

## **Keynote Speaker:**

### ***For God's Sake: Civil Religion and US Foreign Policy***

Lee Marsden, *University of East Anglia, United Kingdom*

#### **Introduction**

In the light of the world economic crisis and the rise of new economic powers such as China, India and Brazil it has become fashionable for academics to speculate about the relative decline of the United States as a unipolar power. Tonight, I have little to add to that debate but I do want to speculate that America's rise to global prominence owed much to its religious beliefs and that America will continue to pursue a religiously orientated foreign policy under President Obama. Any systematic analysis of US foreign policy would suggest that religion played little part in foreign policy decision making until the arrival of George Bush Junior into the White House and those events of 11 September 2001, which have done so much to shape foreign relations in the past eight years. I want to suggest, however, that US foreign policy has always been governed by its religious impulses and that both Bush and Obama have used religious belief to further their foreign policy ambitions.

Tonight I want to explore the religious underpinnings of American primacy. American identity is malleable, a social construct that has undergone numerous transformations as it absorbed successive waves of immigration and attained greater power and influence in the world seeing off ideological challengers including colonialism, fascism and communism. Identity is partly a product of how people see

themselves at home and abroad and in opposition to a socially constructed ‘other’, which changes over time and circumstances. Identity and ideas are mutually reinforcing as what America ‘is’ in the world is determined by notions of what America ‘thinks it is’. If America believes it is exceptional, that it is the guardian of freedom and liberty; that it has a special role to fulfil in the world then such beliefs inform not only identity but also those interests that it will pursue (see Schmidt, 2008).

I want to suggest that US foreign policy owes much to a malleable religious identity, shaped by foundational myths, and that in recognising this we come to understand how America’s status as global hegemon is formed, sustained and expanded. In the lecture this evening I am going to explore the role of foundational myths of manifest destiny, exceptionalism, ‘innocent nation’ and civil religion espoused by successive presidents from George Washington to the present day. We will consider how Barack Obama has utilised civil religion to maximise domestic support for a foreign policy agenda, which seeks to maintain US hegemony through a more conciliatory and multilateral approach than his predecessor in the White House. I will show how George Bush’s use of faith-based soft power and military hard power delivered by increasingly conservative evangelical US armed forces are being expanded by an Obama presidency that defines itself in religious terms while providing opportunities for religious actors to continue to play a role in representing US interests beyond its shores.

### **American Identity**

The foundational myths of manifest destiny, American exceptionalism, ‘innocent nation’, and Civil Religion have been acknowledged by numerous scholars as being instrumental in forging an identity that has been able to bring together Michael Lind’s

‘3 American nations’ of seventeenth century ‘Anglo- Americans’, nineteenth century ‘Euro-Americans’ and late twentieth century ‘Global-Americans’, following successive waves of immigration (cf. Deudney and Meiser, 2008).

John O’Sullivan’s proclamation that America was ‘destined to manifest to mankind the excellence of divine principles’ (McDougall, 1998: 77) provides an ideal starting point to reflect that many of the early settlers were fleeing religious persecution in Europe and sought to create an earthly paradise in the new country where they would be free to practice their religion without hindrance or persecution. John Winthrop’s vision of a ‘city on a hill’ (from Matthew 5:14) that would cause God’s glory to shine on the rest of the world by the new nation’s godly example has become deeply ingrained within the American psyche and frequently quoted by presidents and politicians across the ages and political spectrum. Manifest destiny implied a ‘morally superior nation chosen by God’ with a special obligation to redeem at least the American continent, converting the ‘heathen’ and ‘savages’, while providing moral justification for the expansion of America’s borders (Gentile, 2008: 93). In such a mindset the ethnic cleansing of the native peoples on the continent was justified by appeal to the higher calling of God and the seeds sown for world domination by the transformative ideas of freedom, liberty, free markets and human rights.

Intimately bound up with manifest destiny is the notion of American exceptionalism. Many nations claim a degree of exceptionalism without the geopolitical, economic and military credentials to support such claims. America’s claims to be an exceptional country are well made on economic and military grounds but such claims are also under girded by a religious claim that such primacy is both inevitable and the outworking of divine blessing (See Lipset, 1996). Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics and Liberty Commission explains that: ‘For whatever

reason this county has been uniquely blessed, and most evangelical Christians will argue that it is not fortuitous, it's providential ... and that imposes certain obligations and responsibilities: 'to whom much is given, much is required' (Marsden, 2008: 108).

