

Religion is the wild card in transatlantic relations



Europeans are increasingly doubtful about the rise of faith-based politics in the US, says **Karsten D. Voigt**, the senior Berlin-based diplomat responsible for German-American cooperation. But he notes a comparable yet very different increase in the political role of religious organisations in his own country

Anyone involved in politics has to make difficult ethical decisions. In Europe as in the United States, religious convictions nowadays play a key role because the interplay between religion and politics has become increasingly central to the transatlantic dialogue.

The religious landscape is changing in both the US and Europe. Religious issues are of ever greater relevance to foreign policy, and the relations of all European countries, with the US and especially those of Germany are taking on a quasi-domestic character because US policy trends are having a direct impact on Europe's domestic policies. This applies to religious as well as to other issues.

For example, German diplomats in the US regularly hear complaints from religious groups about the ban in Germany on home schooling. Because in the 18th and 19th centuries only the offspring of rich Europeans were taught at home, we regard compulsory school attendance as a mark of

democratic progress. So even though a minority of Islamic immigrants may want to keep their children out of school, compulsory attendance is in my view indispensable to their social integration.

Unlike the US, Germany and a number of other European countries have made incitement to hatred through propaganda against any religion a punishable offence. Freedom of religious worship offers no immunity from prosecution, even if hate speeches are made inside a church, synagogue or mosque. In other words, although the US and Germany cherish the same basic values of freedom of opinion and religion, our different histories mean that when basic democratic values conflict, we have wound up with different hierarchies of values.

Another example: In the American media the ban in some European countries (including Turkey) on headscarves at school is interpreted as intolerance of the traditions of Islamic immigrants. Yet in

Europe the ban is widely seen as the logical outcome of separating the state from religion. In any case, there are interesting differences between France and Germany. In France, female students and teachers may not wear headscarves at school because it is considered a public, and thus secular, place. In Germany, the ban generally applies to teachers. The view is that teachers are figures of authority, and to embody the state's religious neutrality they must not be seen wearing headscarves or any other religious symbol.

Religious education is voluntary but widespread in German public schools. Few of the federal states regard this as a violation of the German constitution's neutrality towards religions, with the result that classes on Islam are increasingly taught in our public schools. Advocates of religious education emphasize that these classes help convey to children the key values on which a democratic state is based, but which a secular state cannot guarantee. At the same time, the link between religion and politics that has led to a kind of civic religion in the United States remains alien to Europe.

The differences between the US and European countries like Germany and France are also highlighted by the issue of state support for church-run educational institutions. In the federal state of Berlin, which is governed by a coalition of Social Democrats and post-communist Democratic Socials, 90% of the costs of Catholic, Protestant and Jewish schools are financed by the state, providing they comply with certain rules and regulations.

COMMENTARY

By Stanley R. Sloan

We should be intolerant of intolerance

Karsten Voigt's thoughtful article documents a number of religious issues that could affect US-European relations. Without saying so, he argues for tolerance – the value that the United States and Europe should together be promoting and defending.

European commentators have of late been emphasising transatlantic differences over the role that religion should play in politics. At the same time, a number of American observers see Europe's "radical secularism" as a prime cause both of the decline that has taken place in European self-confidence and, of course, in the shrinkage of its population. Nevertheless, the Danish cartoon controversy has illustrated the extent to which Americans and Europeans also share some basic values that are not universally accepted in the Islamic world.

The separation of church and state is managed differently in every western constitutional democracy. Political systems on both sides of the Atlantic seek to ensure that no "church" ends up running the state. However, neither American nor European laws guarantee the separation of religion and democratic politics, and the intersection between these two pillars of western society has become more, not less, congested in recent times.

As Voigt points out, some Europeans have lately begun to equate the danger of American

These religious schools have been steadily increasing in number, not least because Berlin has of late been privatising a growing number of kindergartens, which are then transferred to religious organizations while being subsidised out of public funds. This emphasis on religious education is also to be found elsewhere: Berlin's three public universities now boast a faculty of theology, while the newly elected president of Humboldt University is a professor of theology.

God is explicitly invoked in the preamble to Germany's constitution. The right of religious communities to levy taxes is also enshrined constitutionally – so far this means the Protestant and Catholic churches and the Jewish communities, but Islamic communities could be included in the future. The federal government and the länder also fund educational projects run by Protestant, Catholic and Jewish groups, and religious communities have a legal right to broadcast on state radio and television.

