Faith and decision-making in the Bush presidency

The God elephant in the middle of America's living-room*

Abstract

In The Sacred Canopy Peter Berger explores religion as a sensemaking mechanism by which mankind creates an order from, or imposes it upon, the world around him. More recently, David Snowden of Cardiff University has built on his own work with IBM systems to develop the Cynefin framework which further explores the relationship between man, experience and context as a mechanism to improve policy formulation**. This paper seeks to provide an analysis of policymaking within the current Bush administration and the impact of Faith upon that process as expressed through the Cynefin framework. It considers in particular how President George W. Bush's reported religious sensibilities may be viewed as an effort to straddle the divide between order and chaos. It also examines the evolving relationship between a tightened US security policy and deregulated implementation. Finally, it explores the implications for the nature of the Presidency and impact on religious congregations in the US.

Detail

> *"Bright and glittering on the surface it must be, but underneath it must be held together with bolts of iron" Virginia Woolf (diaries).*

In his 1967 work The Sacred Canopy, Peter Berger explores the frameworks through which man makes sense of himself in relation to his environment. Berger pays particular attention to the role of religion in this process and the delineation between the sacred and the profane. Over time, he argues, there has been a tendency for religious institutions to de-emphasize the 'supernatural' elements of their composition in favor of institutional authority, while focusing their activities on the private needs of the individual. In secularized societies he observes that "the application of religious perspectives to political and economic problems is widely deemed 'irrelevant'" (Berger, 1967: 146-147).

For the United States, the 'irrelevance' of religion to the political process is underscored by the constitutional separation between church and state. But it is also possible to read the First Amendment less as a separation of powers than as the creation of a distinct religious space. Yet, while the law has sought to define its role outside of religion, religion shows no such respect for boundaries. It is this tension with which the United States and its legislators continue to struggle.

For the worshipper, religion sets standards that are very much concerned with how a person's mortal life is lived. This establishes a relationship almost contractual in its expression, certain standards of behavior on earth being a precondition for benefits in the hereafter. The idea, therefore, that it is possible to separate the faith of an individual from their individual daily conduct, including in the political workplace, is at best misplaced. Immediately it has suppressed discussion of the role that practising faith has upon political thought and bred assumptions that policies based on faith rather than political constructs are inappropriate. At worst, the requirement to separate the two leads the p olicy-maker to mask their tenets behind more secular political precepts and in case even to deny the role of faith in shaping their world view[i]. The expectation of separation thus represents a wilful failure to acknowledge the role that religion has in the daily life of the adherent while obliging the adherent to dissemble the root of their policy approach. For the religious, God is synonymous with truth and, like truth, God will out. Yet in the mind of many prominent Americans God, and in particular Christian understandings of God as applied to policy-making, has become the proverbial elephant in the living room – everybody knows it is there, but it has become unseemly to mention it.

This paper aims to explore the impact of religious sensibility on political and policy decision-making – as it were, to confront the elephant. To do so I shall turn to the recently developed Cynefin framework, a policy-making tool and sensemaking model devised within IBM and currently being developed at Cardiff University in the UK. The framework may be viewed as a modern expression of the concepts set out by Berger. As such it provides a means to consider and to illuminate the policy dynamic under a president who regularly draws his faith into the public arena.

The Cynefin framework

Cynefin (pronounced kun-ev'in) is a Welsh word usually translated as 'habitat' or 'place'. But it also carries a wider contextual sense similar to Berger's concept in which "to participate in the society is to share its knowledge – that is, to cohabit its 'nomos'"(Berger, 1967: 21)[3]. The framework has been devised as a new approach to policy-making for governments (and has received some funding from the US through DARPA). It is most concerned with "how people perceive and make sense of situations in order to make decisions" (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003: 470). Notably, the framework relaxes three core assumptions that conventionally apply to policy-making models – namely: order, rational choice and intentional capability.

The assumption of order implies that "an understanding of the causal links in past behavior allows us to define 'best practice' for future behavior. It also implies that there must be a right or ideal way of doing things" (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003: 463). By rejecting this assumption, the model provides not only the conventional four-quadrant management matrix, but also central domain of disorder. This domain (what Rumsfeld might describe as the 'known unknown') may be likened to the religious space created by the First Amendment[4].