The idea that America is special, has been chosen by God, and has ideals which are the envy of the world is supplemented by a further myth which portrays it as an 'innocent nation', more sinned against than sinning. An 'innocent' nation can not conceivably be an empire. An 'innocent' nation's best intentions are inevitably misunderstood. In all foreign interventions the United States, in its innocent nation guise, seeks to liberate and bring freedom to these countries bringing them universal values, whether they want it or not.

A mythical identity emerges that proclaims moral superiority while cultivating a succession of 'immoral' enemies that must be violently defeated in perpetuity in order to maintain the myth (see Hixson, 2008). In such thinking the Soviet Union had no need to fear the United States, rather America and its allies were threatened by the Soviets. Instead of naked US imperialism and support for Israel being a contributing factor in jihadist violence in the Middle East the real cause, they believe, must be envy of the values of freedom and liberty benevolently proffered throughout the world by an innocent nation.

These foundational myths provide a religious framework in the social construction of identity. Although America was settled by Christian dissenters there were also economic migrants and entrepreneurs seeking opportunities in a new land. Before the revolution, despite pockets of deep religiosity, much of colonial America was not characterised as especially Christian. The transformation into a noticeably Christian country comes in Thomas Jefferson's and James Madison's decision to press for a separation of church and state in the first amendment to the constitution. In order

to prevent the establishment of one particular church as an official national religion the founding fathers succeeded in privatising individual faith whilst collectivising a hybrid, all-encompassing, national religion. In several strokes of the pen they were able to cause both politics and religion to prosper in perpetuity as they were each able to compete for votes or souls.

While white Anglo-Saxon Protestantism in its myriad manifestations has dominated the American religious scene since the earliest settlers, the first amendment allowed subsequent generations of Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists to feel equally part of America's special providence (Mead, 2002). They were included in an America overseen by 'Divine Providence' rather than the more divisive Jesus Christ, whilst allowing Christians to believe that they were *de facto* a Christian nation. This inclusivity achieved by privatising religion sought to reconcile God and mammon as the new nation embraced modernity with competing religions, businesses and industries. The American Creed of antistatism, individualism, populism and egalitarianism found its counterpart in a civil religion that sacralises symbols of the nation and reifies the United States in such a way as to include all its citizens with a national, spiritual identity that draws from religious tradition without challenging or denying individual religious belief expressed through church, synagogue, mosque, and temple.

Civil religion is based on a protestant belief system of morality and values and the need for a religious foundation to life (Gentile, 2008: 112; see also Wilson, 1979; Bellah and Hammond, 1980). Divine characteristics are ascribed to the United States itself, while the president, rather than any religious leader, in times of crisis becomes pastor-in-chief. The Stars and Stripes or 'Old Glory' is venerated becoming a sacred object to be handled with care and to have allegiance sworn to it, taking the place of the cross in civil religion. The holy places become Lincoln's memorial, Mount Rushmore,

Arlington cemetery, and the battlefields of the Civil War rather than Jerusalem or Mecca. The sacred writings are not the Bible or Qur'an but the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States of America. The Lord's Prayer becomes the pledge of allegiance and civil religion fulfils the role of uniting the nation in a shared identity whilst enabling presidents to draw from a Christian heritage, and often individual Christian belief, without alienating believers of other faiths and non believers.

Alex de Tocqueville attributed America's success to being able to combine the 'distinct elements' of 'the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom' (de Tocqueville, 1988: 47). The spirit of freedom led to the creation of the most developed economy in human history, while the spirit of religion permeated much of American society with an abiding faith in God shared by in excess of eighty five percent of Americans today, two thirds of whom consider that religion is an important part of their daily life (Pew Forum, 2008; Gallup, 2009).

### **Barack Obama and civil religion**

In the twentieth and twenty first century presidents have increasingly presided over an ethnically diverse and multicultural nation where assumptions of Christian belief can no longer be taken for granted. Rather, presidents from Franklin Roosevelt to Barack Obama have sought to unify their people by appealing to an all-embracing civil religion regardless of their personal commitment to a particular strand of Christian belief. This desire to appeal to civil religion is highlighted particularly with the first African-America presidency of Barack Obama. Throughout the presidential primaries and election campaign Obama sought to define himself by his Christian faith in opposition to claims by his political opponents that his unorthodox background and

African/Muslim sounding name made him un-American and possibly a closet Muslim. Whereas George W. Bush was closely identified with conservative evangelicals, Obama has sought to build a broader religious and indeed non-religious constituency to get elected and restore the United States reputation in the world, considered by Obama and many others to have been damaged by the unilateral actions of the Bush presidency. Obama's Christian faith, while undoubtedly genuinely felt and experienced, was used to allay suspicions that he would represent a radical departure from the forty three presidents who had preceded him despite the colour of his skin. In office he has sought to be a unifying force through emphasising the shared heritage and values summed up in the foundational myths and civil religion that all Americans are invited to subscribe to.

