

# THE IMPACT OF AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY ON WORLD CHRISTIANITY

TOM FRAME

*Drawing on three recent books about America's place in the world, Tom Frame considers the complex entanglement of American culture, Christian mission and imperialism.*



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Recall a senior politician saying a few years ago that if Americans didn't speak English Australians wouldn't be misled into thinking they were like them. However, American foreign policy has enormous impact on Australia—not least on how Christianity is perceived. In this article, I will outline the sources and features of the American identity before considering the force and effect of that identity on American foreign policy. In considering the international projection of that identity through foreign policy, I will come to the crux of the discussion and describe the impact of American foreign policy on Christian mission and ministry, global peace and stability.

## American identity and religion

Let me begin, then, with the question of American identity and draw on Samuel Huntington's recent publication, *Who are We? The Challenges to America's National*

*Identity* for a few pointers. Like many other American writers, Huntington sees 9/11 as a turning point for the United States in recent times. He claims it brought American identity back to the fore. He writes: "So long as Americans see their nation endangered, they are likely to have a high sense of identity with it. If their perception of threat fades, other identities could again take precedence over national identity". He says that Americans have historically defined their identity in terms of "race, ethnicity, ideology and culture". The first two—race and ethnicity—are, he claims, "now largely eliminated" leaving ideology and culture.

Huntington contends that the ideological strand, derived from Thomas Jefferson's 'American Creed' with its principles of liberty, equality, democracy, civil rights, non-discrimination, and the rule of law has remained largely intact. But this creed is the product of a culture that includes among its key elements:

...the English language; Christianity, religious commitment; English concepts of the rule of law, the responsibility of rulers, and the rights of individuals; and dissenting Protestant values of individualism, the work ethic, and the belief that humans have the ability and the duty to try to create a heaven on earth, a 'city on a hill'.

Huntington notes that 63 per cent of Americans claim to be Protestant, 23 per cent are Roman Catholics, 8 per cent other religions and 6 per cent profess no religion at all. This is in stark contrast to Australia where around 38 per cent are Protestant, 27 per cent are Catholic, 4.5 per cent have a religion other than Christianity while 30.5 per cent do not claim any religious affiliation.

The emphasis on Protestantism is important in Huntington's account for two reasons: i) because he claims that Roman Catholics in America maintain an

international allegiance to the Papacy on the one hand, and ii) because Roman Catholics immigrants (especially Hispanics) tend to retain a stronger sense of ethnic loyalty which effectively downgrades their national identity on the other. Having said that, it is clear that contemporary Americans rank among the most religious people in the world. And despite drawing a line between Church and State (a separation, I might add, designed to protect the Church from the State), Americans have believed in the importance of religion in public life since the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780 declared that good order and civil government “essentially depend on piety, religion and morality”.

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This outlook has four general consequences for the formation of national identity.

*First*, the American system of government rests on a religious base that presupposes a Supreme Being. The *second* consequence is a widely held belief that Americans are ‘God’s Chosen’ and that the United States is the ‘New Israel’. *Third*, there are overtly religious elements in public occasions, such as the inauguration of a President, and religious assertions in the American pledge of allegiance and on banknotes. *Fourth*, to quote Huntington again: “national ceremonies and activities themselves take on a religious aura and perform religious functions”. While the American Creed has been described as ‘Protestantism without God’ and American civil religion as ‘Christianity without Christ’, there is an attempt at inclusiveness, it is clear that how Americans define themselves determines their role in the world: a religious people; with a divine mandate; to achieve a godly world.

#### **American identity in the wider world**

In thinking about how America’s religious identity affects its foreign policy I have been assisted by Niall Ferguson’s controversial new

book *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American*. It is apparent that a nation professing a sense of purpose shaped by religious language and a sense of destiny shrouded in religious symbols will inevitably use both its enormous economic power and its unrivalled military strength to defend itself from armed attack while pursuing its ‘mandate’ throughout the surrounding world. As Peter Singer observed in his book, *The President of Good and Evil: The Ethics of George W. Bush*, most Americans see the world in terms of good—which is to be encouraged and commended—and evil—which is to be resisted and defeated.

