# POLITICS AND RELIGION IN AMERICA: FROM BARACK OBAMA TO DONALD TRUMP

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*Abstract:The proposed article will analyze various addresses of American presidents B. Obama and D. Trump, focusing on the specific references to religion, the religious terminology they employed, as well as the implied strategic goals and the effects they might have produced. In The United States there is an official separation of church and state, however this separation does not imply the absence of the religious dimension from the political field, therefore beyond a private faith, worship and manifestations of personal belief, there are 'certain common elements of religious orientation that the great majority of Americans share' (R. Bellah). America remains associated with a country infused politically by Christianity. The presidential discourses are preponderantly infused with religious language, from the commonly used 'God bless America' to quotations of various verses from the Bible.*
*During his two mandates President Obama reflected on his personal faith on various occasions, the Inaugural address, the National Prayer Breakfast, the Easter Breakfast, and other public statements, addressing to people of faith, of all faiths, or no faith.*
*Already with his presidential campaign Donald Trump provoked heated debates and controversies over most of the issues he addressed, and religion is but one of them. However, although his religiosity has been under radical scrutiny, and highly questioned, in the end, the president won four-fifths of the votes of white evangelical Christians and was strongly supported by much of the 'Bible belt.'*

*Keywords: politics, religion, civil religion, presidential speech, B. Obama, D. Trump*

## 1. Introduction

When Alexis de Tocqueville toured the United States back in 1831 he experienced immediately after his arrival 'the religious aspect of the country'. Later on, during his stay he will observe 'the great political consequences', and that in opposition to Europe, where he 'had seen the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom almost always move in contrary directions', there he saw them 'united intimately with one another: they reigned together on the same soil.'[1]

Back in 1967, Robert N. Bellah wrote the essay 'Civil Religion in America,' in which, using J.J. Rousseau's concept of *civil religion*[2], he claims the existence of an institutionalized civil religion in America, distinct from the regular churches, understood as 'a collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals.'[3] The separation of church and state does not imply the absence of the religious dimension from the political field, thus beyond a private faith, worship and manifestations of personal belief, there are 'certain common elements of religious orientation that the great majority of Americans share.'[4] Thus, the political sphere includes a religious

[1] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000, p. 303.
[2] 'In chapter 8, book 4 of *The Social Contract*, he outlines the simple dogmas of the civil religion: the existence of God, the life to come, the reward of virtue and the punishment of vice, and the exclusion of religious intolerance.' (Robert N. Bellah, *Civil Religion in America*, p. 4.)
[3] Robert N. Bellah, 'Civil Religion in America', *Dædalus, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, from the issue entitled, "Religion in America," Winter 1967, Vol. 96, No. 1, p. 3.
[4] *Ibidem.*



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dimension, and even 'the inauguration of a president is an important ceremonial event in this religion,' by reaffirming, 'among other things, the religious legitimation of the highest political authority.'[5]

With the beginning of the new millennium there have been important changes in the structure of the phenomenon of religion in the USA, and these changes are part of a dynamic process that has become more intense in the last decade. Recent surveys are illustrating that the number of people distancing from the institutionalized religion keeps increasing. While the vast majority still expresses the belief in God[6], there is a growing number of declared 'nones', as well as a decline in the religious affiliation[7].

At the same time it is important to consider how beyond various changes, and shifts religion remains an important marker of political identity in the USA; as a 2014 Gallup survey indicated the relationship between religion and party identification has remained consistent, meaning that 'very religious Americans are more likely to identify with or lean toward the Republican Party and less frequently identify with or lean toward the Democratic Party, compared with those who are moderately or nonreligious.'[8] A recent Gallup analysis shows the overall constant support for Trump from highly religious, white Protestants: in 2017 an average 67% approval rating to an average 69% approval in both 2018 and in the first quarter of 2019.[9] A similar analysis was presented by Pew Research in 2019 that white evangelical Protestants are still overwhelmingly supporting the President, whereas other religious groups tend to be more divided in their views of the president.[10]

2. The Obama Era

During his two mandates President Obama reflected on his personal faith on various occasions, the Inaugural address, the National Prayer Breakfast, the Easter Breakfast, and other public statements, addressing to people of faith, of all faiths, or no faith.