Obama's inaugural address reminded Americans that they 'have remained faithful to the ideals of our forbears and true to our founding documents'. The United States is portrayed as an innocent nation 'at war against a far-reaching network of violence and hatred' whereas America is 'a friend of each nation, and every man, woman and child who seeks a future of peace and dignity'. He invoked the memory of the Founding Fathers again as he reminded his audience that they had 'drafted a charter to assure the rule of law and the rights of man – a charter expanded by the blood of generations. Those ideals still light the world, and we will not give them up for expedience sake'. The exceptionalism of the United States is emphasised by its remaining as 'the most prosperous, powerful nation on Earth'. For Obama the United States position as global hegemon had weakened under Bush but in rediscovering American values they are 'ready to lead once more'. The issue for Obama is not whether the United States should continue to play the role of world hegemon but how to achieve this through consent rather than resort to force. He asserts that the lesson of

earlier generations, who established America as the pre-eminent nation was that ‘our power grows through its prudent use; our security emanates from the justice of our cause, the force of our example, the tempering qualities of humility and restraint’ (Obama, 2009a).

This shared legacy and conviction based on the foundational myths provides a rallying point to continue to advance US foreign policy objectives. Obama recognises that although he is a Christian many of his fellow citizens are not and so he acknowledges that America is ‘a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus, and non-believers’. All Americans are encouraged to unite around a civil religion that maintains US values, its role in the world, and appeals to a sense of divine destiny accomplished through commitment to American values so that they might say ‘we did not turn back nor did we falter; and with eyes fixed on the horizon and God’s grace upon us, we carried forth that great gift of freedom and delivered it safely to future generations’ (Obama, 2009a).

Through civil religion Americans have a sense of unity that informs expectations beyond their shores. There is a deeply held conviction that the United States has a divine entitlement to lead the world that informs the rhetoric of successive presidents. During the final days of the Bush presidency there was much discussion about change and continuity in US foreign policy after his departure (see Lynch and Singh, 2008) such arguments operate under a false premise that change and continuity are in opposition to one another and that debates over structure, agency and contingency are all important in determining whether or not US foreign policy is unilateral or multilateral, isolationist or internationalist. I suggest that US foreign policy, because of its foundational myths underpinned by civil religion, seeks to maintain global hegemony by any means necessary. Commanders-in-Chief will use hard power, soft

power or smart power depending on which is more effective in maintaining hegemony. When, as in the case of the Bush presidency, unilateralism and hard power cease being effective an incoming president, such as Obama, will use multilateralism and combinations of soft, smart and hard power to achieve the same objectives of US power maximisation and the universalisation of its values.

In his first national security speech in May 2009, Obama announced the renewal of US diplomacy ‘so that we once again have the strength and standing to truly lead the world’. He again emphasised the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and Bill of Rights as ‘a light that shines for all who seek freedom, fairness, equality, and dignity around the world’ (Obama 2009b). When offering to work in partnership with the Muslim majority world or the rest of the world an Obama presidency is still as determined as its predecessors to be the lead partner and achieve its primacy objectives by all means necessary. Recalling Thomas Jefferson, in his Cairo speech to Muslims worldwide, Obama quoted the founding father ‘I hope that our wisdom will grow with our power, and teach us that the less we use our power the greater it will be’ (Obama, 2009c). One way seemingly that Obama seeks to grow US power is through religious actors, following the precedent of his predecessor.

### **Religious soft power**

Joseph Nye describes soft power as ‘getting others to want the outcomes you want’ through co-opting rather than coercing them (Nye, 2004: 5). One way to achieve this is through religious actors who can deliver US assistance without appearing to be part of an imperial project. Following George Bush’s election victory in 2000, evangelicals

were rewarded for turning out and voting overwhelmingly for him by the creation of an Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives to encourage religious organisations to apply for grants to deliver welfare and relief projects at home and abroad. The foreign assistance faith based office was situated within the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and busily set about soliciting and offering assistance projects to overwhelmingly Christian organisations to the detriment of more experienced secular organisations (see Marsden, 2008). US tax dollars were used to enable evangelical organisations to proselytise abroad whilst delivering foreign aid services at the forefront of US initiatives to utilise soft power. The first amendment of the US Constitution was circumvented by pretending that the educational class or hospital treatment was funded by the taxpayer but the prayer, evangelistic tracts, evangelistic films, ‘witnessing’, and church service surrounding the service provision was funded by voluntary donations.

