for the wars in Afghanistan and later in Iraq, Bush increasingly incorporated “Christian” terms and ideas into his speeches. It was no coincidence, claim observers, that in his State of the Union address on January 28, 2003, Bush justified a preventive strike against Iraq by calling on the “loving God” in whom, as he said, the nation placed its confidence in these “decisive days” more than ever. He also referred to liberty as “God’s gift to humanity,” which the

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American people desired to protect for all the peoples of the world (Bush 2003b). A year before this, Bush had spoken of an “axis of evil” (Bush 2002c), deliberately introducing a religiously charged expression in his use of the word “evil” that helped to divide the world into “good” and “evil,” “friends” and “foes.” Did not this choice of words—as the critics quoted earlier maintain—disclose the “Manichean” attitude of a closet “fundamentalist”?

There is no doubt that since September 11, 2001, Bush’s references to God have grown more frequent and more fervent (“loving God,” “Lord Almighty,” “Giver of life”) than in previous months. The shock of the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington hit the American people hard and drove many to seek refuge in their faith. While it is possible that the President also experienced an intensification of religious faith in the period after September 11, 2001, social science cannot determine the truth of that claim. However, the allegation must be examined that Bush developed a “Christian missionary” view of politics that increasingly colors his domestic and foreign policy. Admittedly, his speeches contain statements that could be interpreted as having Christian Evangelical meanings, such as “the power of faith can transform a life” or “it’s so inspirational to see...the great works of our Lord in your heart” (Bush 2003a). Such statements clearly overstep the normal level of “civil religion” in Presidential speeches. However, should they really be read in the light of the Protestant “fundamentalism” of which the President stands accused by the critics mentioned? Is the domestic and foreign policy of the United States under George W. Bush shaped by the programmatic positions of American “fundamentalists”?

**Christian Protestant Fundamentalism in the US**

The term “fundamentalism” originated—perhaps surprisingly in view of current discussions concerning political developments
in Islamic societies—in the US, and denotes a Protestant reform movement that arose at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. The name derived from the title of a 12-volume series of publications that appeared between 1910 and 1915: The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth. The aim of the work was to defend the “true” faith against “new-fangled” theological modernism,\textsuperscript{11} theological liberalism,\textsuperscript{12} and “secularism” (Darwinism in particular), and also to warn against the negative social and cultural changes they were assumed to spawn.

In its initial stages, the new movement was principally supported by scholars in the urban centers of the North and recognized theological faculties such as Princeton Seminary. From the 1920s fundamentalism also spread among believers of lower socio-economic classes in the South and Midwest.

Although initially the fundamentalists were still classified as part of America’s “mainstream,” this was to change after the “Monkey Trial.” The American public reacted with consternation to the fundamentalists’ proclamations of anti-rationalism (“We study only the Bible”) and “fanatical” criticism of modern natural sciences. As public attitudes became more negative, the fundamentalists responded by increasingly retreating into their communities and cultivating an escapism that spurned the outside world. Many lived in anticipation of the end of the world and the imminent Second Coming of Christ. Fundamentalists began to found their own schools and colleges and expand their

\textsuperscript{11} A reference to the “German,” “Biblical” or “Higher Criticism” which had begun to apply principles of textual criticism to the Bible as to any ancient document; conservative Protestants held the view that this called into question the divine inspiration and truth of the Bible as an authoritative document of faith.

\textsuperscript{12} This referred chiefly to the “social gospel” movement, which in the view of conservative Protestants concentrated too much on social reforms and too little on moral and personal life issues, thus forgetting about “saving souls.”
religious organizations and institutions, in order to be capable of sustaining and reproducing fundamentalist culture while shielded from "modernity" (Bruce 1988, 30-31).

In the twentieth century, American Protestantism was not the only religion to develop a progressively institutionalized, "fundamentalist" wing. Studies conducted as part of the "Fundamentalism Project" of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (Marty and Appleby 1991-1995) show that almost all religions (Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism etc.) developed fundamentalist movements during the twentieth century, which—despite their many differences—had many elements in common.

According to Marty and Appleby (1991-1995, vol. 1, 835), religious "fundamentalism" is an attitude within religious communities that manifests itself in the form of a strategy applied by believers to preserve their distinct group identity when this is perceived as being under threat. Identity is secured by the selective revival of certain "fundamental" dogmas, doctrines and practices, by which believers aim to demarcate themselves from the cultural milieu of the unconverted and "unredeemed," whom they perceive as "enemies of God." Their objective is to "recreate" a hermetic world view that can be applied within a complete cognitive explanation of the world as a whole, its nature, and its history. The powerful attraction of fundamentalist movements is drawn from their claim to absolute truth, conveying "ontological security" in a world of pluralist claims to validity and lifestyles. Their structure is generally authoritarian and their leadership absolutist with a strong moral impetus (Bruce 2000).

