

## VALUES

# How Does Religion Affect Relations between America and Europe?

By Stanley R. Sloan,

Director of the Atlantic Community Initiative and Guest Scholar, Middlebury College.

**Secular Europe and faithful America may face more serious religion-based challenges to their common values and interests.**

Since the end of the Cold War, observers have asked two core questions about the future of the transatlantic alliance. One question has been whether or not NATO remains relevant to the interests of the United States, Canada and the European allies in the absence of a Soviet threat. Alliance supporters, including all alliance governments, answered this question in the early 1990s by declaring that shared values continued to unite the United States and Europe and those values as well as common interests could still be threatened by “risks and uncertainties” in a post-Soviet world.

This answer led skeptics to a second question: do the United States and Europe really still have a strong, vibrant reservoir of shared values?

In recent years, trends in the United States and Europe as well as the emergence of new international terrorist threats claiming Islamic fundamentalist roots have combined to put new focus on religion as a dividing rather than a uniting factor across the Atlantic.

## Post Cold War Challenges

After the Cold War ended, the transatlantic allies affirmed the values endorsed in the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty, claiming democracy, individual

liberty and the rule of law as the heart of their relationship. Nevertheless, some critics suggested that US and European societies were drifting apart and different value structures were developing on the two sides of the Atlantic (and across the US-Canadian border).

Some warned that, without the Soviet threat to preserve cooperative economic relations across the Atlantic, trade disputes would get out of hand; divisions over economic and trade policy would spread to create splits in the transatlantic political/military relationship.

This has not happened. Instead, the NATO allies decided that, even with the Soviet threat gone, their interests would still be well served by continued political, economic and military cooperation.

During the 1990s, the alliance was used to help stabilize the Balkans after traditional peacekeeping under UN auspices had failed to end the ethnic strife there. The alliance was also instrumental in promoting and facilitating the transition of former Warsaw Pact states and former Soviet Republics from authoritarian communist regimes to free market democratic systems at peace with their neighbors.

The fledgling democracies wanted to be embraced by NATO and the European Union. Their immediate desire was to add protection against resurgence of Soviet power. From a longer-term perspective, they wanted to become part of a peaceful, prosperous Europe embedded in a broader transatlantic alliance.

In response to these aspirations, NATO insisted that those wishing to



**God Driven.** 58% of Americans say America's strength is “based on religion”.

join the alliance undertake meaningful political and economic reforms and settle all issues with states on their borders. Three of these countries joined NATO in the late 1990s, seven more in the early part of this century. Several of them have now joined the European Union and others are expected to be admitted to NATO and the EU in the coming years.

The decisions of these countries explicitly affirmed their belief that the values enshrined by the North Atlantic Treaty remained not only valid but also vitally important for their interests.

## Troubled Times

In spite of these positive developments, the parallel emergence of the United States as the world's only true global power, with capabilities and resources far exceeding those of any other, has created tensions in the transatlantic relationship.

For the most part, the United States behaved like a benign hegemon during the 1990s. Nevertheless, other countries began to question whether it was in their interest to follow the United States down every path that Washington perceived to be in American interests.

The questioning of America's power and role in international relations began long before George W. Bush came to office. But the conduct of his administration's first term reaffirmed most of the fears Europeans and others had developed concerning the potential abuse of America's power position. The US decision to go to war against Iraq – and the way in which this decision was taken – drove US prestige and popularity in Europe down to all-time lows.

In the past several years, stimulated by the intersection of the US-declared war on terror and the Iraq conflict, some began to question whether religious differences between the United States and Europe constituted another division that would contribute to a transatlantic divorce.

## Religious Sources of Differences

The more pervasive role of religion in American society and politics compared with Europe is nothing new. Alexis de Tocqueville, writing in *Democracy in America* in 1835, observed "On my arrival in the United States the religious aspect of the coun-



**New Europe.** Demographic scenarios for the year 2020 project 18 to 26% Muslims in European population.

America is seen by many Europeans as mounting a crusade for "democracy"

try was the first thing that struck my attention." He went on to write: "In France, I had almost always seen the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom marching in opposite directions. But in America I found they were intimately united...."

Today, a variety of public opinion polls and projected demographic trends add new content to this difference between the United States and Europe.

■ Various public opinion polls demonstrate that the United States is the most religious "rich" country in the world.

- 59% of Americans say religion is a very important part of their lives,
- compared with 11% of the French; 21% of Germans;
- 27% of Italians; 30% of Canadians; 33% of Brits;
- and even just 35% of Poles.

■ 58% of Americans say America's strength is "based on religion."

■ In answer to the question: "Is it necessary to believe in God in order to be a moral, good person?"