For many in the developing world the first point of contact with the United States is courtesy of the assistance efforts of USAID building infrastructure, organising conflict resolution initiatives, supplying clean water, anti malaria injections, and HIV/AIDS programmes, and starting up businesses. In spite of this flagrant disregard for the first amendment the Bush administration did not have a problem providing funding for faith based organisations that could be relied upon to promote American values overseas.

Under President Obama, Bush’s Office of Faith Based and Community Initiatives has transformed into the Office of Faith Based and Neighbourhood Partnerships domestically and within USAID. Religious organisations are actively encouraged to apply for government funding to deliver the same range of services targeted under the Republican administration. The central White House Office of Faith-

Based and Neighbourhood Partnerships now has twelve satellite offices in other government agencies including USAID.

Obama has for the first time in US history established a 25-member religious advisory council which provides members for six task forces to advise on economic recover and fighting poverty; interreligious dialogue and cooperation; fatherhood and healthy families; reform of the Faith-based Office; environment and climate change; and global poverty, health and development. The task force consists of mainline protestants, conservative and liberal evangelicals, Catholics, Jews, Muslims and a Hindu united by Obama's appeal to civil religion. Only two members of the advisory council, which is supposed to comprise of faith-based AND neighbourhood partnerships, claim to be secular (Pew Forum, 2009).

Obama has expanded the mission of Bush's faith based initiative programme to include 'reducing the need for abortion, promoting responsible fatherhood, and facilitating interfaith dialogue, particularly with the Muslim world' (Gilgoff, 2009). Rather than reducing the role of religion in US domestic and foreign policy the Obama administration has greatly increased it causing the American Civil Liberties Union to express concern that the advisory council will be able 'to advise the president and the White House faith-based office on how to distribute federal dollars, and also advise on a range of other issues, such as AIDS and women's reproductive health care' (Segura, 2009).

### *Military hard power*

While American foreign policy is advanced by the soft power distribution of aid and American values by religious actors, hard power is also exercised by religious actors. Since the early years of the Bush administration the military have become increasingly

influenced by conservative evangelical Christianity. Buoyed by the Bush presidency born again Christians actively evangelise within the Pentagon and occupy senior positions. A video produced in 2006 by the Christian Embassy, a conservative evangelical group committed to converting diplomats, government leaders, and military officers, demonstrates the extent of evangelical influence in the Pentagon. The video, showed interviews conducted inside the Pentagon with senior officials and high-ranking officers in uniform. The Embassy organises Bible studies attended by some forty generals, discipleship groups, prayer breakfasts and outreach events. The Flag Officer Fellowship provides an opportunity for fellow Christians to meet and be seen by fellow officers. The video has interviews with four generals and two colonels based in the Pentagon. Major-General Jack Catton shares his faith with fellow officers and believes this is making ‘a huge impact because you have many men and women who are seeking God’s council and wisdom as we advise the Chairman and the Secretary of Defence, Hallelujah!’<sup>1</sup>

A number of scandals and investigations at military, airforce and naval academies have revealed a military culture that is overtly religious and encourages an environment in which the evangelising of cadets and midshipmen by Christian staff and faculty members. Investigations following complaints at Virginia Military Institute, the Air Force Academy, the Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md., and West Point between 2004 and 2009 reveal tremendous pressure being placed on cadets and midshipmen to conform or convert to evangelical Christianity. The Military Religious Freedom Foundation receive over five hundred complaints of religious bias each month from members of the military. The Officers’ Christian Fellowship and Campus Crusade for Christ’s Military Ministry remain active on two hundred US military bases around the world (Banerjee, 2008; Lichtblau, 2009). Although officially the military establishment

do not sanction evangelising, a religious ethos permeates the institutions with Bible quotations and prayer. At West Point, during his commencement address, Secretary of the Army Pete Green portrayed wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as ‘a clash between American and radical Islamic approaches to religious liberty’ (Banerjee, 2008). General Caslen, West Point’s commandant of cadets from 2006 to 2008 emphasised the spiritual training of cadets: ‘That is the leadership development model for West Point and that recognizes there is a supreme being’ (Banerjee, 2008).