Drawing the line between "fundamentalist" and "non-fundamentalist" movements within a religion can be difficult. "Fundamentalists" are distinguished from "conservative," "traditionalist" or "orthodox" believers solely by their specific understanding of the common doctrines, particularly by the selection and interpretation of those principles of faith regarded, and to be
regarded, as “fundamental.” In this connection, the supernatural and eschatological elements of a religion are generally emphasized and linked to a dualistic Manichean interpretation of the world. The meaning of history is projected onto a person (Hidden Imam, Christ, Messiah) or a tendency, at the appearance of which “good” (“justice”) ultimately prevails at the end of time and evil (“Satan”) is swept away forever. The intensity of faith is strengthened by repeated predictions that the “last days” will dawn in the near future.

Despite the consequences they hold for society, fundamentalist movements are not necessarily political. Riesebrodt (1990) joins Max Weber in distinguishing two forms of fundamentalism: one of “ruling the world,” responding to the conflict between religious principles of orientation and a changing social environment by attempting to control reality, particularly by suppressing reality that differs from the norm; and one of “fleeing from the world,” an at least mental withdrawal from the world, generally with cultish attributes. Only the first type has the potential for radical politicization.

American fundamentalism in the first half of the twentieth century was a purely religious, largely apolitical movement with strong escapist tendencies, expecting changes in those social conditions designated as “sinful” to arise from the confessional conversion of the individual to the Christian way of life and from a retreat from the “secular world,” or from the direct intervention of Christ (chiliasm), but not as a result of social activism on the part of the church, political participation, or intervention by the (welfare) state. Attempts to politicize fundamentalism thus failed repeatedly between the 1920s and 1960s, and not until the 1970s did partial political mobilization of a “Christian Right” take place, a reaction to growing protest activities by the liberal new social movements, the “counter-culture,” and the liberalization of abortion law by the United States Supreme Court.
The "Christian Right" and American Domestic Policy

A new phenomenon in the United States was the establishment of political organizations in conservative Protestantism such as "Moral Majority," "Religious Roundtable," "Christian Voice," and "Concerned Women for America" in the late 1970s (Watson 1997; Wilcox 2000), which were founded by fundamentalist television and radio preachers (among them Jerry Falwell, Timothy LaHaye, and James Robison). From the end of the 1980s these and other "Christian Right" organizations were increasingly joined by "neo-Evangelicals," "Pentecostals," and "Charismatics" (here referred to by the generic term of "Evangelicals"), who do not share the full range of religious convictions of the Protestant "fundamentalists," but support their political aims.

These political aims primarily constitute the implementation of socio-moral and religio-political reforms such as the reinstatement of morning prayers in schools, addressing Biblical creationism in biology lessons, and a strict ban on abortions—reforms intended to arrest or reverse the process of social modernization and socio-cultural liberalization that had been accelerating since the 1960s.

Surveys show that around 27% of the American population can be categorized as Evangelical Protestants (around one-quarter of whom, approximately 7% of the total population, are Protestant "fundamentalists" in the strictest sense) (Wald 1997, 173). In surveys, Evangelicals claim more frequently than other Protestants or Catholics that religion is an important area of orientation in their lives; they are more active in their church communities, attend services more frequently, and read the Bible more often than other Christians (Wilcox 2000, 48-49).

On political issues, Evangelicals adopt considerably more conservative positions than adherents of other religions, demonstrating extremely conservative attitudes to issues of religious
policy, and social and moral issues in particular. Surveys show they are less willing to tolerate others with diverging values and more likely to regard belief in God as an important prerequisite for being a "good American." On issues of abortion, the role of women in society and homosexual rights, the gap between Evangelicals and "mainline" Protestants, Catholics and those with no religious affiliations is relatively wide, while differences are less marked on economic questions (Wilcox 2000, 50-51).

While not all Evangelicals support or favor the organizations of the "Christian Right" and their aims, around 14 to 17% of all American voters can be classified as supporters of the "Christian Right," voting almost exclusively for Republican candidates (Green 2000a; Green 2000b; Wilcox 2002, 116-117). This is the source of the significant influence exerted since the 1980s by the "Christian Right" of the Republican Party. The "Christian Right" thus associated its great hopes of a radical political change and the realization of its catalog of political demands with George W. Bush's assumption of office in January 2001.