However, the historic isolationism of

the United States, a tendency that I believe survives, means it has to be coaxed into engagement with unfolding regional and global security challenges. But because the United States wants to defend itself far beyond the shores of continental America, preferably in East Asia or Western Europe, it appears to be an Imperial power. Consequently, there are 752 US military installations in over 130 countries while the United States has invaded two sovereign nations (Afghanistan and Iraq) in the past three years. President Bush has stated his intention of extending the “benefits of freedom ... to every corner of the globe” but is emphatic: “America has never been an empire”. Most people would say America is an Imperial nation—even if it is so reluctantly. But is that such a bad thing?

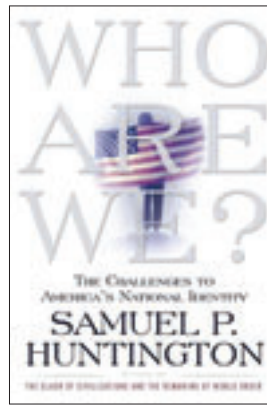
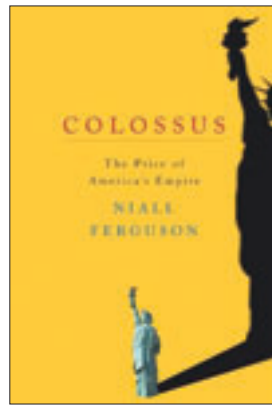
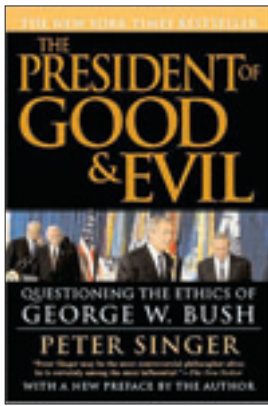
Niall Ferguson, a British academic now resident in the United States, says no. He says: “It is not that empires are good but that the alternatives are worse”. He argues that “empire is more necessary in the 21st century than ever before”. Why? As a means to “contain epidemics, depose tyrants, end local wars and eradicate terrorist organizations”. The sooner the United States openly acknowledges that it is an imperial nation the better. The problem, Ferguson says, is that Americans are in denial.

It is an Empire with ‘attention deficit disorder’. It refuses to admit the scale of its responsibilities and to invest adequately in situations that it can influence for good. He advocates a ‘liberal empire’, modelled on that maintained by Britain, which can bring about prosperity and democracy by force of will if necessary. Thus, Ferguson is not surprised or even embarrassed by the Bush Administration’s policy document *The National Security Strategy of the United States* released in September 2002. It stated:

As a matter of common sense and self-defence, America will act against such emerging threats before they are fully formed. We cannot defend America and our friends by hoping for the best. So we must be prepared to defeat our enemies’ plans, using the best intelligence and proceeding with deliberation. History will judge harshly those who saw this danger coming but failed to act. In the new world we have entered, the only path to safety is the path of action.

But even if the United States refused to acknowledge its imperial characteristics in a diplomatic or military legal sense, I would argue that it must come to terms with the exportation of its popular culture, its moral values and ethical virtues, its political aspirations and social expectations, its capitalism and consumerism. The Star Spangled Banner is in many places a long way behind the Golden Arches.

For its part, Australia has been heavily influenced by the United States for good and for bad, and there is a deep streak of anti-Americanism in many Australian people. By and large the citizens of this country are in my observation indifferent to Peruvian culture, Icelandic politics and Senegal’s military might. The same is not true of the United States. It has infused and, some would say, infected Australian public life, popular culture and even religious worship. So much now looks or sounds American without apology. For their part, American imports are not inclined to explain themselves and show little respect for local customs. I have often quoted with enthusiasm that great aphorism: “the United States is the only country in the world to become decadent before it was



