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Religion and U.S. Foreign Policy

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A BBC documentary series recently reported on the apparent divine sanction given U.S. President George Bush's decision to march into Afghanistan and Iraq. In June 2003, the American president allegedly told Palestinian officials of the active role the Almighty played in his resolve for war. Although the White House has strongly denied that the president ever made such claims, news of Bush's religious encounter has made many opinion-makers in the Middle East wince, to say the least. More significant, it has caused the more suspicious in the region to beat their sorry breasts in angry confirmation of their fears that the American military expeditions were indeed undisguised religious crusades.

In the United States, while the claims have ignited controversy, the latest hullabaloo has also provided grist to the comedians' mill. Conan O'Brien deadpanned that it was not the Almighty but Batman who instructed Bush to launch the war. Another suggested that while more Americans in the Bible Belt and Southern states might buy the spiritual side of the story, those in the more liberal states like New England would be more inclined to believe the celestial personality as being a combination of Richard Cheney and Karl Rove rather than a saintly deity.

All things considered and notwithstanding the White House's refutation of the reliability of the BBC's claims, what the BBC show has perhaps inadvertently done is to bring into sharp focus a fascinating dimension of U.S. foreign policy. This is the nexus between the rise of politically-conscious religious groups in the United States and aspects of the U.S. administration's engagements in international politics.

Nexus between Religion and Foreign Policy

Among the myriad domestic sources of U.S. foreign relations, religion has come under intense scrutiny of late because of the increasing infusion of religious and ethical considerations into Washington's tackling of global issues such as human cloning, religious freedoms, and women's rights. Part of the reason for this stems from the personality and beliefs of the chief executive who is purportedly open to religious advice, has had little qualms peppering his speeches with religious references, and has attributed the triumph as regards his battle with the bottle to divine intervention.

The greater openness at the White House to inputs from the religious community, however, also stems from the recognition among U.S. officials that the domestic constituency (represented increasingly by religious activists) for a more forceful American commitment to tackling perceived injustice and social concerns on the international stage is broadening

considerably. Harvard University Professor Samuel Huntington has noted that a religious revivalism akin to the ‘Great Awakenings’ of the 18th and 19th centuries is stirring in American churches. ‘It should not be surprising’, he wrote recently, ‘if Americans again turn to religion to find their national identity and their national purpose’.

And according to Professor Stephen Zunes of the University of San Francisco, approximately one out of seven American voters identifies with the so-called Christian Right. Given the high likelihood that they will actually turn up at the polls, they are a formidable electoral force indeed. If the 2004 presidential election is any indication, the political power wielded by such politicized faith-based groups in advancing or breaking any politician’s bid for the presidential office is not soon to go away.

Into the Fray

Consequently, whenever groups such as the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), which alone is capable of rallying some thirty million supporters to a cause, flex their political muscles, converge on, and adopt institutional positions on matters such as the global spread of HIV/AIDS, politicians have invariably paid heed to those issues as well. The NAE, for example, successfully lobbied the Bush government into promulgating the United States Leadership Against HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria Act of 2003. The legislation obliged the White House to devise and implement a five-year plan to tackle the global HIV/AIDS epidemic. It also sanctioned U.S. participation in The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria, an international body established to advance the battle against the diseases.

Likewise, concerted lobbying from domestic U.S. anti-abortion groups has moved Washington to advance a ‘global gag rule’, forbidding the U.S. from supporting institutions that endorse abortion. Support for the work of organisations like the United Nations Population Fund, which had been accused of aiding coercive abortions in China, was accordingly curtailed. The administration’s work at the U.N. for a ban on human cloning, which found some success in the eventual adoption of a nonbinding pronouncement in March 2005 prohibiting human cloning, also played politically to that significant domestic electoral base—the religious right.

Other groups like the sixteen million-strong Southern Baptist Convention and the influential Midland Ministerial Alliance have also coalesced with human rights activists in putting pressure on the White House to get tough on countries such as North Korea. Notably, the Alliance, which is a network of churches from Bush’s Texas hometown, has used its clout to help secure passage of the 2004 North Korean Human Rights Act through Congress. The act provides substantial grants to aid programs promoting the protection of human rights in North Korea. The Alliance has additionally embarked on a campaign to induce the U.S. government to potentially slap tariffs of up to twenty-seven percent on Chinese imports should Beijing repatriate North Korean refugees back across the Sino-North Korean border. Measures paving the way for possible economic sanctions and incentives have similarly been put in place to address religious persecution and freedom in countries such as Saudi Arabia and Vietnam.

Conclusion

The influence of religious movements and ideas on U.S. foreign policy is undoubtedly one of

the most noteworthy developments in the last twenty years. It has swayed and buoyed the Bush government's approach to a wide range of concerns such as global human rights and religious persecution. Such faith-based initiatives undoubtedly advance the cause of human-centred security. But it has also suffused the U.S. government with a moral vigour that has stirred it to enter into values-centred battles with other states and constituencies in an appreciably spirited manner.

Meanwhile, comedians will get their laughs at Bush's expense given the president's already legendary inarticulacy—Bushisms, as the compendium of gaffes is most popularly termed. But it may also be said, without undue exaggeration, that it is only because a considerable section of the modern world is out of sympathy with the more serious religious sentiment that all of Bush's ostensible guffaw-inducing language on the political religious front will seem to many to be lacking in seriousness. For those living in more theocratic environments, however, any trivial evidence consonant to their pre-existing theological beliefs about impending Apocalypses and tribulations are sure to be viewed first with sombre seriousness, then the gnashing of teeth, and perhaps—and regrettably—a militant response.

Yet, ironically, perhaps it is in that faith-based conservatism on social issues that may enable the United States to build a bridge between itself and the Islamic world. While Joseph Nye may be right in suggesting that the appealing power of American culture should be used in the struggle against jihadi terrorism, the question remains: which aspects of American culture? In attempting to connect with peoples who have long assumed that the United States is the land of hedonism and decadence, it may be more productive from a soft power perspective to accentuate Focus on the Family rather than Britney Spears. In seeking to reach out to a constituency who has developed the perception that the United States is against Islamic values, it may be useful to stress the alliances that Washington has forged with Islamic states at the United Nations in opposing abortion rights and human cloning. Indeed, if the accentuation of commonalities has the potential to mitigate intercultural conflicts between different societies, the religious turn in U.S. affairs might paradoxically facilitate interactive dialogue between the United States and the Islamic world.

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