In fact, Bush began to accommodate the expectations of the "Christian Right" soon after his election. He reinstated the "Mexico City Policy" canceling US financial aid for international family planning organizations that perform abortions, which had been abolished by Clinton in 1993. He ordered a re-appraisal of state subsidies for medical research institutes using embryonic stem cells in their work. He announced the introduction of education vouchers also redeemable at (Evangelical) parochial schools. He proposed a future program of "faith-based

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13 At the end of the 1990s, the number of activists was between 150,000 and 200,000 (cf. Green 2000a: 8).
14 On August 9, 2001, Bush decided to grant State aid only to research on existing stem cell lines, a decision that provoked divided opinions on "Christian Right" sites, which called for an end to federal funding.
initiatives” (which later failed due to congressional opposition). In addition, he publicly announced his support for morning prayers in public schools, for abstinence education, and for a constitutional amendment to ban same-sex-marriages, for the prohibition of certain forms of late-term abortion, and the prohibition of therapeutic and reproductive cloning. He nominated staunch opponents of *Roe v. Wade* as federal appellate judges. Furthermore, he appointed a Pentecostal, John Ashcroft, former Senator of Missouri, as Attorney General: Ashcroft’s appointment in particular was to be understood as a *quid pro quo* for the support of the “Christian Right” during the election, prompting expectations for the future of closer cooperation between the White House and the religio-conservative wing of the GOP on issues of domestic policy.

However, for Bush the “Christian Right” is only one of several key blocks of voters. To secure reelection in 2004, he will need to satisfy other voter groups in the Republican Party such as the economic conservatives, who are more interested in reforms in economic, fiscal, and social policy. Since these voter groups frequently also hold moderate or liberal views on socio-moral and religious policy issues, the President’s scope for accommodating the demands of the “Christian Right” is strictly curtailed. He will thus continue—while making smaller concessions on some socially less controversial issues—to temporize and obfuscate on key issues for the “Christian Right,” since adopting over-definite positions would lose him votes from other voting groups. Up to now, then, Bush has deliberately refrained from launching initiatives to prohibit abortion by Constitutional amendment or to ease the strict separation of church and state. He is basically acting no differently from Ronald Reagan, who supported individual initiatives by the “Christian Right” in the 1980s but invested little political capital in launching radical changes. Reagan’s verbal support of the aims of the “Christian
Right" was largely motivated by election strategy, as was his occasional use of evangelical-fundamentalist terms such as his description of the Soviet Union as an "evil empire."

George W. Bush is following in the footsteps of Ronald Reagan, whose successful reelection in 1984 was due not least to support from this circle. Bush’s constant reiteration that he grew up in one of the Bible Belt states (although born in Connecticut), converted to Methodism and was "born again," are all aimed at increasing his credibility among conservative Protestants, whose votes are vital in the 2004 Presidential elections to boost his chances of success and prevent a repetition of the close call that occurred in the year 2000.

This is why Bush is so definite in his use of the language of Evangelicalism, referring to the "axis of evil," describing the protection of freedom as the American "mission" or warning of the dangers of a nuclear "Armageddon" (Bush 2002a). While as a "born-again Christian" he may have a personal affinity with the religio-theological positions of the spiritual leaders of the "Christian Right," from a political point of view his strategy is in the main an attempt motivated by election tactics to integrate evangelical voters as fully as possible into the circle of regular Republican voters, by the use of rhetoric and token gestures over issues of domestic policy. This is demonstrated not least by the fact that the President tends to accommodate "Christian Right" interests to a far lesser extent in matters of foreign policy—seldom a critical factor in US election results.

The "Christian Right" and American Foreign Policy

During the twenty years and more of its existence, the demands of the "Christian Right" have primarily concerned domestic policy, only rarely taking a stance on foreign policy issues. Even after the attacks of September 11, the movement’s leaders initially attempted to exploit events to galvanize domestic policy
into action. Jerry Falwell, former spokesman of the “Moral Majority,” stated in a television interview two days after the terrorist attacks of September 11 that they had been caused by the wrath of God, punishing the United States of America for its “sins” (i.e., homosexuality, abortion, and feminism). Yet his attempt to advertise the movement’s own domestic policy agenda by applying this interpretation misfired; massive public protests ensued and Falwell was forced to apologize for his remarks.15

