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Religion and its Impact on Foreign Policy in the United States and Germany: Similarities and Differences

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Is the perceived religious gap between the U.S. and Germany real?

What role do domestic religious organizations play in German or American foreign policy?

How can its understanding of religion and policy affect the West's relationship with Islamic states?

Introduction

After September 11, attention has shifted in the scholarly and policy communities to religion as a major factor in foreign policy. Islamic fundamentalism and the West's relationship with the Muslim world are especially under scrutiny. Islam, however, is not the only religious influence on foreign policy; religion in general plays a role in how Western countries conduct and implement their foreign policy towards other countries and actors. Analysts usually emphasize the United States when analyzing the role of religion in Western countries, but Germany is increasingly a focus. In addition to religion's contribution to the values shaping foreign policy, religious organizations as actors inform and influence American and German foreign policy, albeit overtly in the United States, and subtly in Germany. The religious gap between Germany and the United States is thus more apparent than real. The perception of a religious gap is based on a different understanding of the role of religion in the public sphere and vis-à-vis the state, influenced by the different histories of church-state relations in Europe and the United States. Understanding these different histories and the dissimilar approach to religion in the two countries will lead to a better mutual appreciation of what drives foreign policy. Recognition of the nature and consequences of religious influences on foreign policy in Germany and the United States can also prompt discussion on how other nations, such as Muslim countries, take religious values into account in foreign policymaking.

Germany

Germany understands itself as a secular country. Separation between church and state is viewed as a foundational pillar of the nation. The German public sees religiosity mostly as a private affair, which should not influence policymaking, and it regards the public and political dominance of religion in the United States with skepticism. Germans, as do most

Europeans, equate secularism with modernity, a necessary break from Europe's history of wars based on religious difference and intolerance. In the European perspective, the state needs to be protected from religion. Yet, European societies are not free from the influence of religion. In fact, German society is more connected to religion than many Germans realize. Without significant

public discussion or dissent, the government collects church taxes that support the main religious institutions in Germany; religious organizations dispense most of Germany's foreign aid; and religious organizations and their subsidiaries provide many social services.

In addition to the institutional connections, according to Konrad von Bonin, the chairman of the *Evangelischer Entwicklungsdienst* (Protestant International Development Service), religion has also influenced, in a dynamic process, the values guiding Germany's foreign policy in at least three areas: peace, the fight against poverty, and the protection of the environment.¹ These priorities are also clear in official statements of Germany's foreign policy goals.²

Official choice also resonates with the German public; according to a recent poll in Germany, two-thirds of the respondents would like to see the churches in Germany take a more active role in ethical, international questions such as human rights and war and peace (as well as in domestic issues like medically assisted suicide, marriage and family, abortion, and the protection of embryos). The poll results were surprising, given that 38 percent of the respondents considered themselves only somewhat religious and 18 percent identified themselves as not religious at all.³ These data conform to the conventional wisdom of lower religiosity—defined by regular church attendance—in Germany compared to the U.S. However, a better measure for

gauging the role of values in public life, including foreign policy, may be the question asked by a Pew Forum survey: Does one have to believe in God to be moral? Fifty-seven percent of Americans answered in the affirmative whereas only 39 percent of Germans agreed with the question (still representing the highest figure in most of Europe). The significance of a broad definition of religion to include moral behavior and values is evident in a recent German survey, where a full 75 percent of Protestants in Germany indicated that one can believe in God without going to a religious service on Sunday.⁴ The German public expectation of a role for churches in international ethical questions is consistent with its high expectation concerning the welfare state.⁵

The values derived from religious attachment in a moral sense—peace, fight against poverty, environmental protection—inform the work of religious organizations when they connect institutionally to the German government and the German Foreign Office. The Catholic Church's Office in Berlin (*Katholisches Büro*), for example, is the main political contact of the Church in its effort to influence German foreign policy, especially in the realm of development policies.⁶ The Church also liaises with church-affairs sections of most political parties in Germany (*Kirchenbeauftragte*). Furthermore, the Protestant and Catholic churches lobby the federal government on its development policies through the Joint Conference on Church and Development (*Gemeinsame Konferenz Kirche und Entwicklung*, GKKE), which also publishes reports critical of official policies supporting the export of weapons.⁷

Measurement of the degree of influence on foreign policy is difficult. Some analysts argue that churches in Germany can impact foreign policy only if the Foreign Office shares the same goals and, at best, can be responsible only for small policy corrections.⁸ Others point to the peace demonstrations during the Gulf War, and the wars in Bosnia and Somalia, as times when actions of the Church had a tangible influence on German foreign policy and decreased the government's room for maneuver.⁹ This explicitly-

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expressed desire for peace as one of the basic values in the two most dominant religions in Germany, Catholicism and Protestantism, impacted German foreign policy because of the congruence between the values of the mainline churches and the values of the majority of the German population, turning the churches into a catalyst for the goals of the population at large, similar to the role of non-religious NGOs.

