

Beyond Westphalia

Until September 11, 2001, religious affiliation was, for most people living in the developed nations, a rather private concern. It surged to media headlines and to public consciousness in the aftermath of the al-Qaeda attacks on New York and Washington. The current global instability, with al-Qaeda and the United States at the core, is depicted in the North American media largely as a clash stemming from the religious fanaticism of some anachronistic Islamic fundamentalists. Despite protestations by the Bush administration that the subsequent “war on terror” is not a second Crusade, George W. Bush’s overt Christianity and his frequent references to Christian doctrine reinforce the notion that a religious schism underlies the conflict.

Yet it was not the Christian churches that the predominantly S’audi terrorist cell targeted in 2001 nor those institutions that, with their presumed decadence, may offend the modesty of some Muslims. The buildings selected are those which represent, or did represent, the global dominance of the United States in the key areas of economy, military and politics. What precipitated the attacks specifically was Osama bin Laden’s appraisal of American intrusiveness in his native country: American military bases in Mecca and Medina, American-led economic development that has resulted in high unemployment and huge income disparity among S’audis and healthy profits for select American corporations like Halliburton and Bechtel, and a S’audi monarchy, protected by American military guard, that is ruthless against opponents who dare to protest publicly. Osama bin Laden himself was banished from S’audi Arabia after he denounced the monarchy. For all the rhetoric, his animosity stems as much from national as religious reasons.

Without disputing the strong religious convictions of both protagonists, their presentation of the conflict as primarily a religious war is convenient for both. A religious war against Muslim fanatics is preferable for an administration that wants to hide the role of its imperial aspirations in nourishing anti-American sentiments across the globe. Religious convictions,

based on faith, cannot be challenged through rational debate. Foreign policies, however, are fair game for closer scrutiny. The religious cover works equally well for al-Qaeda. By portraying Muslims in Palestine and elsewhere as being victims of a Crusade, al-Qaeda leaders can stir the pot in response to any number of grievances to recruit saboteurs and suicide bombers from beyond the boundaries of their Arab-speaking homelands.

Even if al-Qaeda is rooted in religious doctrine, it is stateless and therefore acts outside of constitutions and national laws. The United States, despite efforts by the evangelical Christians that make up a third of George W. Bush's electoral support, maintains a separation of church and state. Of the three countries named by Bush as "the axis of evil," only Iran is quasi-theocratic, with the mullahs exerting control over a somewhat democratically elected government, much as the papacy once exerted control over emperors of the Holy Roman Empire. Iran's occasional fatwahs are troublesome but not to the point of instigating war. Its recent haste to develop nuclear capabilities is understandable given the divergent American responses to North Korea, which quickly developed nuclear weapons after being named to the "axis", versus Iraq, which did not.

Israel is another nation in which religion directly influences government decisions. Under its constitution, those Jewish sects that see the settlement of all of Palestine west of the Jordan River as God's will are guaranteed representation in the Diet. Settlement policies have reflected that Zionism and exacerbated what was already a messy conflict with Palestinians and neighbouring Arab countries. However, the Israeli-Palestine struggle has been contained within the region and, although contributing to the general animosity among Arab-speaking people toward Israelis and the Western powers that support them, is not the only or even the dominant factor in the current hostilities.

The rise of radical Islamic movements began in the 1970s after the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) raised prices and caused an economic recession in the developed nations. The United States responded by focusing its attention on the oil-rich Arab world and particularly Saudi Arabia, the largest producer. In the three decades since, the United

States has nurtured a special relationship with the House of S'aud which, given the significant status of S'audi Arabia in OPEC, has afforded the superpower security of access to oil at acceptable prices. It has also enabled the United States to divert S'audi oil revenues to a handful of American corporations under contract to build S'audi Arabia's infrastructure. Under this development policy, employment opportunities and living standards for most S'audis have declined.