However, when the United States launched military operations against the Taliban in Afghanistan, fundamentalist leaders began to turn their attention towards foreign policy. Their propaganda now portrayed America—as in the times of the East-West conflict—as the “last great home of faith” that had become the target of “Satan.” The Soviet Union was replaced by Islam(ism) as the new “kingdom of evil.” Their supporters gratefully seized on the idea; Muslims had, after all, long been regarded as a threat to the state of Israel, the existence of which plays an important role in Protestant fundamentalist eschatology.16

This new interpretation of the “fight of good against evil” resulted in unequivocally clear propaganda: “Muhammad was a demon-possessed pedophile,” declared Jerry Vines, an ex-president of the Southern Baptist Convention. “Islam is a very evil and wicked religion,” announced Franklin Graham, son of

16 For fundamentalists Israel, said to be the location of “Armageddon,” will be the site of the “last great battle” against the Anti-Christ. The foundation of the state of Israel in 1948, and the conquest of Jerusalem by Israeli troops in the Six Days’ War, are regarded by Evangelical premillenialists as a “sign” of the imminent fulfillment of Biblical prophecies. They have thus demanded for years that the state of Israel be defended by all means and Jerusalem recognized as part of Israeli territory. But their most recent demand is the destruction of “ungodly Babylon” from which—according to their interpretation of the Scriptures—the Anti-Christ will extend his rule. Babylon is sited in today’s Iraq, and was rebuilt only a few years ago under Saddam Hussein.

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Billy Graham (NBC Nightly News, November 16, 2001). “Islam seeks to destroy others” stated Marion “Pat” Robertson, founder of the “Christian Coalition,” who said elsewhere that Mohammed “was an absolute wild-eyed fanatic. He was a robber and a brigand...to think that this is a peaceful religion is fraudulent.” “Adolf Hitler was bad,” he continued, “but what the Muslims want to do to the Jews is worse.”

When the “Christian Coalition,” the largest organization of the “Christian Right” with 1.5 million members, organized a symposium in Washington in February 2003 on the theme “Muslims and The Judeo-Christian World—Where to From Here?,” at which—as critics pointed out—not a single Muslim was invited to speak, the hostility to Islam inherent to the event was clearly revealed in the choice of topics: “War on Iraq,” “Christian Persecution in Arab Countries,” and “Islam and Terrorism.” Another objective of the event, according to information given by the organizers, was to inform American Christians about the “true”—in other words, the violent, anti-Christian—“nature of Islam.”

The “Christian Coalition” had sent a questionnaire to its members prior to the conference to investigate their attitude toward Islam. Almost 90% of those participating in this online survey (n=955) shared the view that Islam was not a “religion of peace;” 91.5% believed that Islam was not a “Godly religion”

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18 Thus Marion “Pat” Robertson in the TV show “Hannity & Colmes,” Fox News Channel; quoted here from a press release of the Muslim American Society dated 10 October 2002.
and 96% believed that Christians were discriminated against in Islamic societies—unlike Muslims in Christian societies. With an eye to the Iraq crisis, the survey revealed that 75% were in favor of war against Saddam Hussein—twenty percentage points more than in the population as a whole at that time (Szkala/Jäger 2003, 44).

Although Iraq policies delivered such definite support for the President’s position, there are no grounds for concluding that George W. Bush would pursue the religiously colored world view and apocalyptic prophecies of a Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, and their ilk, or align his foreign policy to such views. On the contrary, Bush explicitly distanced himself several times from their tirades against Islam, earning their harsh criticism in return.

Bush’s statements were marked by his attempt to achieve four different goals: (1) avoid alienating his Evangelical voters while maintaining a tone of moderation; (2) by doing this, to prevent the development of pan-Islamic solidarity with the Taliban, Osama Bin Laden, and Saddam Hussein after the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq; (3) attempt to forge a broadly based war and anti-terrorism coalition to include moderate Islamic states (Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait etc.; but also Pakistan and Uzbekistan, for example, with regard to the war in Afghanistan); (4) ensure that, despite his bellicose rhetoric, no danger would ensue for the Muslim minority in his own country. Of the four to six million Muslims in the US, not a few had been the victims of

21 However, 77% of the survey's participants openly admitted to knowing "little" or "nothing" about Islam: Christian Coalition Releases Survey Results on Islam. Press Release, January 17, 2003: http://cc.org/becomeinformed/pressrelease011703.html.
verbal or physical attacks after September 11, and at least three had been murdered.\(^{23}\)