The fact of religion's influence has also been recognized by the German Foreign Office in creating the position of Commissioner for Dialogue with the Islamic World. The aim of the dialogue is "to promote understanding between the West and the Islamic world as well as pluralism within societies and to reduce hostile anti-Western images in Islamic societies."¹⁰ Yet, the German government (like most western European governments) has limits in engaging religion in foreign policy, as demonstrated in its opposition to the demand of certain eastern European countries, particularly Poland, that the European Union constitution contain a reference to Christianity. However, the German government's opposition did not prevent a good number of German delegates (whose own constitution references God in the preamble) from supporting a reference to God in the European Union constitution.¹¹ In the EU context, religion has also entered into the controversy over Turkey's membership, reflecting the fact that "[t]here is still a symbolic connection between identity and religion, whether the

connection is felt historically or in other ways. [...] Many people who rarely or never attend church still feel that Europe has a Christian identity and believe that identity is threatened by the membership of a secular Turkish republic."¹²

In addition to trying to influence German foreign policy at home, religious organizations such as the *Evangelischer Entwicklungsdienst* and *Aktion Sühnezeichen* (Action Reconciliation) affect German foreign policy through their independent actions abroad. These organizations have performed the important role of addressing Germany's difficult past (*Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit*) in Germany's foreign policy: After World War II when Germany was slowly rehabilitating internationally and rebuilding relationships with other countries, organizations aimed at reconciliation enabled a deeper dialogue with countries that were victims of Nazism and those that were becoming newly independent in the developing world. Religious organizations often impact foreign policy by working beyond official lines and establishing relations between countries and people beyond diplomatic ties; they can help clear the path for official policy.

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United States

After the election of George W. Bush in 2000, the increase in tensions between Europe and the United States was partly based on religion. European states felt that American foreign policy was greatly influenced by Christian evangelicals, a religious group whose support had helped President Bush win the election. Europeans, in particular, do not understand constant references to God and religion in Bush's speeches. Germans believe Christian evangelicals possess far too much influence on President Bush's foreign policy and are hoping for change after the U.S. presidential elections in November 2008. They may be disappointed. John B. Judis contends that "[i]n putting forth his foreign policy, President George W. Bush speaks of the United States having a 'calling' or 'mission' that has come from the 'Maker of Heaven.'" Yet, Judis also argues continuity: "[W]hile [Bush] uses explicitly religious language more than his immediate predecessors, there is nothing exceptional about a U.S.

president resorting to religious themes to explain his foreign policy. U.S. goals in the world are based on Protestant millennial themes that go back to seventeenth-century England."¹³ Values and goals of U.S. foreign policy are based in religious understanding, even when they are embraced by both religious and non-religious Americans, making it unlikely, in Judis' view, that the basis of current U.S. foreign policy steeped in these religious beliefs will change after President Bush has left office.

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Analysts, such as Judis, argue that three basic factors have influenced American foreign policy: First, the belief that the

U.S. is a chosen nation; second, the belief that the U.S. is obligated to improve the world; and third, the belief that in

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this mission the United States represents good fighting evil.¹⁴ Calvinistic theology stressed the individual relationship of the believer with God and was the basis for the historical anti-authoritarian, liberal, and individualist American worldview which grew even stronger through the sparse settlement in the American West and the increased need for self-reliance. Over time, these religious ideas have seeped into American foreign policy understanding.¹⁵ In the historically-based analytical scheme, economic liberalism has led to political liberalism and any threat to both should be combated by the United States. This perspective, stressing the relationship between American foreign policy on the one hand and frontier experience, British liberalism, and America's evangelicalism on the other, is unlikely to change in the short run. These religiously-infused beliefs stemming from the seventeenth century carry a great resonance still today—not only with conservative governments. The idea of America as the chosen nation was also prevalent under Democratic presidents such as Bill Clinton.