In the newly rebuilt German parliament in Berlin there is a room set aside for prayer, and more than 100 members of the Bundestag are affiliated with the prayer breakfast association, while some 15 of them hold university degrees in theology. In the last parliament, two of the four Vice Presidents of the Bundestag studied theology. Angela Merkel, just like the chairman of the SPD social democratic

party, grew up in a family of Protestant ministers. The SPD in what was East Germany was founded mainly by Protestant ministers and activists, and it has become part of the collective memory of all Germans that the democratic revolution of 1989 would not have been so peaceful without the involvement of the Protestant church. At the end of the cold war, the Christian minority in East Germany acted as the salt of the earth, and their spirit still

influences the political culture in Germany today. Approximately 35% of the population in Germany belong to the Protestant church, and roughly the same percentage to the Catholic church, with more than 3% practising Muslims.

In the US, the proportion of evangelicals as a whole is less than 25%, but in the 2004 election 77.5% of all the evangelicals voted for President Bush, accounting

for almost 40% of all Republican votes. Along with the votes of traditionally-minded Catholics, voters who are not just conservative in religious terms but also in a political sense look to be greater than half of the American electorate.

There are no movements represented in the Bundestag that can be compared with the religious right in the US, nor do they play any significant role in German society. Both politically and culturally, the religious right in the US and the secularized or Christian left in Germany couldn't be more different. Many

The US tends to see the Islamic world in a positive light and assesses threats to democratic structures in terms not of religious traditions but of tyrants who exert undemocratic political leadership

Germans now tend to equate America's religious right with fundamentalists within Islam, Hinduism or Judaism. For the trend in Europe is generally towards the secularization of politics. By contrast, the US is a country of believers and politically assertive churchgoers. Although some 26m Germans are Protestant church members, only a small minority of about 1.3m might be considered evangelicals.

In short, the theology prevailing in Europe is one that sees itself as the sister of philosophy. My impression is very different when I go to church in the United States, especially in the Deep South or the Midwest, where I find much more emphasis on emotions and personal faith. For many Europeans, such views are fundamentalist and thus an expression of a pre-Enlightenment religiosity.

There is also a widespread link in the United States between religion and patriotism which meets not just with incomprehension in Europe, but with dismay. It is a link that in Germany arouses profoundly negative associations with our own history of having banned and destroyed unwanted religions. In Europe as a whole it is seen askance because of our past history of using religion to justify wars and colonial conquests.

European doubts about the development of America's faith-based politics have been succinctly expressed by Bishop Wolfgang Huber, Chairman of the Council of the Protestant Church in Germany. He has pointed out that when in 1963 Martin Luther King declared "I have a dream" he

evangelical fundamentalism with radical Islamic fundamentalism. But even the most committed American Christian fundamentalists support separation between church and state. But many Islamists – and not just the radicals – who many of them want a close match between their religious beliefs and the rules of state.

A generic tendency of fundamentalists everywhere is that of seeing the texts and teachings of their faith as "gospel," as the "truth". A middle-of-the-road christian "believes" in god, but someone with a more fundamental approach sees the existence of their god as a fact, not as a belief. In conversations with a good friend who is a self-described "born-again" Christian, I discovered that large parts of what I "believed", as a matter of faith, my friend sincerely viewed as "fact".

The kind of certitude to which this fundamentalist approach gives rise becomes particularly problematic at the intersection between religion and politics. A strong believer with political views on an issue grounded in religious beliefs is less likely to tolerate any dissenting political view. This certitude can easily lead fundamentalists to believe that they are doing "god's work". If this perception is carried over into political involvement, and even to positions of governmental responsibility, the "church" may still be separate from the state, but religion is certainly acting as a strong influence on politics and government.

In the United States, influential commentators are increasingly speaking out

spoke of freedom and equality for everyone. His dream was not linked to any particular claim to power and was a call for non-violent protest. He evoked a vision which spanned continents, even religions. Bishop Huber went on to say: "In Martin Luther King's version, the Christian influence on the American dream is particularly marked... At the same time, however, it is possible to view this the other way round; the Christian dream as an American dream. Where such a reversal takes place, the American dream gives rise to the idea of American superiority in the name of Christ."

The separation of state and religion and a secular legal system are fundamental democratic principles on both sides of the Atlantic. Both the American and French revolutions were based on these traditions, although they resulted in very different arrangements between state and church. German constitutional law and German practice differ from both.

For the founders of Islam, religion, politics and law formed a single unity. Islamic extremists and Islamic traditionalists thus reject the adoption of our constitutional and legal traditions for Islamic states.

