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Wholly Different Angles on The World

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By Michael Sean Winters
Sunday, March 30, 2008; B01

It wasn't that long ago that the [Vatican](#) and the [White House](#) saw the world pretty similarly. Throughout the Cold War, both staunchly opposed communism, laying the bedrock for U.S.-Vatican cooperation. The Truman administration launched the Marshall Plan to rebuild [Europe's](#) shattered postwar economies and stave off radicalism; at the Vatican, Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani warned, "You can say what you want about the divinity of Christ, but if, in the remotest village in Sicily, you vote communist, your excommunication will arrive the next day." And of course, both [Pope John Paul II](#) and President [Ronald Reagan](#) played supporting but important roles in the collapse of communism.

But that harmony is long gone. During his U.S. visit next month, [Pope Benedict XVI](#) will show how much his worldview differs from [President Bush's](#) when he denounces the continuing U.S. occupation of [Iraq](#) before the [U.N. General Assembly](#) -- a denunciation that's expected to be especially harsh after the recent martyrdom of a Chaldean Catholic archbishop killed by insurgents in [Mosul](#).

The Vatican's outlook on the world these days resembles that of other European capitals where Bush's foreign policy is held in low regard -- leaving the hand-in-glove alliance that characterized Vatican-U.S. relations for 50 years as a thing of the past. This shouldn't be much of a surprise. After the fall of the [Berlin Wall](#), Europeans in general began to see the United States not as their great protector but as a global bully. European elites have long disdained American-style rugged individualism and scoffed at Washington's unwillingness to fight global warming or provide universal health insurance to its own citizens. Then came Bush's cowboy diplomacy and the rush to war in Iraq, both of which badly deteriorated relationships between European capitals and Washington. The Vatican was no exception.

What's more surprising is that the post-9/11 Vatican has not proved particularly keen on the dominant motif of Bush's foreign policy, combating Islamist terrorism. One might think that the papacy would have a special interest in this project. Catholicism is competing for converts with Islam in [Africa](#). And more important, recent papacies have made reconciling faith with reason one of their central concerns, and nothing so threatens that project as religious fanaticism. But bureaucrats in the Vatican look at the world through more or less the same spectacles as bureaucrats in [Brussels](#), and their worldview is increasingly anti-American.

After all, Vatican diplomats are drawn largely from the same families as their secular counterparts. They went to the same schools, read the same newspapers and magazines, attend the same social functions, summer at the same resorts. These connections usually lurk in the background, but sometimes a vivid example presents itself. In March 2005, an Italian intelligence officer, Nicola Calipari, was mistakenly shot by U.S. troops at a checkpoint near the [Baghdad](#) airport shortly after securing the release of a kidnapped Italian reporter. His state funeral was held at the massive church of [Santa Maria degli Angeli](#) in [Rome](#); one of the presiders was a Vatican official, Monsignor Maurizio Calipari -- the intelligence officer's brother.

Then there's the question of development. Even before the collapse of communism, a core aspect of the Vatican's foreign policy was the yawning gulf between the wealthy northern continents and the impoverished southern ones. The fact that most Catholics today live in the Southern Hemisphere only reinforces that view. Global economic justice ranks high on the Vatican's list of foreign policy objectives, but the papacy takes a broader perspective here; it insists on Third World debt relief, but it also wants to address the worrisome cultural and spiritual consequences of the West's luxurious decadence.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict also divides the Vatican and the United States, much as it does with our European allies. Pope John Paul II, burdened with the memory of the historic anti-Semitism that unfolded in his native [Poland](#), was the most pro-[Israel](#) pope in history; his decision to establish diplomatic ties with the Jewish state was one of his most significant achievements. But his desire to improve relations with Israel was not widely shared within the Vatican's diplomatic corps, which was more worried about the fragile existence of Catholic minorities in Arab countries. Worse, some clerics also remain susceptible to the anti-Semitism that still lurks in elite European circles.

Beyond all that lies a different outlook that goes far deeper than any particular policy difference. Americans are still from Mars, and Europeans -- including Vatican foreign policy officials -- are still from Venus. For starters, the U.S. ambivalence (or outright hostility) toward the [United Nations](#) is not shared by our European and Vatican friends. But beyond that, nationalism is on the wane in Europe. The euro is merely the most obvious example of the diminishing importance of national sovereignty. Americans, on the other hand, remain downright touchy about our nationalism. We still like to wrap ourselves in the Stars and Stripes, but drive down Washington's Embassy Row, and you will see the flag of the [European Union](#) flying alongside the national flags of every European embassy.

The unending war in Iraq highlights the most fundamental difference between the views from the Tiber and the Potomac. The Vatican has become highly suspicious of the use of force per se. Benedict is a scholar and devotee of [St. Augustine](#), whose 5th-century writings form the basis of just-war theory, with its stern prohibition against aggression and "preventive" war. The saint who gave us the doctrine of original sin saw power as a danger and viewed violence as a coarse tool for resolving conflicts. Augustine was concerned with the human soul, not with foreign policy, but his concern for the unintended consequences of violence ring profoundly true as the Iraq war enters its sixth year. While other European diplomats may not acknowledge their debt to Augustine, they have reached similar conclusions about the limited usefulness of force.

The Vatican is an oddity in world affairs. Its ways more closely resemble those of an 18th-century royal court than they do the habits of a modern capital. Its decision-making is largely opaque to the outside world; there are no inspectors general to monitor official behavior, no organized political opposition to challenge policy decisions or personnel appointments. The media are mesmerized and seduced by the antiquity, the props, the aura of sanctity. Vatican-ologists are virtually the only true tea-leaf readers left.

The pope's voice is a uniquely authoritative one, and it reaches far and wide -- even to the ears of Catholic voters in the upcoming [Pennsylvania](#) primary. But the views he will voice during his U.S. visit will not be hugely different from those found in more prosaic European capitals. If you're trying to understand how the pope sees the world, to get past the religious verbiage to the political kernel within, try not to think of Rome. Think of Brussels.

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Michael Sean Winters's book, "Left at the Altar: How the Democrats Lost the Catholics and How the Catholics Can Save the Democrats," will be published in June.

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