Even though their understanding of the world and of their foreign policy is suffused in religious values, the majority of Americans agree with Europeans that religion and government should be kept separate. The statement "Religion is a matter of personal faith and should be kept separate from government policy" was supported by 55 percent of

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Americans and 67 percent of Germans in a 2007 Pew poll, suggesting similar reactions across the Atlantic. What is understood differently, however, is the nature of secularism and the relationship between secularism and modernity, as outlined by Wilfred McClay: "In the American experience, the separation of church and state [...]

does not necessarily mean the separation of religion from public life. [...] America has a strong commitment to secularism, but it is secularism of a particular kind, understood in a particular way. [Furthermore] the United States has achieved in practice what seems impossible in theory: a

reconciliation of religion with modernity, in contrast [...] to the Western European pattern."¹⁶ The western European idea that the state needs to be protected from religion is reversed in the United States where the dominant view is that religion must be protected from the state. Religion is allowed to percolate through the public sphere because of its diversity and diffusion, according to Walter Russell Mead: "Religion in the United States is too pluralistic for any single current to dominate. The growing presence and influence of non-Christian communities in the country—of Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and, above all, secularists—will continue to limit the ability of any religious group to impose its values across the board."¹⁷

Americans view pluralism as the insurance against the domination of any one religion, whereas Europeans view the restriction of religion in the public sphere as the same insurance. Yet, both societies are in reality pluralistic in the sense "that all religious associations and institutions can become, in effect, voluntary associations."¹⁸

The voluntary dimension of religious organizations has strong influences on the structure of religious organizations in the United States and in Germany and thus on their influence in society and politics. The United States has a much greater, historically longer experience with competition in the 'religious market.' The relative ease with which a religious institution can be established, as well as the fact that Americans are usually more open to establishing new institutions, has contributed to

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the variety of religious organizations in the United States. The fact that secularism can also mean competition between religions, because the state no longer dictates a binding religion, has been recognized only slowly by the churches in Germany. Stemming from a long tradition of state-ordered religion, the mainline churches in Germany are not used to competing for their audiences. Combined with the German attitude of expectation mentioned above, this unwillingness to engage in competition leads to the empty churches so prevalent in Germany and Europe today. Secularism allows for competition not only among religions, but also for opting out of organized religion completely. In fact, "Europeans stay out of institutions. They [practice religion] in their basement [...] or in their living room, and it's much more difficult, as a result, to study."¹⁹

As in Germany, religion's influence on foreign policy in the United States is evident in the behavior of religious institutions. American religious organizations have a long tradition

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of influencing foreign policy, often with very positive results in cases such as human rights infractions and health issues. Polls have shown that a majority of Americans thinks it is necessary to believe in God to be moral. Articulation of religious sentiments is a way to bring morality into the debate about foreign policy. Many "Great Debates" in American foreign policy have been couched in moral terms. The image of religion in the United States is better by far than in Europe. Yet, the suspicions that Americans

have toward the state extend to religious organizations. Not all religious organizations will try to influence domestic or foreign policies, and those who do are mindful that they cannot and do not want to represent or replace the state, as this would mean a loss of their independence, echoing a fear expressed by German religious organizations. Catholic organizations in the United States and across the globe follow Pope Benedict XVI's statements on church-state relations in his First Encyclical Letter: "The Church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible. She cannot and must not replace the State. Yet at the same time she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. She has to play her part through rational argument."²⁰

Christian evangelicals, who are often portrayed by Europeans as the masterminds behind religion's influence on American foreign policy, are a very diverse group themselves, as are most other religious organizations. Even though evangelical and Catholic religious organizations were very successful in lobbying the Bush government not to extend foreign aid to organizations providing abortions, analysts agree that most of their lobbying efforts are aimed at curbing abortions in the United States domestically.²¹ Muslim organizations in the United States have usually refrained from lobbying the U.S. government in the past, but after 9/11 this has begun to change and some Muslim organizations are specifically interested in balancing a perceived influence of Jewish organizations on the United States' position on Israel.

The U.S. Department of State registered the importance of religion in the international arena when it established the Office of International Religious Freedom in 1999. According to the Department of State, the office is designed to "promote freedom of religion and conscience throughout the world as a fundamental human right and as a source of stability for all countries; assist newly formed democracies in implementing freedom of religion and conscience; assist religious and human rights NGOs in promoting religious freedom; [and] identify and denounce regimes that are severe persecutors of their citizens or others on the basis of religious belief."²² According to John Shattuck, in creating such an office in the State Department, the United States explicitly and organizationally linked the issue of religion with its own foreign policy because it is in the country's "national interest, and [its] security interest, to come to grips with religion as a motivational force in international relations and to promote religious tolerance as a way of deterring conflict and protecting [America's] own freedom from external and internal threats."²³ According to Thomas Farr, encouraging religious freedom abroad can be accomplished by implementing the "twin tolerations" of religious freedom and the right to engage in the public sphere without coercing the conscience of citizens.²⁴ It is especially the concept of encouraging religiously informed participation in the public sphere that distinguishes the American perspective from the European approach, in which religiously informed views are present