- 50% of Americans say "yes;"
- but only 13% of French, 25% of Brits, and 27% of Italians agree.

■ In spite of answers to the previous question, however, US public faith in pluralism and tolerance apparently remains strong:

- over 80% believe it is possible to be a "good American" without Judeo-Christian values or even without any religious faith.

■ The religious profiles of European countries are quite different.

- 48% of people living in Western Europe almost never go to church; 44% in Eastern Europe seldom go.
- 49% of Danes, 52% of Norwegians and 55% of Swedes regard God as irrelevant to their lives.

■ Perhaps reflecting accurately such European views, advocates failed to win inclusion of the role of Christianity as a source of European values in the preamble to the draft EU constitution.

## The Demographic Factor

It is well known that Europe's traditional populations are declining; Europeans simply do not produce enough babies. This has a profound impact on projected economic growth, military capabilities, and Europe's potential to play a more significant role in the world.

Germany, between now and 2050, could lose in native population the equivalent of the entire population of the old East Germany. Spain reportedly will lose over 35% of its native population in this same time period. According to some projections, 60% of Italians in 2050 will not know from personal experience what it is like to have a brother, a sister, an aunt, an uncle, or a cousin.

At the same time, Europe's Muslim population is growing. The current Muslim population in the EU is estimated between 18-20 million and growing through both birth rate and immigration. If Turkey eventually joins the EU in ten years, it would come in roughly tied with Germany with 14.5% of all EU citizens.

Some experts have projected that, with current trends and attitudes, Europe would be Islamicized by the end of this century, or even sooner.

Opinion polls have margins for error, and demographic projections may not always forecast the future. But the general directions suggested by the various statistics cited above have contributed to a variety of arguments concerning how religion-related issues could further divide the United States from Europe.

## Diverging Perceptions of the Threat

In the United States, it is widely accepted that radical Islamic funda-



**Angry Muslims.**  
Domestic tensions may affect European diplomacies.

Europeans put more focus on mitigating the circumstances of the terrorist threat

mentalism is a major threat to the United States and like-minded nations. The Bush administration has taken the United States to war against terror and against Iraq, encouraging and perpetuating the mind-set that we shall be "at war" until we have achieved complete victory.

The historian and conservative commentator Niall Ferguson has written that *"To Americans, Islamism has effectively replaced Soviet communism as a mortal danger. To Europeans, the threat of Islamic terrorists today is simply not comparable to that posed by the Red Army twenty years ago...many Europeans have behaved as if the optimal response to the growing threat of Islamist terrorism is to distance Europe from the United States."*

That said, the United States and European countries understand the importance of cooperating to deal with the near-term consequences of the terrorist threat: witness the support of all NATO allies for the NATO stabilization operation in Afghanistan and in counter-terrorist operations in general.

However, Europeans tend to put more focus on finding and mitigating the social and international circumstances that give rise to terrorist organizations and their support. They tend to see the problem as one that requires a long-term struggle that may be reduced or managed, not a war to be "won."

Many Europeans even see the United States as a main causal factor because of its support for Israel, desire to protect access to oil, and quick resort to military force. Some 50% of Europeans now tell pollsters that the United States is a "negative factor" when it comes to "peace in the world."

## Differing Influences on Foreign Policies

One current European concern about the United States, reflected in the latter statistic, is the perception of the US as driven by Evangelical Christian fundamentalism. The United States is seen by many Europeans as mounting a crusade for "democracy" which will only promote increased conflict and intensified radical Islamic fundamentalist terrorist responses.

It is important to remember that, in Europe, historical experience has suggested that the church and religion have not always been friends of democracy or forces for peace -- as noted by de Tocqueville in the 1830s. The "success" of the Enlightenment for Europeans was to ensure that the political order rested on a social contract based on reason rather than on an absolute truth which made discussion impossible.

As a result, Europeans have been uncomfortable with the way American presidents have invoked God in support of US policies. George W. Bush did not start this, even though he carried it to new levels. One top European foreign policy expert, François Heisbourg, has expressed the European view this way: *"The biblical references in politics, the division of the world between good and evil, these are things that we simply don't get. In a number of areas, it seems to me that we are no longer part of the same civilization."*

The bottom line is that Europeans will be nervous and reluctant to follow the US lead to the extent that American foreign policy appears to be driven by religious fervor, suggesting not only that God is on our side but that the United States is always right or justified in its actions.

### European Secularism as an Undermining Factor?

Here is the other side of the coin. From one point of view, the absence of an active religious ingredient in European foreign and public policy in general is a weakness in European democracy, and a long-term threat to the transatlantic alliance.