In January 2009 President Obama was sworn in as the forty-fourth president of the United States of America. In his *Inaugural Address*, while reflecting on the crisis and the war in which the American nations was involved, the difficulties and challenges ahead, Obama

[5] *Ibidem.*

[6] Data provided by the Harris Poll in 2013 indicates that the majority, 74% of U.S. adults do believe in God, a decline from previous years (2005, 2007 and 2009) when 82% expressed a belief in God.

[7] A 2015 survey by Pew Research Center indicated that 34% to 36 % of millennials are declared as 'nones', which represents an increase from 36.6 million to 55.8 million. A 2017 Pew Research Center poll indicated an increase from 19 % in 2012 to 27 % in the category 'spiritual but not religious'.

[8] https://news.gallup.com/poll/174134/religion-remains-strong-marker-political-identity.aspx?g_source=link_NEWSV9&g_medium=TOPIC&g_campaign=item_&g_content=Religion%2520Remains%2520a%2520Strong%2520Marker%2520of%2520Political%2520Identity%2520in%2520U.S., accessed on July 13th, 2019.

[9] https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/248384/highly-religious-white-protestants-firm-support-trump.aspx?g_source=link_NEWSV9&g_medium=TOPIC&g_campaign=item_&g_content=Highly%2520Religious%2c%2520White%2520Protestants%2520Firm%2520in%2520Support%2520for%2520Trump, accessed on July 13th, 2019.

[10] https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/03/18/evangelical-approval-of-trump-remains-high-but-other-religious-groups-are-less-supportive/?utm_source=link_newsv9&utm_campaign=item_248384&utm_medium=copy, accessed on July 13th, 2019. Pew Research Center conducted 11 surveys since Trump's inauguration and the findings were that 'between 46% and 55% of white mainline Protestants have approved of the president, including 48% in the January 2019 survey. Around half of white Catholics have approved of Trump in these surveys, including 44% in January. Religiously unaffiliated Americans consistently express among the lowest levels of approval of Trump's performance, ranging from 17% to 27% across the polls the Center has conducted since the president assumed office. Most black Protestants and nonwhite Catholics also have disapproved of the way the president handles his job.' (*Ibidem.*)



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made an appeal to 'hope over fear, unity of purpose over conflict and discord,'[11] and continued

> 'in the words of Scripture, the time has come to set aside childish things. The time has come to reaffirm our enduring spirit; to choose our better history; to carry forward that precious gift, that noble idea passed on from generation to generation: the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness.'[12]

Announcing the beginning of a responsible withdrawal from Irak, and a peace agenda for Afghanistan, Obama describes the American *patchwork heritage* as one of strength, and not weakness:

> 'We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus, and non-believers. … To the Muslim world, we seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect. To those leaders around the globe who seek to sow conflict, or blame their society's ills on the West, know that your people will judge you on what you can build, not what you destroy.'[13]

The new President underlined the richness of the diversity of 'every language and culture, drawn from every end of this Earth' that have shaped the nation, how out of struggle and obstacles a stronger and more united America emerged. In line with the recurrent presidential rhetoric, he mentions God, *the knowledge that God calls on us to shape an uncertain destiny*, *God's grace upon us*, but distances himself from his predecessors when going beyond the Judeo-Christian ethos, while also including a reference to the non-believers.