Radical Islam is a reaction to political powerlessness in the face of these deteriorating living conditions for the majority of people in Arab states. In those nations headed by monarchies, such as S'audi Arabia, or military regimes, there is no process for influencing the direction the country takes if the rulers choose to ignore the will of the citizens. Nominally democratic nations with large Muslim populations have similarly thwarted political aspirations of Islamists. In Algeria, for example, having won the first round of voting in 1991, Islamists were denied the right to govern when the ruling generals, backed by the French, their former colonial masters, cancelled the second round of voting. A prolonged civil war ensued and the Islamists lost. In Egypt, the government, heavily dependent on financial support from the United States, responded to the rising popularity of Islamists by outlawing the Muslim Brotherhood. In recent elections, when opponents who had close ties to the Brotherhood appeared to be likely to win, the government arrested many on a variety of charges. It is a matter of the First World supporting democracy in developing nations on condition that the voters elect the governments the more powerful nations want and, as recent history has shown, the suppression of national self-determination is not confined to Muslim nations. A long list of governments whose policies have threatened profits of corporate America have been undermined by economic manipulation, political skulduggery, coups or military invasions in which the United States played a significant role: Chile's Salvadore Allende, Panama's Omar Torrijos and Iran's Mohammad Mossadegh are but a few government leaders who have been ousted or killed.

When al-Qaeda and other Islamists directed their energies toward the former Soviet Union after it invaded Afghanistan, the United States afforded financial and strategical

assistance. Afghanistan proved to be the proverbial straw for the Soviet empire, and America was still basking in the glory of winning the Cold War when, by military force, the fundamentalist Taliban assumed power in Afghanistan. Human rights issues under that government were not on the American agenda; Afghanistan does not have the vast oil reserves of many of its neighbours. During the rule of the Taliban, most of Afghanistan was relatively stable albeit, by most standards, repressive. It did not invade other countries; it did not impose its template on others. Had the Taliban not sheltered Osama bin Laden after 9-11, it would still be in command today.

If the inability to effect change in Arab nations through secular methods explains the development of radical Islamic movements, it does not explain the growing influence of Judaeo-Christianity in the United States government. The so-called moral majority has been an increasingly significant factor in American elections over the past two decades but only recently has the evangelical movement emerged as a powerful constituency. In a democracy, if the majority of voters choose leaders who are evangelical, so be it. However, it does indicate that a significant number of Americans, citizens of the most wealthy country in the world, have turned away from the rationalism that displaced Medieval revelation. In *Future Tense*, Gwynn Dyer cites a poll that indicates that eighteen per cent of American adults and a third of George W. Bush's supporters believe the present Middle East conflict is the precursor to Armageddon.

It is no coincidence that the power of the Christian conservatives has risen during a period when American economic prowess has been declining. In 1980, the United States accounted for half of the global Gross National Product. By 2000, its share had dropped to twenty per cent. It suffers continual trade deficits and has become a debtor nation, dependent on China and Japan to buy its treasury bonds. Over the same period, the social contract between corporations and communities was broken and higher paying jobs, especially in the manufacturing sector, were outsourced to independent contractors or sent overseas. The mobility of capital and the consequent growth of precarious forms of employment and greater inequality

in the distribution of wealth has left many in the developed world less secure financially and socially.

While this is more pronounced in the United States, which has the greatest income disparity among First World nations, Canada, Australia and western European countries have, to varying degrees, cut social spending and embraced the corporatist agenda, with similar economic consequences for the majority of citizens. Robert Reich called this transition the Latin Americanization of the United States; he might as easily have termed it the Arabification of the United States (and other First World nations), although the Arab's descent from a sophisticated civilization, in which science and culture thrived, began four centuries ago when the dominant European nations of the time were colonizing lands and subjugating people around the globe.

The prospect of China displacing the United States as the economic powerhouse will continue to nurture insecurity in the First World. Uncertainty, deprivation and fear engender in many a need to search for meaning and structure. Some people find these in the "certainties" offered by religion or astrology, some in the "answers" produced by the rigid methodology of quantitative scientific and social inquiry and some in the myths they create about their own national identity. Personal identity is a reconciliation of multiple and often contradictory belief systems deriving from personal and cultural experiences. For a significant number of Americans, and others, the rational world that emanated from the Age of Enlightenment is failing to provide the answers by which they can make sense of their lives. However, the quest for certainty often leads to convictions, religious or ideological, that leave no room for tolerance of differences, that define others as "ignorant" or "irrational" or "evil."