For both sides in the transatlantic community, the flow of immigrants from Islamic states is presenting us with new challenges. It imposes change on the immigrants themselves, although what direction these changes should take and where the limits of change will lie is unclear and at times disputed. On each side of the Atlantic we will probably find different answers, but Europe and America should

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against any one religious group having too much influence on the decisions of government. The next American president will, as American presidents have always done, invoke god's blessing on America. However, American political dynamics make it unlikely that the next president – Republican or Democrat – will bring strong fundamentalist tendencies to the job.

Anyone who ventures into discussion of religion and politics knows that they need to be prepared for emotional disagreements. My own recent maiden voyage on this topic was before a small-town New England audience made up of protestants (including a few evangelicals), Catholics, Jews and at least one atheist. During the discussion period, a member of the audience asked me thoughtfully "are you basically saying that we should be intolerant of intolerance?" He had it right.

The willingness to tolerate the beliefs of others provides vital sustenance for our civil societies. Intolerance – the failure to honour and respect the religious beliefs of others when not sharing those beliefs, and to try to impose one's beliefs on others – is the enemy of freedom and justice. The question is how to know when intolerance has become sufficiently threatening to require active steps against its sources. On both sides of the Atlantic, we may increasingly face that question in the years ahead. □

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both be prepared to learn from experience to a much greater extent than before.

Looking to the wider aspects of the politicisation of religions, we in the West should be in no doubt that conflicts and crises in the many countries around the world with majority Muslim populations will have a negative influence on foreign policy. Europeans and Americans are already disturbed by a widespread anti-Western, and particularly anti-American, mood. The vast majority of Muslims reject terrorism and regard it as incompatible with the teachings of Islam. But the fact remains that many terrorist groups have used Islam as an ideological justification for violence. We all know that has had a negative impact on the standing of Islam on both sides of the Atlantic, but we should draw no comfort from that.

Americans and Europeans have been working together to bring about greater democracy, and the rule of law worldwide as well as in the Islamic world. But in spite of our common goals, there are differences in our viewpoints and in our methods.

The US has never been faced with a situation in which any group's religious convictions posed a threat to democracy. It therefore tends to see the Islamic world in a positive light and assesses threats to democratic structures in terms not of religious traditions but of tyrants who exert undemocratic political leadership. These, as we have seen, can be toppled relatively quickly, if necessary by using military force.

A comparison between the 1939-45 war against Adolf Hitler's Germany and that in

2003 against Saddam Hussein's Iraq might be accurate as regards the military aspect of their liberation, but wholly misleading when set against very different intellectual and religious backgrounds. Religious groups were oppressed by totalitarian regimes in both states, but the Shiites in Iraq and the Christians in Nazi Germany who openly professed their faith represented completely different intellectual and political concepts. Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani and the prominent anti-Nazi pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer have nothing in common apart from the fact that they lived under oppressive regimes.

Europe's experience is not the same as America's. In Europe, many Christians and Jews have worked actively against dictatorships and for democracy and human rights, but the dominant religious traditions and institutions had long opposed democratisation. They had to re-define themselves before they became reliable and active advocates of democratic development. In some European states, this process lasted into the 20th century. This sort of positive redefinition of religious traditions has by no means yet taken place in all Islamic societies. It will take time, and in many states it will probably take decades. Most Europeans doubt that this process of intellectual and religious reform in the Islamic world can be accelerated by the use of military force.

Looking back over the centuries, most European wars were waged in the name of religion. In the Thirty Years' War, the bloodiest European conflict of the 17th century, in which both sides invoked

Christian values, half the population died in some parts of Germany. As recently as World War I in 1914-18 "God is with us" was inscribed on the belt buckles of German soldiers. So some of the current political rhetoric from the US reminds us Europeans of periods in our own history we are glad to put behind us. Even Europeans who are familiar with America's past find it hard to accept the use of religious rhetoric in political discourse; though long been in currency, it has noticeably increased in the last few years.

Common interests, values and political traditions prevail on both sides of the Atlantic, but there are also important differences. We should not focus on these,

but nor should we ignore them. We should try to understand and respect each other despite these differences. Sometimes, accepting differences can even set in motion a joint learning process. For precisely this reason, I am pleased that during conversations with German politicians and church leaders I have noted great interest in creating a more intensive dialogue with US partners. This interest is not limited to dialogue with like-minded people, but fortunately extends to representatives of other traditions and beliefs. □

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