A year later, at the *National Prayer Breakfast*, Obama placed himself in the line of his predecessors for over half a century and addressed his faith, and the way faith may inform 'who I am -- as a President, and as a person.'[14] Expressing communion with those present, the President went on to affirm and 'share a recognition -- one as old as time -- that a willingness to believe, an openness to grace, a commitment to prayer can bring sustenance to our lives'[15]:

> 'There is, of course, a need for prayer even in times of joy and peace and prosperity. Perhaps especially in such times prayer is needed -- to guard against pride and to guard against complacency. But rightly or wrongly, most of us are inclined to seek out the divine not in the moment when the Lord makes His face shine upon us, but in moments when God's grace can seem farthest away.'[16]

Introducing the audience to the recent catastrophe in Haiti, the President brought to light the efforts and the compassion expressed by Americans of all faiths or of no faith who became united around the common goal of providing help for their neighbour. The challenges democracy is confronting were also addressed, from divisions to arguments on the role of government, the erosion of civility in the public square:

> 'Empowered by faith, consistently, prayerfully, we need to find our way back to civility. That begins with stepping out of our comfort zones in an effort to bridge divisions. We see that in many conservative pastors who are helping lead the way to fix our broken immigration system. … We see it in the increasing recognition among progressives that

[11] *President Barack Obama's Inaugural Address*, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2009/01/21/president-barack-obamas-inaugural-address, accessed on July 6th, 2019.
[12] *Ibidem.*
[13] *Ibidem.*
[14] Barack Obama, *Address at the 58th National Prayer Breakfast*,https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-national-prayer-breakfast, accessed on May 7th, 2019.
[15] *Ibidem.*
[16] *Ibidem.*



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government can't solve all of our problems, and that talking about values like responsible fatherhood and healthy marriage are integral to any anti-poverty agenda.'[17]

Toward the end of his speech the President invoked the memory of Martin Luther King, and the way 'in the eyes of those who denied his humanity, he saw the face of God', by making the memorable statement that "Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend."[18] He also used the same context to remember Abraham Lincoln and how he was able 'to see the face of God' in 'the eyes of confederate soldiers.' He then ended his address by saying that 'progress comes when we look into the eyes of another and see the face of God. That we might do so -- that we will do so all the time, not just some of the time -- is my fervent prayer for our nation and the world. Thank you, God bless you, and God bless the United States of America.'[19]

During the 2011 *Easter Prayer Breakfast* President Obama insisted on various aspects related to his faith and the distinctive significance Easter holds as 'we're reminded that in that moment, he took on the sins of the world -- past, present and future -- and he extended to us that unfathomable gift of grace and salvation through his death and resurrection.'[20] Some voices associated his openess to address his personal faith more directly with the various polls indicating that one in five Americans believed Obama to be a Muslim.[21] The President reflected on the 'magnificent grace, this expansive grace, this 'Amazing Grace', calling him to reflect: 'And it calls me to pray. It calls me to ask God for forgiveness for the times that I've not shown grace to others, those times that I've fallen short.'[22]

In 2013, during the same event, the *Easter Prayer Breakfast,* President Obama once again spoke openly about his faith and shared some insights from a recent trip to the Holy Land, describing the visit on that 'sacred earth'as a 'powerful' and 'humbling' experience:

'It brings Scripture to life. It brings us closer to Christ. It reminds us that our Savior, who suffered and died was resurrected, both fully God and also a man; a human being who lived, and walked, and felt joy and sorrow just like us.

And so for Christians to walk where He walked and see what He saw are blessed moments. And while I had been to Jerusalem before, where Jesus healed the sick, and cured the blind, and embraced the least of these, I also had a chance to go to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. And those of you who have been there know that entering the church is a remarkable experience (...)'[23]

The President had a short encounter with the Patriarch of Jerusalem who greeted him near tthe Altar of the Nativity, a special place for all Christians, in his own words, 'the place where heaven and Earth met.'[24] Obama referred to those moments as a personal time of reflection, awareness and prayer:

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[17] *Ibidem.*
[18] *Ibidem.*
[19] *Ibidem.*
[20] *Remarks by the President at Easter Prayer Breakfast*, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/04/19/remarks-president-easter-prayer-breakfast, accessed on July 13th, 2019.
[21] According to a Pew Research Center survey in 2010, there was a growing number of Americans who considered Obama to be a Muslim. The survey showed that 'the share of Americans who believe Barack Obama is a Muslim – which held steady at between 11% and 12% from early 2008 through early 2009 – has jumped to 18%. There also has been a steep decline in the number of people who identify Obama as a Christian – 34% today, down from 48% in March 2009 and 51% in October 2008. A plurality (43%) now say they do not know what Obama's religion is, up from 34% in 2009.' (https://www.people-press.org/2010/08/19/section-1-obama-and-religion/, accessed on July 13th, 2019)
[22] *Ibidem.*
[23] *Remarks by the President and Vice President at Easter Prayer Breakfast*, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/04/05/remarks-president-and-vice-president-easter-prayer-breakfast, accessed on June 13th, 2019.
[24] *Ibidem.*