Iran-Iraq-North Korea is not the only "axis of evil" identified by the Bush administration. Recently, Donald Rumsfelt warned of a "Western axis of evil" comprising Venezuela and other South American democracies that have elected socialist governments. China may soon be added to the list. In a January, 2006, broadcast of *As It Happens*, June Teufel Dreyer of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission described China as a threat to America's national security. The dissimilarities between these nations leaves one constant to explain America's

fears: all threaten the goal of the United States to exert economic, political and military dominion in every part of the world.

Empire-building has always been destructive in the long run. Many African and Asian nations are still struggling to resolve issues arising from artificial borders that were imposed by their conquerors and power-sharing among the different ethnic or tribal groups that live within those boundaries. In the Americas, Australia and New Zealand, aboriginal peoples are still striving to define themselves in the context of the dominant societies. Curbing the excesses of powerful nations has always been a challenge. The technology of destruction available to antagonists today makes it imperative to find ways to settle grievances before they turn into armed conflict.

Since the Treaty of Westphalia was signed in 1648 to end hostilities between the Holy Roman Empire and various European nations led by France, the respect for sovereignty has been a fundamental element of formal international relations, including the United Nations Charter. No matter what the religious and ideological beliefs of rulers of nations, international law aims to limit military intrusion into another nation's affairs to those cases involving genocide or the imminent threat of attack by that nation. In practice, powerful nations have never stopped intervening militarily in the affairs of weaker ones, Europe during its colonial expansion and, after the Second World War, the Soviet Union and the United States as they fought their "cold war" on the soils of African, Latin American and Asian countries. The fact that, for the past half century, the involvement of First World nations has been covert, that they feel they must recruit collaborators from within the countries of interest, does, however, indicate a limiting effect on outright military intervention. Until Iraq. A return to the principles that began in Westphalia is an essential first step to reducing warfare between nations. It does not, however, address conflicts involving nationless movements.

Limiting the use of military power has not prevented the subjugation of populations by non-military means. The First World's purposeful economic repression of developing countries by luring governments into unmanageable debts, described by John Perkins in *Confessions of an*

Economic Hit Man, demonstrates that empire-building, whether it is executed militarily or economically, erodes sovereignty and subverts the will of the majority. Coercing governments to spend national revenues on debt repayment rather than the most basic needs of their citizens invites corruption among the elites of indebted nations and heavy-handed measures to control the crime and social unrest that arises from the deprivation of the many. It is violence by proxy. To protect nations from this new form of colonialism, the respect for borders must not only shield them from unwarranted military intervention but also ensure their rights, within the framework of consensual international agreements, to political, social and economic self-determination. The ideology behind unfettered capitalism, which is unquestioned by most people in the First World, is not the only or, given the record, the best way of creating and distributing global wealth. The delivery of essential services by the private sector is not inherently better than delivery by the public sector, and yet the conditions placed on the world's poorest nations seeking debt relief include the privatisation of vital services such as water systems. These conditions almost guarantee that the poorest nations will again accumulate debt in order to pay those First World companies that are aggressively marketing their wares.

The United Nations, despite its flaws, is the only body that has the potential for ensuring the respect for national integrity and fairness in trade and other relationships. However, it faces two major obstacles to implementing the necessary reforms. The first is the domination of institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund by the United States, which uses these agencies to promote its ideology and to subjugate indebted nations to its will. The second is the veto power of a small number of powerful nations who are permanent members of the Security Council. Until these countries see themselves as members rather than creators of the global community, it will be very difficult to develop and enforce the processes that respect global diversity. However, just as the Israeli people realised that "land for peace" is a better option, so too might the United States and others in the First World realise that truly local government, empowered to formulate its own political, economic, social and religious

policies and to derive a fair share of the benefits of its resources and labour, is preferable to the current aggression and fear.

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