By relaxing the assumption of rational choice, the framework enables an examination beyond the conventional 'pain or pleasure' basis upon which it is conventionally assumed that decisions are made. This allows room for "context and perspective" (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003: 481) underlying those decisions. For the current US leadership, that context and perspective is built upon a particular understanding of the Christian message. The Cynefin framework thus facilitates the examination of policy decisions against a religious sensibility which might otherwise be categorized as 'irrational' but which in fact places its own demands upon the decision-maker beyond conventional 'pain or pleasure' lines.

The final assumption – that of intentional capability – is perhaps the most contentious in the context of today's United States and, in particular, current US foreign policy. This assumption posits that "the acquisition of capability indicates an intention to use that capability" (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003: 463). It is an assumption that, arguably, colored not only America's decision to invade Iraq – the assumption of Saddam Hussein's ultimate preparedness to use weapons of mass destruction – but also underpins international fears of American hegemony. By removing this assumption – by distancing capability from intention – the Cynefin framework allows room to raise questions concerning implications rather than motives or, in other terms, the method rather than the madness such that the 'madness' may be explored and the underlying rationale become more explicit.

The model and the matrix

The Cynefin matrix is not intended as a categorization but rather as a framework. It comprises four domains of sensemaking but, unlike conventional business school matrices, there is no preference for one quadrant above another. Also, unlike conventional matrices, the central area is left open. This is described as the domain of 'disorder' or the 'unknown'. The framework is designed as a means to examine and understand the dynamics of decision-making, the objective being to reach a consensus that reduces the central domain.

Management application of the framework begins with a contextualization exercise in which structured brainstorming introduces items across a broad range including communities, motivations, events, opinions, products and traditions – in short all

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Fig. 1: The Cynefin matrix

factors that feed into the sensemaking process (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003: 471)[5]. The framework enables the decision-maker to examine where they are within the decision-making process, including transitions through the domain of disorder, and how most appropriately to respond.

Crossing the boundaries

Because Cynefin views decisions as a process rather than an ideal place, the significance rests not so much in the boxes as at the boundaries and the transition between points[6]. Movement between known and knowable allows for a level of incremental improvement; this is the most fluid of the boundaries within the framework.

The Cynefin framework draws on complexity science and pattern analysis. But these methods alone present difficulties when trying to simulate true free will versus complex intentionality. This echo of the medieval debate on free will versus predestination

has led some analysts to superimpose a sense of emergent order (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003: 464)[7]. To date awareness of emergent order has as yet had comparatively little influence on mainstream theory and practice in management and strategy. The concept is nevertheless reflected in the Cynefin framework by the passage of decision-making and response through the various domains. It also relates closely to perceived order within faith-based decision-making.

Christianity and the assumption of order: In God We Trust

Kurtz and Snowden (2003) note "in the space of disorder, we know something very valuable – that we do not know." As Berger observes, however, religion provides a framework through which "a meaningful order, or 'nomos', is imposed upon the discrete experiences of individuals" (Berger, 1967: 19). Belief in an order made by God has long been a part of Christian awareness, from the medieval idea of the Harmonies through Quaker notions of 'right ordering' to current concepts in some denominations relating to the role of women and to homosexuality. Within the New Testament, faith incorporates the unseen and the unknowable[8]. For the Christian, therefore, the 'domain of disorder' may come to be occupied by a faith-based nomos. This has significant implications for policy evolution as it extends the 'known' space into areas that cannot be tested, but which give rise to a distinct response or course of action.

The Cynefin model posits that "Organizations settle into stable symmetric relationships in known space and fail to recognize that they dynamics of the environment have changed until it is too late … the decision makers in the system don't see things that fall outside the pattern of their expectation" (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003: 475). In this context the known and the knowable are inclined to merge, leading to an emphasis on the 'response' reflex of the 'known' rather than the 'report' reflex of the knowable.

The mergence of the known and the knowable, or rather the removal of the boundary between them, brings its own vulnerabilities of assumption even to the point that Kurtz and Snowden suggest that it might become pathological (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003: 476). For the faith-based policy-maker, the supplanting of disorder by faith leads to extended assumptions of familiarity combining known, knowable and nomos. This has serious implications for policy as it leads to blindness of expectations and erodes the means for testing and evaluating ideas.