Perhaps the leading proponent of this point of view is George Weigel, a prominent Catholic theologian, author and commentator. In his book *The Cube and the Cathedral: Europe, America and Politics Without God*, he ques-

tions whether Europe, by adopting a posture of "radical secularism," and suffering from "Christophobia," is in danger of losing not only its soul but also its culture and democratic system.

Speaking to a Carnegie Council "Religion in Politics" seminar in September 2005, Weigel argued that *"history is driven by culture over the long haul, by what men and women cherish, honor and worship, by what men and women are willing to stake their lives on, by the artifacts that they create in literature and art to give expression to those deep cultural commitments."* Weigel maintains Europe's depopulation is a sign that it has lost faith in itself and the future.

George Weigel asks: *"Can a political community deliberately founded on principled skepticism about the human capacity to know the truth of anything give an account of its commitments to human rights, democracy, the rule of law, civility, and tolerance, beyond the very thin account that it works better...?"* Linking this argument to the demographic one, he also asks *"Can a political community in the midst of depopulating itself and having that vacuum filled by people from another cultural experience...defend itself against that kind of cultural transformation, which, if successful, would mean the end of, or at least the severe attenuation of Europe's commitments to human rights, democracy, the rule of law, civility and tolerance?"*

In sum, according to this argument, Europeans are choosing a path that will fundamentally alter European society, culture and government, and not for the better for Europe or for the transatlantic relationship.

### By Way of Conclusion...

By way of conclusion, what follows are some initial thoughts about the

context in which the United States, Canada and the European democracies should deal with religion-related issues that impinge on their relationship.

**First**, the United States, Canada and Europe should not, and need not, allow religion-related differences to divide the Atlantic Community.

**On both sides of the Atlantic, we should be intolerant of intolerance!**

**Second**, irrespective of how we practice (or don't practice) our religions, certain irreducible principles that have been at the

heart of our democracies and that remain vitally important to the maintenance of civil societies must be preserved.

A critical aspect of US and European democratic systems is the guaranteed freedom for individuals and groups to worship in the religion of their choice (or practice atheism, if they so choose). This right should not be taken away by governments or jeopardized by religious groups seeking a dominant position for their beliefs.

Tolerance of the rights and beliefs of others is a critical value for both domestic peace and international cooperation. On both sides of the Atlantic, we should be intolerant of intolerance!

### THE ATLANTIC COMMUNITY INITIATIVE

The Atlantic Community Initiative ([www.AtlanticCommunity.org](http://www.AtlanticCommunity.org)) was established to enhance awareness, information and education about the continued importance of the transatlantic relationship. The Initiative seeks to help strengthen the commitment to common values, interests and cooperative endeavors in the Euro-Atlantic community of democratic nations.



**Common Interest.**  
Collective security requires strong, extensive and long term commitments.

**Third,** if religious beliefs lead some to try to restrict the rights of others by engaging in violent acts (from outside, for example by al-Qaeda, or within, for example by religious fanatics), the perpetrators must be opposed with whatever is necessary to limit the threat they pose to our societies.

This said, recent events in France demonstrate that governments must be sensitive to and deal with underlying socio-economic and cultural circumstances (particularly within the growing Islamic populations in European countries) that give rise to violence which then is explained or defended in religious terms.

**In sum,** the broad directions that suggest themselves for the United States, Europe and their relationship are to:

- promote tolerance over intolerance;
- choose cooperation over conflict;
- favor moderation over extremism;
- remain **willing and able**, at the same time, to defend individual liberties and the system that guarantees them from those who choose to challenge them by force.

If transatlantic governments are attentive to such guidelines, external or internal religion-related factors should

**The transatlantic allies should not, and need not, allow religion related differences to divide the Atlantic Community**

not threaten the integrity of transatlantic relations. If societies and governments on both sides of the Atlantic pursue tolerance for the religious beliefs and rights of

their citizens and of others and defend against threats to those rights, they will be able to keep the promises made in the North Atlantic Treaty, even in today's complex international environment.

If, however, governments lose sight of the important positive contributions religion has made to the development of Western civilization or, on another extreme, incorporate or encourage perspectives from extreme fundamentalist religious groups in their policies, religion-related factors could become a seriously divisive aspect of US-European relations. ■

*This article is based on an October 2005 presentation to the Global Issues Forum on Faith and Conflict in Enosburg Falls, Vermont, USA. The author gratefully acknowledges the insightful observations of the participants on his presentation. Mr. Sloan's latest book is **NATO, the European Union and the Atlantic Community: The Transatlantic Bargain Challenged** (Rowman and Littlefield, 2005).*