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'I was reminded that while our time on Earth is fleeting, he is eternal. His life, his lessons live on in our hearts and, most importantly, in our actions. When we tend to the sick, when we console those in pain, when we sacrifice for those in need, wherever and whenever we are there to give comfort and to guide and to love, then Christ is with us.'[25]

In 2016, during his final *Easter Prayer Breakfast*, President Obama addressed to 140 Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox denominational leaders and pastors. It was not only an occasion to once again shed light on various facets of his faith but to also speak of the recent terrorist assaults in Belgium and Pakistan, in an attempt to overcome fear and divivion that may result from such horrific attacks. The response one should give when confronted with such acts of violence is to not fall in to the temptation 'to cast out the stranger, strike out against those who don't look like us, or pray exactly as we do.'[26] In contrary, understanding the genuine meaning of Easter means not being afraid, becoming witnesses to the victory of light over darkness, and healing hatred with love: '(O)ur faith changes us. I know it's changed me. It renews in us a sense of possibility. It allows us to believe that although we are all sinners, and that at times we will falter, there's always the possibility of redemption.'[27]

3. The Trump Era: The President's faith and his influence on the American civil religion

Already with his presidential campaign Donald Trump provoked heated debates and controversies over most of the issues he addressed, and religion is but one of them. Although his religiosity has been under radical scrutiny, and highly questioned, the president won four-fifths of the votes of white evangelical Christians, surprisingly surpassing predecessors such as George W. Bush or Ronald Reagan. He was strongly supported by much of the *Bible belt*, once again surprisingly, surpassing George W. Bush.

Michele Bachmann, one of Trump's evangelical advisers during the 2016 campaign, said in a recent interview that '[Trump] is highly biblical, and I would say to your listeners, we will in all likelihood never see a more godly, biblical president again in our lifetime. So we need to be not only praying for him, we need to support him, in my opinion, in every possible way that we can.'[28]

There were six prominent religious leaders invited to be part of the swearing-in ceremony, among them the leading evangelist Franklin Graham, televangelist Paula White, the Archbishop of New York, Cardinal Timothy Dolan, Rabbi Marvin Hier, the co-founder of the Simon Wiesenthal Center.

During the *National Prayer Breakfast* in 2017, Trump began his address by recalling President Eisenhower, the initiator of the event back in 1953, a tradition that symbolizes the power of faith. The President shared with the audience some personal memories related to his faith: 'I was blessed to be raised in a churched home. My mother and father taught me that to whom much is given much is expected. I was sworn in on the very bible from which my mother would teach us as young children. And that faith lives on in my heart every single day.'[29]

The President underlined the unity beyond the diversity, the many faiths and worldviews gathered in the room, united by the shared belief that 'our Republic was formed on the basis that freedom is not a gift from government, but that freedom is a gift from God.'[30] Recalling Th. Jefferson and his words 'The God who gave us life, gave us liberty,' Trump insisted that

[25] *Ibidem.*
[26] *Ibidem.*
[27] *Ibidem.*
[28] Chris Cillizza, 'Michele Bachmann claimed that Donald Trump is 'highly biblical.' So..., in *CNN*,https://edition.cnn.com/2019/04/16/politics/michele-bachman-donald-trump-bible-religious/index.html, accessed on July 13th, 2019.
[29] *Remarks by President Trump at National Prayer Breakfast*,https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-national-prayer-breakfast/, accessed on June 13th, 2019.
[30] *Ibidem.*



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religious freedom is a sacred right, one that would be protected under all circumstances. Terrorism is but one facet of an infringment of religious freedom, and as recent years witnessed an increase of violence committted in the name of religion, therefore the President vowed to put an end to this phenomenon:

> 'We have seen peace-loving Muslims brutalized, victimized, murdered and oppressed by ISIS killers. We have seen threats of extermination against the Jewish people. We have seen a campaign of ISIS and genocide against Christians, where they cut off heads. (...)
> All nations have a moral obligation to speak out against such violence. All nations have a duty to work together to confront it and to confront it viciously, if we have to. So I want to express clearly today to the American people that my administration will do everything in its power to defend and protect religious liberty in our land.'[31]

A year later, on the same occasion, Trump focused his speech on remarks related mostly to America and God, by referring to the Founding Fathers and the inclusion of the Creator in the *Declaration of Independence*, to the words 'Praise be to God', etched atop the Washington Monument, the blessing to be American, a land illustrationg the splendor of God's creation:

> 'Throughout our history, we see the story of God's providence. And in every city and town, we see the Lord's grace all around us, through a million acts of kindness, courage and generosity. We love God. We see the Lord's grace in the service members who risk their lives for our freedom.
> (...)
> As the Bible tells us, for we are God's handiwork, created in Jesus Christ to do good works. America's heroes rise to this calling. In their selfless deeds, they reveal the beauty and goodness of the human soul.'[32]

Envisioning America as the beacon and the light for other nations, the President shed light on how the Americans are 'a tireless force for justice and for peace,' their involvment in Syria, where the coalition reigistered a positive outcome in defeating ISIS and liberating the territory, as well as in places such as Iran, Cuba, Venezuela, North Korea, and other countries suffering under 'repressive and brutal regimes,' making clear that America will stand with 'all people suffering oppression and religious persecution.'[33]

The 2019 *National Prayer Breakfast* was an opportunity for President Trump to connect with a largely conservative audience, and to tackle stringent topics from religious freedom to abortion. This last issue was saluted and consistently applauded, the participants stood when Trump indicated his opposition to abortion: 'As part of our commitment to building a just and loving society, we must build a culture that cherishes the dignity and sanctity of innocent human life. All children born and unborn are made in the holy image of God.'[34]

During the *National Day of Prayer* in May 2019, President Trump seemed to have infused his speech with a religious tone, to an unprecedented extent, as some critical voices reacted. Throughout the event, Trump made several references to faith and God, how he felt supported by the providence during some tough moments of his presidency, and even indicated that the Americans are referring to God more frequently: '... People are so proud to be using that beautiful word, "God." And they're using the word "God" again. And they're

[31] *Ibidem.*
[32] *Remarks by President Trump at the 66th Annual National Prayer Breakfast*, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-66th-annual-national-prayer-breakfast/, accessed on June 13th, 2019.
[33] *Ibidem.*
[34] *Ibidem.*



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not hiding from it. And they're not being told to take it down. And they're not saying, "We can't honor God." "In God we trust." So important.'[35]

Beginning with the Trump administration religion seems to have been more intensly integrated into matters of foreign policy as well. It is important to consider that the first trip abroad were dedicated to three areas symbolic for the three Abrahamic religions, and the trip itself was named by some commentators *a pilgrimage*. The President first stopped in Saudia Arabia, where he was received with an enthusiasm not manifested to his predecessor, and attended the Arab Islamic American Summit in Riyadh, delivering 'a message of friendship and hope.'[36] Underlining that America's vision is 'one of peace, security, and prosperity—in this region, and in the world,' Trump made clear that this vision and hope were the motivation behind his first foreign visit, described as 'a trip to the heart of the Muslim world, to the nation that serves as custodian of the two holiest sites in the Islamic Faith.'[37] He also added that in the inaugural address he 'pledged to strengthen America's oldest friendships, and to build new partnerships in pursuit of peace,' promissing that America 'will not seek to impose our way of life on others, but to outstretch our hands in the spirit of cooperation and trust.'[38] One central issue addressed in his speech was the phenomenon of terrorism, which has spread its deadly tentacles all over the globe, from the Middle East to South America, America, Africa, India, Russia, China, Europe. The President stresses that 'the deadliest toll has been exacted on the innocent people of Arab, Muslim and Middle Eastern nations,' some estimates indicating that 'more than 95 percent of the victims of terrorism are themselves Muslim,' but also that 'the true toll of ISIS, Al Qaeda, Hezbollah, Hamas, and so many others, must be counted not only in the number of dead,' but also 'in generations of vanished dreams.'[39]