Lack of boundaries and the erosion of policy preparedness

Within Cynefin, the sense of certainty caused variously by merged domains or absence of boundaries heightens the risk of asymmetric collapse. This occurs when movement passes from the known domain to the chaotic. The greater the perceived known domain, the greater the risk of false assumption. Here the risk is either that "decision makers in the system don't see things that fall outside the pattern of their expectation" (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003: 475) or that "senior decision makers and their policy advisors will find ways of fitting reality into their existing models rather than face the fact that those models are outdated, and they will punish dissent" (p. 476). The encounter with reality can be catastrophic. Kurtz and Snowden assert that policy-makers attempt to counter this through policies designed to produce a forcible shift from chaos back to the known through draconian imposition of order. The response may be so rigid as to be unsustainable; moreover, in uncertain times it is more appropriate to shift the issue from the domain of the known to the complex (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003: 477-478).

Case example: 9/11 and decision-shift

The Cynefin framework has been built recognizing that "perception and sensemaking are fundamentally different in order versus disorder" (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003: 470). For the US a major and visible disorder came, of course, with the terrorist attacks of September 11 2001. But it is important also to consider the broader context within which the Bush administration was operating until that time.

America's perceived withdrawal from the wider international community – from the failure to ratify Kyoto to successive declarations that the US is not the world's policeman – has been variously attributed to George W. Bush's comparatively limited international exposure, the nationalist stance of American conservatism and even the closed nature of the Evangelical communities from which he draws his support[9]. However, the United States was already on a path of withdrawal toward the end of the Clinton administration, encouraged in part by the end of the cold war and in equal measure by Europe's increasing focus on its own internal issues (Kagan, 2003: 45 & 81-83).

International perceptions of US policy were aggravated by the Bush emphasis on defence spending which, while consistent with previous Republican administrations, lacked the inclusive internationalism of the Clinton administration. Thus when Bush came to power the world was quick to fall back upon the conventional assumption of intentional capability. For Washington's part, the President's advisors were drawn largely from an administration that had been out of power for a decade – that of his father[10]. Experiential assumptions commonly seated within the 'knowable' quadrant thus affected both sides in equal measure. As Kurtz and Snowden explain: "this is the domain in which entrained patterns are at their most dangerous, as a simple error in an assumption can lead to a false conclusion that is difficult to isolate and may not be seen" (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003: 468-469). For international onlookers, particularly those from secular Europe, rapid conclusions were drawn about the likely impact of faith

not only on the new President's personal views, but also his likely policies.

The debate over what may or may not have been foreseeable in the run up to 9/11 continues to rage through various reviews of intelligence services and information gathering and distribution, in the US and elsewhere. But it should not be forgotten that a time of order is, by its very nature, a time of the known and is therefore a time in which the leader may enjoy a greater sense of control over events. Control over the broader national direction also allows greater leeway for individuals within those structures. As William J Bennett notes: "we were living in a bubble in the 1990s, and as long as we were inside that bubble, we as a nation permitted ourselves every sort of indulgence, moral as well as material. Or who could imagine that bad news would come, or what shape it would take, or what it might demand of us?" (Bennett, 2003: 180).

The impact of 9/11 has been to enable America to rediscover its mission, not only as beacon but also, in the words of Benjamin Franklin, as "the cause of all mankind" (cited in Kagan, 2003: 88). Encouraged by Presidential references to an 'axis of evil', moral outrage has grown on all sides. Domestically, the mergence of conservative Americanism with a broad Christian ethic has found voice in a deeper concern that liberal moral relativism has caused the erosion of American ideals – as Bennett laments: "Although we cannot assume that our values are universally shared, we need not conclude either that our deepest values lack universal validity or that no values are universally shared" (Bennett, 2003: 67).

The rediscovery of world role was manifest through the forcible shift back from chaos to the known through 'draconian measures' which effectively reconfigured the legal framework at home and abroad. This ranged from the Patriot Act through to the creation of extra-legal standards for the detention of 'armed combatants' at Guantanamo Bay. This in turn has led to the evolution of a new 'patriotic' moral relativism[11], bringing with it a recognition of complexity and concomitant policy formulations.

Religion, policy and distancing: Implications for US security policy

It has become axiomatic that any ideal worth having must be an ideal worth fighting for – be it a faith, a nation or other doctrine. That sentiment is more potent where that fight is against an identified 'evil'. Research led by Peter Feaver at Duke University suggests that the American public is more robust about military deployments than is commonly perceived, particularly where forces are deployed early in sufficient numbers to secure victory[12]. Nevertheless "ever since Somalia, putting US troops at risk [in discretionary interventions] has not been an option. Within the new Bush administration, this new tendency towards avoiding commitments has been further reinforced" (Singer, 2003: 58 – quotation from US diplomat Dennis Jeff). This reflects not only America's reluctance to act as the world's policeman, but also the fact that pursuing evil in a democratic society also carries political risk.

