

America's deep Christian faith

By Justin Webb
BBC correspondent in Washington

Our correspondent gives a personal view on the importance of faith and religious belief in American life.

My wife and I do not believe in God.

In our last posting, in Brussels among the nominally catholic Belgians, unbelief was not a problem.

The Bush administration hums to the sound of prayer. Prayer meetings take place day and night.

Before that in London it was not remotely an issue. With the sole exception of one friend who is an evangelical Christian, I don't recall a single conversation with anyone about religious matters in the years I lived and worked in the capital.

Our house in London was right next to a church. We talked to the tiny congregation about the weather, about the need to prune the rose bushes and mend the fence. But we never talked about God.

How different it is on this side of the Atlantic. The early settlers came here in part to practise their faiths as they saw fit.

Since then the right to trumpet your religious affiliations - loud and clear - has been part of the warp and weft of American life.

And I am not talking about the Bible Belt - or about the loopy folk who live in log cabins in Idaho and Oregon and worry that the government is poisoning their water.

Mr and Mrs Average

I am talking about Mr and Mrs Average in Normaltown, USA.

Mr and Mrs Average share an uncomplicated faith with its roots in the puritanism of their forebears.

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According to that faith there is such a thing as heaven - 86% of Americans, we are told by the pollsters, believe in heaven.

But much more striking to me, and much more pertinent to current world events, is the fact that 76% or three out of four people you meet on any American street believe in hell and the existence of Satan.

They believe that the devil is out to get you. That evil is a force in the world - a force to be engaged in battle.

Battling evil

Much of that battle takes place in the form of prayer.

Americans will talk of praying as if it were the most normal, rational thing to do.

The jolly plump woman who delivers our mail in the Washington suburbs has a son who is ill - the doctors are doing their best, she says, but she's praying hard and that's what'll do the trick.

During the last week a child who'd been missing for nine months has been found safe and well - the event was described routinely on the news media as a miracle.

One broadcast had a caption reading "the power of prayer".

In fact the child had been abducted and her abductor was recognised and captured.

Goodbye Jack Daniels, hello Jesus

In rational old Britain the media circus following the finding of the child would have been focused on ways of preventing this happening again - on police errors in the investigation.

Here, metaphorically, sometimes literally, they just sink to their knees.

Both President Bush and Prime Minister Blair are religious men but the simple American faith - with heaven and hell, good and evil and right and wrong - appears rather better suited to wartime conditions

And nobody spends more time on his knees - I am back in metaphorical mode here - than George W Bush.

He is famously born again - at the age of 40 it was goodbye Jack Daniels and hello Jesus. He has never looked back.

So while there are plenty of rational people giving rational advice about policy matters in the Bush White House there is also a channel, an input, from on high.

The Bush administration hums to the sound of prayer. Prayer meetings take place day and night.

It's not uncommon to see White House functionaries hurrying down corridors carrying bibles. A friend who works in the press office of 10 Downing Street tells me that - even in these difficult times - such a sight would be highly unusual.

Doubtless the president and his people have been praying earnestly that Saddam Hussein might fall under a bus.

But if no bus comes they feel justified in what they have decided to do.

Having made the decision to fight the good fight - and have no doubt about it President Bush has made that decision - the nagging doubts, the rational fears, the worldly misgivings - all those things felt so strongly by post-religious Europeans - can be set aside.

President Bush looks as tired as Prime Minister Blair sometimes, but never as worried.

Both are religious men but the simple American faith - with heaven and hell, good and evil and right and wrong - appears rather better suited to wartime conditions.

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