In his addresses, Bush consistently omitted all expressions associated with the “clash of civilizations” (Huntington 1996) that would only have played into the hands of Islamic (and Protestant) fundamentalists and provoked a “clash within civilizations” at home. He did all he could to present the fight against al-Qaeda and the Taliban as a “battle against international terrorism”—an anti-religious, because inhuman, movement—and backed up his verbal articulation of this stance with symbolic acts of state: After September 11, multi-denominational services were held in New York, attended by a phalanx of non-Christian clergy and religious scholars (including those of Jewish, Islamic, and Hindu origins), at which George W. Bush’s ‘sermons’ were invariably from the mold of civil, not denominational religion.\(^{24}\)

Statements by the President that transparently served the needs of his own Evangelical voters (“axis of evil” etc.) remained the exception. The central, reiterated concepts addressed in his speeches were “terrorism,” not “religion,” “al-Qaeda” and “the Taliban regime,” not “Islam,” and “lasting freedom,” not “global peace”—which, like “infinite justice,” could have been interpreted in a Christian missionary light. “The terrorists,” stated Bush,

practice a fringe form of Islamic extremism that has been rejected by Muslim scholars and the vast majority of Muslim clerics—a fringe movement that perverts the peaceful teachings of Islam.... Islam’s teachings are good and peaceful, and those who commit evil in the name of Allah blaspheme the name of Allah. The terrorists are traitors to their own faith, trying, in effect, to hijack Islam itself.... They are the

heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the twentieth century…they follow in the path of fascism, and Nazism, and totalitarianism (Bush 2001).

Behind this carefully chosen rhetoric was the US government’s realization that Huntington’s theory of an imminent “clash of civilizations,” which has been adopted by American (and Islamic) fundamentalists as a confirmation of their Manichean world view, can easily become a self-fulfilling prophecy as a result of the government’s own words and deeds.

George W. Bush’s Foreign Policy and the Iraq Conflict

The foreign policy of Bush’s government is influenced not by representatives of the “fundamentalist” “Christian Right” but by neo- and standard conservative advisers that, like Rumsfeld, Cheney, Rice, Wolfowitz and Perle, had already served under earlier Republican presidents (Bush, Ford, and Reagan). None is a Protestant fundamentalist or Evangelical. Attorney General John Ashcroft, an avowed supporter of the “Christian Right,” has no perceptible influence on the formulation of US foreign policy.

The attitude of the President’s foreign policy advisers is shaped by a deep distrust of international organizations such as the United Nations and a profoundly skeptical view of multilateral action that could curtail American sovereignty or potentially damage American (security) interests.

While these views are represented in part by the “Christian Right,” they are primarily shared by conservative think tanks in particular (such as the American Enterprise Institute and the Center for Security Policy), as well as other security policy advisers and Republican senators. Current United States’ foreign and security policies are formulated against a backdrop of (neo-) conservative convictions, not Christian fundamentalist dogmas.

However, European critics in particular cling to the conviction that the “preventive strike” against Iraq, a controversial
move in terms of both morality and international law, was ultimately religiously motivated and demonstrated belief in a "mission." After all, Bush himself had described the US's God-given mission as being "to defend our nation and lead the world to peace" (Bush 2003a), exhibiting—according to one German journalist—the nature of salvation: "The ambition to protect that Bush expresses is one of totality, encompassing, so to speak, the evil of all generations. Though the Kingdom of God has not yet materialized, yet it has dawned at that time in 2003 when a lone president takes the evil of the world upon himself and, acting as others' proxy, comes, sees and conquers." 25

It is certainly correct that in the weeks leading up to the war against Iraq, Bush increasingly applied the rhetoric of (civil!) religion, with the aim of mobilizing support for his cause at home. However, there are no grounds for the proposition that his motives for planning the invasion were specifically denominational Christian, given the array of realpolitik-related reasons from the US point of view which advocated military intervention in Iraq (Pollack 2002). As early as October 7, 2002, President Bush had stated

Some believe we can address this danger by simply resuming the old approach to inspections, and applying diplomatic and economic pressure. Yet this is precisely what the world has tried to do since 1991. The UN inspections program was met with systematic deception. The Iraqi regime bugged hotel rooms and offices of inspectors to find where they were going next; they forged documents, destroyed evidence, and developed mobile weapons facilities to keep a step ahead of inspectors (Bush 2002b).