The influence of the Christian Right also extends to the battlefields of Afghanistan and Iraq. Over the past few years conservative evangelicals have taken nearly sixty percent of military chaplaincy posts, an integral part of the US military, and a ripe recruiting ground as bullets and missiles fly. One Southern Baptist chaplain at Najaf even offered soldiers the chance to swim in the swimming pool, if they were willing to convert and be baptized. Soldiers receive DVDs of their home church services; attend church services, prayer meetings and bible classes (Hedges, 2007; Layklin, 2003; Beaumont, 2007). A video aired on al Jazeera in May 2009 showed US military chaplains in Afghanistan preparing to distribute Bibles translated into Pashto and Dari and discussing how to get around rules outlawing proselytising by giving gifts in order to evangelise.<sup>ii</sup>

Jeff Sharlet reveals similar attitudes by Special Forces in Iraq entering a religious battle with ‘Jesus Killed Mohammed’ written across their Bradley armoured vehicle (Sharlet, 2009). This reflects a US military made up disproportionately of conservative evangelicals many of whom who see themselves as being a Christian army. It also feeds from the foundational myth of American Exceptionalism and manifest destiny, conducting a ‘civilising mission’ to Muslim countries to open them up to US democracy, goods and values.

Such views are at odds with a more conciliatory tone adopted by Obama towards the Muslim majority world:

I've come here to Cairo to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based on mutual interests and mutual respect, and one based on the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap, and share common principles – principles of justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings (Obama, 2009c).

Whether the president's message merely indicates a change in rhetoric or actual practice on the ground in war zones remains to be seen. The juxtaposition of faith-based soft power and military hard power highlights both the difficulties of using religion as a means of advancing US foreign policy interests and the opportunities that Obama believes he can create to maximise US power by reaching out to other religious actors around the world.

## **Conclusion**

Obama as a committed Christian has actively sought out religious figures to bring into the policy making arena through regular conference calls and meetings. While the Christian Right, favoured by Bush, have been supplemented by more liberal and mainstream Christians and those of other faiths, including Jews, Muslims and Hindus. Just as his predecessor reached out to American Muslims, in spite of opposition from his core support within the evangelical community in the Republican party, so Obama will bring other faiths into the political realm amalgamating their diverse theological views into a palatable civil religion for domestic and international consumption. Although it is unwise to make predictions, it is not too brave to suggest that Obama will continue to wage wars for freedom and US national interests though clearly these will

never be for ‘selfish’ interests but for the betterment of those people warred against and warred on behalf of. Obama will preside over an American hegemony that changes as the differing pulls of structure and agency take their toll but global hegemon it will remain throughout his tenure.

The United States despite economic turmoil, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and rapidly changing demographics is situated as the sole super power, commanding the global commons (cf. Posen, 2003), and still by some margin the world’s greatest military, economic and ideological power. I have suggested that this position of supremacy has been attained by America’s vision of itself as world leader that has its origins and sustenance in foundational myths of manifest destiny, exceptionalism, and being an innocent nation.

This mythology has a religious dimension that has been able to adapt with modernity, indeed some would argue shape modernity, to combine capitalism, democracy and a civil religion that is able to embrace all faiths across America, whilst enabling Christians, and those of other faiths, to believe that presidential speeches are directed just to them and that US foreign policy represents their religious convictions. This has been played out across the foreign assistance field, the exporting of democracy and capitalism, in the military, and through a mantra from successive presidents that appeals to America’s higher self, its sense of mission and purpose, its imperative to share what God has bestowed on them to the rest of a waiting world.

This driving sense of having to convert the world to freedom, liberty, democracy, human rights and capitalism is vividly illustrated in the speeches of both George Bush and Barack Obama, which consist of shared narratives reflecting back what Americans have come to believe of themselves in their better moments. What Americans believe about themselves has come to reflect what they have achieved in the

world. It is a global hegemon using its vast power to attempt to bring about the kind of world it wishes itself to be. Barack Obama's presidency builds on the civil religion tradition of his predecessors, the foundational myths continue to inspire and galvanise the American people to justify and support US foreign policy actions in seeking to maintain and advance national interests and US power. Obama is using, and will continue to use, a religious narrative to frame his actions and religious actors to deliver US foreign policy objectives, whether through persuasion and co-option or coercion and military force. Rather than religion and foreign policy being confined to the Bush era, religion has always played a part in US foreign policy and under an Obama presidency that relationship will only grow stronger.

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<sup>i</sup> A copy of the video was posted on you tube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uT2BE5RS01E&eurl=>, accessed 21 December 2006, the video keeps being taken down and resubmitted. Information is also available from 'Questionable Mission: A Christian Embassy campaign at the Pentagon test constitutional boundaries', *The Washington Post*, 6 January 2007. See also Chris Hedges, 'America's Holy Warriors', <http://altnet.org/story/46211/>, accessed 16 February 2007

<sup>ii</sup> 'US army "does not promote religion"', Al Jazeera, <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/asia/2009/05/2009542250178146.html>, accessed 6 May 2009.

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