This risk is particularly acute in the US where the military provides a gateway to opportunity and advancement in a land with otherwise minimal social support systems. Military service is more generally perceived as a means to pay one's way through college, or to achieve the broader aspirations that America so manifestly offers rather than as an end in itself. To deploy troops is to buck these expectations and so to lose votes. Increasingly this concern is leading to the deployment of mercenaries in place of regular soldiers, a development explored in some detail by authors including Singer (2003). This development is significant in terms of distancing of the underpinning morality of military deployments from the basis upon which such policy decisions are made. It also marks the movement of US defence policy from the Cynefin domains of known and knowable through the domain of chaos into the domain of the complex. This has been achieved by effectively circumventing the central domain – here expressed through Christian nomos.

When applying faith to policy, the implications are significant. The decision to go to war is as much moral as political. That morality derives not only from the justice of the cause, but also the preparedness of a government to ask the ultimate sacrifice of its people and, in the context of a democracy, the readiness of those people to rally to that cause. Because the US military draws upon significant numbers of the voting public, it may be argued that democracy – or rather, fear of loss of votes – will act as a moral brake upon the leadership. As James Madison observed: "A dependence on the people is, no doubt, the primary control on the government…" However, Madison continues "…but experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary precautions"[13].

The social welfare role fulfilled by the military in America has not only undermined its preparedness for military purpose but has also led to a distancing of elected leaders from the impacts of the decision to deploy. Unlike European armies where members of the ruling classes were (and continue to be) as much engaged in the armed forces as the less well off, there is little conjunction between the wealthy (and frequently governing) families of the United States and active service, even at officer level. Without familial engagement or prospect of loss of loved ones, the polity is distanced from the impacts of decisions to deploy – in other words, does not expect to make that same sacrifice.

This plays ill against the concept of America as an idea, and particularly as an idea for which it is worth dying. It is doubly hollow when the fight is presented in terms of good versus evil. America, and the image of God evoked by Bush, becomes a rally cry rather than moral cornerstone of decision-making. The increasing use of mercenary troops distances the decision from the policy maker by introducing the assumed rationality of a paid contract. It also distances the decision from democratic accountability because the blood being spent is not necessarily that of America's own so public outcry is likely diminished. The pragmatic acknowledgement of complexity thus both undermines concepts of democratic accountability and bypasses the

Christian nomos by removing the ethical considerations required in mounting a just war. Without such considerations, the American ideal itself is open to question.

Here a lesson may perhaps be drawn from the Tophet in Carthage – a temple at which it is believed that child sacrifices were made by the families of the wealthy in order to bring the favor of the gods upon Phoenician military ventures. Over time, the ruling families delegated this responsibility to their slaves whose children were offered as sacrifice instead. Ultimately this translated into animal sacrifice. Only in the most extreme moments of crisis did the ruling families again sacrifice their own, by which time the Punic wars were largely lost[14].

Impact on the Presidency

"It is not true to say that the Bush administration does not listen. It's just that it takes them 18 months to do anything about it" Charles Cogan[15].

The 'space' created for religion in the First Amendment has come not only to free a place for religious observance exempt from political interference, but also to diminish the opportunity for those whose core business is that of Faith to instruct or guide their political leaders. While a politician may appeal to a religious sensibility in order to broaden his voter base, efforts by religious leaders to assert the over-arching morality of that faith are condemned. Statements by some Catholic priests that they would withhold Communion from Catholic politicians and voters advocating policies denounced by Rome are but one example of such controversy[16]. Although there is no prohibition on religious voices proclaiming on policy issues, Bush, an Episcopalian turned Methodist, faces no such central authority to contest his actions[17].

It has been observed that the core of President Bush's certainty is as much a facet of his personality as of his faith; he is no more exceptional as a practising Christian than Presidents Carter or Clinton (Daalder & Lindsay, 2003: 89). Nevertheless, the President has taken deliberate strides to draw on the language of his Faith, not least through the appointment of Michael Gerson, a past theology major and self-described evangelical Christian, as his speechwriter (Woodward, 2004: 86). As Wilcox observes, "America's civil religion seems to require that the president assume the role of national religious leader" (Wilcox, 2000: 88). Bush's open espousal of Christian principle is professed from a position already sanctified through the language of the Constitution ("the Blessings of Liberty … Full Faith and Credit"), underpinned by the language chosen by the leader himself, and heightened in a circumstance circumscribed by a clearly delineated 'good' and 'evil'. In a nation that, in a 2001 survey, professed itself to be 77% Christian[18], the common ground has been claimed and captured in the name of America. The current use of religious language therefore serves not only to underpin the President's position through association with culturally powerful imagery, but also to increase the reverence in which that position is held[19].