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At the start of 2003, the US government claimed that Iraq had failed to fulfill Resolution 1441 of November 8, 2002, in addition to 16 earlier resolutions, and that Iraq had evaded sanctions imposed on it, used bogus companies to procure material for its weapons program and financed the material with illegal oil revenues that it had boosted from 500 million dollars to three billion dollars within only a few years. The government also claimed that Iraq had failed to meet its obligations to disarm and to disclose data concerning its arsenals of biological and chemical weapons of mass destruction and their stockpile locations; that it had attempted to develop nuclear weapons; that it possessed missile systems exceeding 150 km in range, also expressly forbidden by UN resolution (Resolution 687); furthermore, the claims continued, links between Iraq and the al-Qaeda terrorist network existed which—as Colin Powell declared before the UN security council—were said to have been established by Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi. There was a danger that Iraq could supply terrorist networks with biological or chemical war substances such as anthrax, botulin, ricin or VX nerve gas (already used once by Saddam Hussein against Iran and his own Kurdish population).

The Bush administration considered these grounds sufficient to justify a military strike against Iraq and effect a regime change. Any attempt to read further “intrinsic” factors such as religious motives (“Protestant fundamentalism”) into its conclusion must—as this analysis has shown—be rejected as pure speculation. While motives of “civil religion” are involved in the question of the legitimacy of the Iraq war and its “aftermath,” the principal aim behind the persistent affirmation of wanting to help the repressed Iraqi people topple a tyrannical regime and introduce “freedom” and “democracy” was to mobilize support in

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Bush’s own country (since Vietnam, the United States has obviously been unable to wage war without gaining public support). But a distinction must be drawn between this rhetoric of “civil religion” and the rhetoric of denominational religion. Unlike the latter, the former generated a self-imposed political obligation to arrange for the rebuilding of the country and democratic order after the successful conclusion of the Iraq war, regardless of the cost and duration of the undertaking. The Bush government has no choice but to permit itself to be judged by this implicit obligation—particularly at home—since the Iraq war is over. The vast scale of the task is likely to prove a tough test of the United States’ “missionary zeal” for democracy.

CONCLUSION

To many observers, the forty-third President of the US, George W. Bush, appears more religious than his predecessors. While this may be true for him as an individual, his policies show no such influence by personal religious beliefs. Like his role model Ronald Reagan, Bush is first and foremost a political “professional,” and is advised by political “professionals” such as Karl Rove, the election strategist. Bush seeks to win the support of as many societal groups in the US as possible, not least with a view to securing his reelection in 2004. To do this, he requires the support of the “Christian Right” wing of his own party, among others (but by no means exclusively). He thus accommodates the domestic policy demands issued by this wing, at least where he can do this without losing the support of other voting blocs, and therefore occasionally takes over the rhetorical terminology of Evangelicals, particularly when speaking before an Evangelical audience. Bush’s statements quoted at the beginning, “the power of faith can transform a life” or “it’s so inspirational to see...the great works of our Lord in your heart” (Bush 2003a) were made to the “National Religious Broadcasters,” an
organization of Evangelical radio and TV broadcasters in the USA that plays a key role as disseminator in Bush’s election strategy. Reagan also adopted this style of speaking at the beginning of the 1980s whenever he appeared at the organization’s conferences.

However, the “Christian Right” plays no role in the formulation of foreign policy, in which the government’s actions are influenced by (neo-)conservative advisers, whose viewpoints and objectives reveal motives of security policy, strategy and economics, but not religion. No other interpretation of the President’s statements and speeches is possible. Bush’s choice of religious metaphors remains in the category of American “civil religion,” expressing a commitment to the ideals of democracy and human rights—intended to derive their effectiveness not from the use of force and hegemonial expansion, but from their own role model. Even under Bush, American politics has not adopted the tenor of using military methods to export the country’s own social model throughout the world: “America has no empire to extend or utopia to establish,” declared Bush in 2002 to the cadets of West Point Military Academy (Bush 2002a).

The foreign policy of George W. Bush, then, is less concerned with a change of direction motivated by religion (or even Christianity) than with a stricter perception of American (security) interests prompted by the events of September 11, and a stronger articulation of the ideas and “beliefs” of “civil religion”: “We have no intention of imposing our culture—but America will always stand firm for the non-negotiable demands of human dignity: the rule of law, limits on the power of the state, respect for women, private property, free speech, equal justice, and religious tolerance” (Bush 2002c). Historically, these “beliefs” of civil religion that oblige every political order to protect peace and freedom and guarantee equal opportunity, the rule of law and democracy, have primarily served to determine the moral yard-
stick by which the citizens of the United States can gauge the legitimacy of their own government’s political actions—and pronounce judgment on Election Day.

REFERENCES