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in the public sphere, but usually hidden, particularly in the realm of foreign policy. Criticism from abroad concerning the legislation implementing the Office of International Religious Freedom has alleged that "[it] predominantly represents the interests of missionary religions, interested in proselytizing and changing people's religious views in other countries." The second criticism contends that "the U.S. cares more about religious freedom as we define it than about other international human rights, and that the U.S. is projecting its interest in its own concept of freedom of religion to other countries, trying to export a uniquely American brand of religion."²⁵ This international perception of the Office of International Religious Freedom was partly fueled by the belief that evangelicals were lobbying for its implementation. In fact, lobbying for the legislation to create the office came from a wide range of religious organizations and groups advocating human rights in general. Furthermore,

supporters of the legislation argue that the United States does not actively support missionaries around the world, precisely to avoid the impression that this is official U.S. foreign policy.²⁶

Criticism from within the United States concerning the role of religion in the State Department argues that analysts and policymakers in fact neglect religious factors: "Former

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright last year wrote about the tendency of American diplomats to think of religion as nothing but trouble and to stay away from it as an irrational aspect of human behavior."²⁷ Critics of the State Department's neglect assert that the United States will have to understand the influence of religion on other countries' foreign policy and their behavior in order to remain effective.

Policy Implications

Religion influences foreign policy in both the United States and Germany. It is important for the transatlantic dialogue to understand these different approaches, without passing judgment. A different understanding of secularism and its variable influence on foreign policy should not preclude Germany and the U.S. from working together on positive ideals such as peace, human rights, and tolerance.

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The different degree of religious self-understanding in the United States and in Germany can cause problems in the transatlantic partnership from time to time, but policymakers and political analysts should avoid simplifying or downgrading the influence of religion on foreign policy in the U.S. and

in Germany. The influence of religion in the U.S. is not so strong that the nation will embark on the next crusade at a moment's notice, nor does the centrality of secularism in Germany prevent it from encompassing religious values and ideas into its foreign policy. The United States should respect the fact that religious fervor in policy actions will be met with skepticism in Europe. The tradition of American foreign policy enshrines the influence of religious values and ideas, but articulation of policy choices does not always require religious rhetoric. Equally, Europeans should not see religious fanaticism behind every American foreign policy decision and need to understand that religious vocabulary often serves a domestic political purpose in the U.S. While the presidential elections in November 2008 will bring a change in the presidency, the religious underpinnings of American foreign policy will likely continue. Germany would therefore be better served by understanding the historical roots of the American tradition, than by rejecting them as an aberration of President Bush.

One should also not overlook that religious organizations in the United States and political parties in Germany can agree on certain issues. For example, evangelical and Catholic organizations in the U.S. overlap with the Greens in Germany in their opposition to cloning and embryonic stem cell research. Even though coalitions between religious organizations and parties of another country have not been common, the increase of actors in the international arena might make such cooperation more likely, especially if the cooperation focuses on the issues rather than on the ideological or religious underpinnings.

Churches as transnational actors—dating back centuries ago to the international and Diaspora activities of Catholicism, Islam, and Judaism—are and will remain a staple of international affairs. They influence the governments in their home countries, as well as foreign governments. Technology has enabled religious organizations all over the world to communicate infinitely, within their faith as well as with organizations of different faiths. Religious organizations as independent international actors can encourage intercultural communication and create understanding.

Dialogue with Islam and countries driven by Islam, a key foreign policy priority for Germany and the U.S., can be productive only if policymakers acknowledge their own religiously-based values. Muslim minorities in Europe further increase demands that religion should not be left off the political agenda and "[a]fter decades of rising secularism and declining church attendance, religion is now back on Europe's political agenda."²⁸ In dealing with Islam and its consequences in Europe, Europeans have begun to reflect

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What does it mean to be a European? What does it mean to be Christian? The ways in which Europeans and Americans handle these questions are of utmost importance not only in transatlantic relations, but also for relations with the Islamic faith and the Islamic world. Furthermore, the relationship between religion and

modernity, which is approached so differently in the United States and in Europe, is of growing salience to religious Islamic states. According to Peter Berger, "it is of great interest in the Muslim world or in India if one can show that modernity can come in both secular and religious versions."²⁹ A German-American dialogue regarding church-state relations not only helps to increase mutual understanding but offers constructive lessons for other parts of the globe. Expanding the transatlantic dialogue beyond its constituent religions to other world religions, such as Islam, can permit a fuller and more nuanced appreciation of the role of religion in international affairs.

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