Commenting on the decision to invade Iraq, Bush stated, "I'm surely not going to justify war based upon God. Understand that. Nevertheless, in my case I pray that I be as good a messenger of His will as possible" (Woodward, 2004: 379). The concept of President as such a messenger carries powerful connotations in a country which, while riven with denominational differences, remains predominantly Christian. This is not to suggest that the Presidency is claiming an American equivalent of the Divine Right of Kings, nor even the deification enjoyed (or rather deployed) by the Emperors of Ancient Rome. But for those with a sense of America as a nation on divine mission, it is difficult to argue with someone who also identifies closely with Christian concepts of God. For those anxious to keep God out of politics, it is easier to avoid discussing God altogether. In either case the effect is to remove the boundaries at which policy discussion and refinement might occur.

Exploitation of congregation

Kurtz and Snowden observe that "often in a group using the Cynefin framework, people agree on what the extremes of the four domains mean in the context they are considering, but disagree on more subtle differences near the centre of the space. As a result individuals compete to interpret the central space on the basis of their preference for action" (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003: 470). Each group will differ on how best to reduce the domain of disorder, the success of which endeavour depends upon "consensual acts of collaboration" (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003: 470).

It has already been noted that invocations of God stifle debate, be it among believers who broadly share the given view and faith construct or from those who wish to maintain the debate free of religious inferences. Moreover, "a single circumstance may contain competing aspects and perspectives with different degrees of uncertainty or that such differences can be used to strategic advantage" (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003: 480). In a multi-denominational society, the replacement of the domain of disorder by a Christian nomos becomes less a place of consensus than of division which may itself be put to tactical purpose.

To the dismay of some, America has become host to a market of competitive churches in which denominations focus on their unique selling points rather than a commonality through Christ. The absence of a single over-riding ecclesiastical structure to challenge the President's religious stance also provides a political tool by which to ensure the governance of the State. In practice this is less a separation of functions than a liberation of Presidential (and personal) power. Although protestant

denominations remain in the forefront, the largest denomination in the United States is the Catholic Church. Rome's stance on issues such as abortion and gay marriage provides a political opportunity for a President whose opposition comprises a significant proportion of Catholics, but whose stance runs contrary to those teachings. This provides opportunities to provoke political division and maintain the focus on that division. Bush is able to appeal to the advocates of these policies through his conservatism while appealing by association to the broader Protestant constituency. This appeal will likely grow as the Catholic Church attempts to assert its voice through threats to withhold communion. In these circumstances there is little political benefit to be derived from an ecumenical approach; the opportunity is therefore diminished for churches in America to build towards a shared Christian nomos.

By extending the nomos to include America itself as a Christian concept, it is nevertheless possible to draw on each of these denominations in a manner that serves the purposes of the State. Through policies such as the Faith Based Initiative, congregations are regarded as a means of service distribution enabling a delegation of welfare responsibilities and reducing the burden on the state. This carries risks in that religious communities are at their strongest in areas of greatest social or material need, thus the benefits to the poor are likely to be limited in communities drawing on the aid of congregations themselves composed of the poor. For as long as the administration relies upon a voter base comprising Evangelical congregations, largely drawn from that same social sector, there is little incentive to bring them greater material comfort. Poverty may not be synonymous with chastity, but it is more likely to bring with it voter obedience.

Conclusion

As Madison famously put it: "If men were angels no government would be necessary." By supplanting the unknown with faith structures in an environment without clear theological authority, there is an increased risk of inhibited decision-making. Dissent is the more easily quashed in an environment that broadly shares the Christian sentiments to which the mission is designed to appeal. In policy terms this diminishes testing and impoverishes the quality of decisions.

The interpretation of separation of church and state has placed pressure on leaders to deny the constructs of the very society that they seek to represent. This, coupled with the pressures of the democratic process, inclines policy makers to seek alternative mechanisms through which they can fulfill both their doctrinal and policy objectives. By obliging the denial of those structures at the outset, the very basis for moral or faith-based decision-making is undermined. By failing to acknowledge the God elephant in its living room, America gives its President the leeway to play Hannibal – from leadership, through adventurism to ultimate personal and national failure.

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