The President also made an appeal to unity and solidarity in fighting against organized terror, insisting that:

> 'If we do not stand in uniform condemnation of this killing—then not only will we be judged by our people, not only will we be judged by history, but we will be judged by God. This is not a battle between different faiths, different sects, or different civilizations. This is a battle between barbaric criminals who seek to obliterate human life, and decent people of all religions who seek to protect it. (...) When we see the scenes of destruction in the wake of terror, we see no signs that those murdered were Jewish or Christian, Shia or Sunni. When we look upon the streams of innocent blood soaked into the ancient ground, we cannot see the faith or sect or tribe of the victims – we see only that they were Children of God whose deaths are an insult to all that is holy.'[40]

In the end of his address, the President emphasized once again the need for unity and common efforts in that region, home to Christians, Muslims and Jews and the imperativness of tolerance and respect for each other, mentioning that after his visit in Riyadh, he will travel to Jerusalem and Bethlehem, and then to the Vatican, thus visiting many of the holiest places in the three Abrahamic Faiths and insisted that 'if these three faiths can join together in cooperation, then peace in this world is possible – including peace between Israelis and Palestinians.'[41]

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[35] *Remarks by President Trump at the National Day of Prayer Service*, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-national-day-prayer-service/, accessed on June 13th, 2019.
[36] *President Trump's Speech to the Arab Islamic American Summit,* https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-trumps-speech-arab-islamic-american-summit/, accessed on July 13th, 2019.
[37] *Ibidem.*
[38] *Ibidem.*
[39] *Ibidem.*
[40] *Ibidem.*
[41] *Ibidem.*



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President Trump's visit to Israel marked the first time a sitting American President had visited the Old City of Jerusalem, where the first stop was at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the holiest place for Christianity then at the Western Wall, a remnant of the Second Jewish Temple.

In his speech, the President called upon 'Jews, Christians, Muslims, and every faith, every tribe, every creed — to draw inspiration from this ancient city, to set aside our sectarian differences, to overcome oppression and hatred, and to give all children the freedom and hope and dignity written into our souls,'[42] emphasizing once again the need for unity and concord.

During the private audiance with Pope Francis, at the Vatican, there were a variety of stringent issues on the table for discussion, among them the climate change, immigration, on which their views are known to be in disonance, as well as abortion and religious freedom on which the two world leaders shared a common ground.

4. Conclusions

The content analysis of the presidential addresses that were the object of our research indicated the intense employment of religion, not only a religious terminology, but also instances where Bible verses were concieved as illustrative for both personal and political contexts. Both presidents made use of a religion as a strategy to *prove* their *religiosity* to the American people, in contexts where a concern about their religion or religiosity was raised.

What particularizes the Trump administration in what religion is considered is the fact that beyond a certain religious rhetoric used for various strategic purposes, for keeping the support of his electorate, religion seems to have been more intensly integrated into matters of foreign policy. The first foreign visit, named by some commentators *a pilgrimage*, was dedicated to three areas symbolic for the three Abrahamic religions: Riyadh, Jerusalem, and the Vatican.

Under Trump, religious freedom has assumed what is arguably an unprecedented dominance in foreign affairs, a strong commitment to involvement in solving crises caused by violence against religious minorities overseas. Expressed in the words of the vice chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, Kristina Arriaga: 'There has been a treatment of religious freedom in this administration as an indivisible, universal, and interdependent human right.' [43] Arriaga underlinded that this 'was not present in the Obama administration. So I think it's refreshing for the international community, and for those of us who advocate for [this issue], to see that religious freedom is being restored to its proper place.'[44]

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[44] *Ibidem.*



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