## The one truly global religion?

Christianity is described in Adrian Hastings' *A World History of Christianity* as the only genuinely global religion. It is the predominant religion in four and a half of the world's six continents: Europe, North and South America, Australia and the Pacific, and sub-Saharan Africa are mainly Christian. It is also the majority religion in the Philippines and in South Korea. In many ways this proliferation is not surprising. In response to the command of Jesus recorded at the close of St Matthew's Gospel to make disciples of all nations, the evangelising energy of the Church has taken believers across the world proclaiming Christ and him crucified. I have no doubt that zeal will continue to be embodied in mission and outreach despite the inherent difficulties and dangers of this kind of endeavour. In past decades, Christian missionaries were accused of devaluing local cultures and ignoring host customs by seeking not just conversion to the religion of Jesus but the embrace of bourgeois European culture and the imposition of social democratic ideals. The aim was not just to make new disciples but to make Africans, Asians and Aborigines who resembled the people who had brought them the gospel.

civilised". And I must acknowledge my own deep disdain for so much that seems to represent America. If Australians feel this way as citizens of a nation that has enjoyed American political friendship and goodwill, and it has been significant and positive in many ways, one can imagine the mood in those nations identified by President George W. Bush as being part of the so-called 'Axis of Evil'. Anti-Americanism has become a mass phenomenon, perhaps even a global uprising, involving passions most Americans cannot comprehend let alone ameliorate. How can this tension be resolved? Huntington offers three alternatives: "America becomes the world. The world becomes America. America remains America. Cosmopolitan? Imperial? National? The choices Americans make will shape their future as a nation and the future of the world". This is probably true but this is not how the Muslim world perceives the challenge or the alternatives.

I have no doubt that many throughout Asia and the Arab world see Christianity as a thoroughly Western religion. This is ironic given its origins in the Middle East and its recent rapid spread throughout Africa and South America. There are, of course, many resonances of Christianity in Western political philosophy. Self-declared Christians are active in Western political and military institutions. Christianity is intertwined with the social and political order in countries like Canada, New Zealand and Australia. And when Asians or Arabs observe elements of Christianity in either the thrust of American foreign policy or in justifications for the United States resorting to military action, they feel obliged in part to resist or

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## Identifying Christianity with Western actions

Two years ago I started visiting the Cultural Centre of the Saudi Embassy in Canberra to arrange for the delivery of a box of Korans for distribution to ADF personnel attending the inaugural Islam Acquaint Course. During several conversations with the embassy staff over successive visits, it was apparent that they had yet to grasp either the essence or the extent of religious nominalism in this country or, I suspected, the United States as well. Indeed, I was asked for my opinion of Bill Clinton's relationship with Monica Lewinsky, and why Christianity (rather than the Church of which Clinton was a member) could tolerate such behaviour.

oppose both its force and effect on religious grounds. This resistance becomes acute in nations that have formally embraced a religious outlook in public life or legislated to establish a theocratic state: such as Thailand and Iran. Of course, Christianity is not a private religion. It is played out in public life. There will, therefore, always be associations and partnerships between the Church and the State, and especially while the majority of the American population claim some affiliation with a Christian Church. So an element of ambiguity or haziness is unavoidable in the development and explanation of national policy. But where does that leave Christianity as a discrete religion with its own integrity?

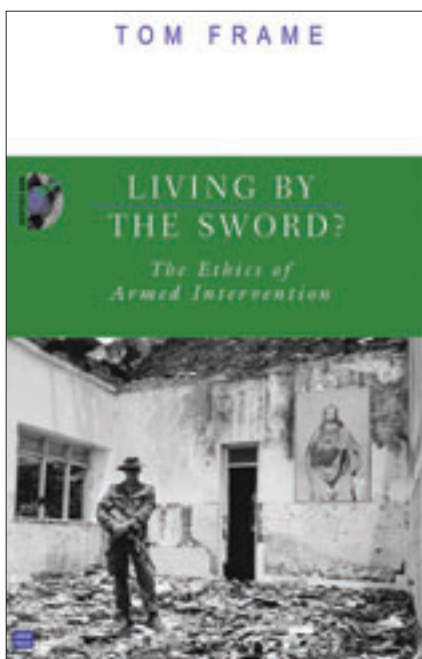
The contemporary Church has recognised the pride, arrogance and the heresy embedded in such an outlook. It is now seen as something akin to the Apostolic Church wanting to impose circumcision on Gentile believers. There is now a much better appreciation of those things that are integral to Christian profession and those things that are entirely discretionary and matters open to free and independent judgement. Indeed, the preservation of cultural differences within Christian Churches across the world has been recognised as a blessing to be celebrated rather than a bane to be eliminated. But in many places there remains a lively perception that Christianity is still manacled to Western bourgeois liberal culture and that it continues

to be an ally of corporate capitalism and rampant consumerism. And because the imported popular culture in most countries originates predominantly from the United States—I am thinking here of sports, films, fashion, music and fast food—there is an added dimension to the notion that becoming a Christian means being American. We are dealing more with perceptions than reality but the effects and outcomes remain. For instance, this perception has an influence on a nation's attitude towards accepting humanitarian assistance, the imposition of travel restrictions, the existence of a free press

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and resorts to censorship, the composition of parliament, the judiciary and the armed forces, and a readiness to belong to multinational institutions or to participate in international programs.

Some countries prefer, therefore, to be closed and isolationist rather than open themselves and their citizens to Christianity and the possibility of American influence hiding in its shadow or US interference



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coming in its wake. The bombing of churches and places of Christian worship in Iraq for the first time in sixteen months suggests that in the minds of some, Christianity and the United States are synonymous. And in those countries that are 'secular' or just nominally Christian, the Church's entanglement with the State is being reviewed. How a Christian applies his or her religious principles to the responsibilities of citizenship or the manner in which spiritual convictions are expressed in the political realm are by no means settled questions.

#### **What is (and is not) Caesar's?**

For the last three centuries religion has been a declining factor in human affairs. It started in the 17th century, when after more than a hundred years of bloody religious war, the leaders of Europe attempted to reduce and contain the influence of religion in politics in the Treaty of Westphalia. In the following century, Enlightenment thinkers exalted reason over faith as a source of human understanding. The 19th century saw increasing confidence that science would dethrone religion while botany and astronomy would displace theology and dogmatics. Humanity was moving into a new phase of rationalism, pragmatism and secularism. Marx denounced religion as the 'opiate of the masses' and Freud referred to religious beliefs as mere 'delusions'. But in the last quarter of the 20th century, that trend was abruptly reversed in most parts of the world other than in Western Europe and in countries like Australia, Canada and New Zealand. Elsewhere there has been religious resurgence and spiritual revival. As the American sociologist Mark Juergensmeyer observes, political leaders throughout the world are now "striving for new forms of national order based on religious values". But beware: once a conflict between individuals and communities enters into the realm of theological convictions and religious beliefs, it tends to become bitter, extreme and completely impervious to compromise.

It is clear that Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda have set themselves implacably against the United States, its people, its religion and its culture in much the way that the Soviet Union did between 1945 and 1989.

Islamic extremists are also hostile to the older European states and to Western nations elsewhere—such as Australia. Extremists and fanatics do not expect to change these societies because even they realise this is futile. Instead, the aim is to inflict serious damage on them—to hurt and harm them. Is this really a 'clash of civilisations'? Yes. It would appear to be. And every time that American political leaders claim some divine mandate for their actions beyond the US's borders, the more difficult it is for Christians wherever they are living in the world. Although the Muslim world is as divided and fractured by doctrinal dispute and organisational disagreement as the Christian Church, a feature of many conflicts is for the belligerents to see a unity and a common cause in their adversary that does not exist. This appears to be happening at the present time in the Islamic world's confrontation with the United States. No one is immune to its effects or safe from its consequences. This global confrontation has contributed in some way I am sure to recent local sectarian violence in Australia.

Part of the answer is for religious groups to be precise about what they believe and concise in their prohibitions of contrary conduct. There is also a general need for a long and close examination of the interactions between religious groups and political authorities. This is not new. Indeed, the question put to Jesus concerning the payment of taxes was about this very matter. We must work hard at determining what does belong to God and what does belong to Caesar, even as we commit ourselves to giving each their due. ©

This article was initially a paper given at Quest, a venture of Green Square Community Church in Sydney ([www.greensquarechurch.org](http://www.greensquarechurch.org)).

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