Opinion

News



Steve Bannon in a scene from the new film "The Brink." Bannon has for some time been an evangelist for "the Judeo-Christian West," in his conception of a value system as well as a place, says Mark Silk. (Photo courtesy of Magnolia Pictures)



by Michael Sean Winters

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Columnist's note: *Last week, I published a commentary about Steve Bannon's appearance on EWTN's "The World Over" with Raymond Arroyo. My commentary generated a great number of responses, the smartest of which came from professor Mark Silk, director of the Greenberg Center for the Study of Religion in Public Life. He attached a paper he presented earlier this year at the American Association of Law Schools conference in New Orleans. His talk was entitled: "Judeo-Christian: From Anti-Fascist to Neo-Fascist" and it was part of a panel on "The Evolution and Use of 'Judeo-Christian' in American Law and Public Life." Silk's paper was so smart, I asked permission to publish it here at Distinctly Catholic and Silk graciously agreed. I am delighted to share this important and brilliant text.*

Thirty-five years ago, I published "Notes on the Judeo-Christian Tradition in America," an article that traced the history of "Judeo-Christian" terminology in American culture. It was my first venture into American religious history — the venture of a philologically trained medievalist for whom *begriffsgeschichte*, the history of concepts, was the normal way to do intellectual and cultural history. Happily, "Judeo-Christian" proved to be a concept with quite an interesting history, not the least interesting part of which was how a term that emerged in common usage as a means of acknowledging and protecting the Jews came to be dismissed by many of us as hegemonic and supersessionist. Over the years, the usage has continued to evolve, and as I'll try to show, it has now migrated a full 180 degrees. But let me begin by reviewing the bidding, which begins well before the terminology became ideologically fraught.

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Initially, in the early 19th century, the adjectival "Judeo-" was invented to signify a hybrid phenomenon, such as to identify Yiddish as "Judeo-German" or "Judeo-Polish." It was most widely used (in French as well as English) to refer to the early followers

of Jesus who opposed Paul in wishing to restrict the message of Jesus to Jews and who insisted on maintaining Jewish law and ritual. These were the Judeo-Christians par excellence, and thus, "Judeo-Christian" pointed to a restriction of the divine promise to the Jews, even as the term "Abrahamic" — coming into use at the same time — indicated an extension of that promise to the Christians. At the same time, Judeo-Christian terminology began to be used to identify a tradition set apart from other "world" religious traditions like Hinduism, as well as from more secular outlooks. At the end of the nineteenth century, for example, the French novelist Anatole France had one of his characters contrast the world system of Laplace with "the old Judeo-Christian cosmogony." Altogether, "Judeo-Christian" usage in the 19th century was descriptive and analytical, less theologically loaded than "Abrahamic."

It was not until the middle decades of the 20th century that "Judeo-Christian" become a political term. In the 1930s, when anti-Semitism was on the rise on both sides of the Atlantic, Judeo-Christian language began to be used by interfaith organizations such as the National Conference of Christians and Jews to indicate a common religious cause. It served to signal opposition to pro-fascist America Firsters, who were increasingly using "Christian" as a signature term, giving their organizations names such asthe Christian American Crusade, the Christian Aryan Syndicate, and the Christian Mobilizers. During the war, Judeo-Christian rhetoric became more common. Indeed, ground zero of this means of affirming a shared religious basis for western values was the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York — the site of the large convocations of liberal academics and intellectuals held annually from 1940 by the Conference on Science, Religion and Philosophy in Their Relation to the American Way of Life, Inc. Organized by Lyman Bryson of Columbia Teachers College and JTS' Louis Finklestein, the Conference originated, in Carl Friedrich's words, "essentially as a rallying point for Judeo-Christian forces in America against the threat presented to them by the Axis ideology and actions." Such was the clash between the civilization of Western liberal democracy and Fascism.

After the war, "Judeo-Christian" gained widespread popularity, as pastors, politicians, and pundits seized on the term to mobilize the spiritual forces of America against "godless" communism — its second civilizational clash. As Daniel Poling, president of the Military Chaplains Association of the United States, asserted at the association's 1951 convention, "We meet at a time when the Judeo-Christian faith is challenged as never before in all the years since Abraham left Ur of the Chaldees." The following

year, in a speech before the Freedoms Foundation, President-elect Dwight D. Eisenhower famously declared, "Our form of government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, and I don't care what it is." Less famously, and in such a way as to make clear that he was speaking of the principle of democracy, he continued, "With us of course it is the Judeo-Christian concept but it must be a religion that all men are created equal." I have long thought that Eisenhower picked up the usage as president of Columbia University thanks to the influence of the Conference on Science, Religion and Philosophy.

Notwithstanding the inclusionary impulses behind it, and (as it were) the imprimatur of JTS, Judeo-Christian terminology provoked significant Jewish ambivalence. As early as 1943, a well-known publicist named Trude Weiss-Rosmarin called it "a totalitarian aberration" to tie Jewish-Christian goodwill to a shared religious identity. In 1970, the writer and publisher Arthur A. Cohen published *The Myth of the Judeo-Christian Tradition*, a collection of articles in which the Judeo-Christian tradition was denounced as the invention of German Protestant higher critics interested in promoting a "de-Judaizing of Christian theology" that "could not be more evident than in the pitiful inability of the Protestant (and to a slightly — but only slightly — lesser extent, Catholic) Church to oppose German National Socialism." That, of course, turned the history of the term's use upside down. Cohen's book nevertheless received a warm reception that signaled a general fatigue with the "Judeo-Christian tradition," which an enthusiastic reviewer for the liberal Catholic magazine *Commonweal* called "the catch-all of textbook writers, Western Civ. Lectures, Brotherhood Week toastmasters, and Jews and Christians who cannot think of anything else to speak of to one another when it comes to religious convictions." As America left its cold war consciousness behind, "Judeo-Christian" began to take on more negative connotations. In "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," a widely read article published in *Science* magazine in 1967, the medievalist Lynn White blamed "the Judeo-Christian dogma of creation" for instilling in Western society an ethic of exploitation of the natural world.*

The sense among progressives that "Judeo-Christian" had outlived its usefulness opened the door to using "Abrahamic" as a substitute, especially after 1979, when the Iranian Revolution thrust politicized Islam onto the world stage. For example, after the attacks of September 11, Roland Homet, an Episcopal layman and international lawyer, described attending an interfaith forum that came to the conclusion that coercing others to adopt our values "does not represent the best of

the Abrahamic tradition." "Abrahamic" was, however, much less frequently used to point to a common value system than to designate what Judaism, Christianity, and Islam themselves had (or did not have) in common. Thus, in 1990, *New York Times* religion columnist Peter Steinfels noted "the strong refusal of the Abrahamic faiths — Judaism, Christianity and Islam — to identify God with the world." In 2009, Barack Obama issued a proclamation noting that the "rituals of Hajj and Eid-ul-Adha both serve as reminders of the shared Abrahamic roots of three of the world's major religions."

In American society, Abrahamic language came into its own was through a range of conferences, interfaith "trialogues," academic centers, and books designed to enhance understanding among members of the three faiths in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In 1995, the Library of Congress created an "Abrahamic" subject heading that by the end of the century had accumulated three dozen titles. The best seller of the genre has been *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of the Three Faiths*, by Bruce Feiler, a popular writer on various religious and life-style subjects. On the strength of the book's success, Feiler set about organizing public forums called "Abraham summits" and small group meetings called "Abraham salons" — interfaith gatherings for "The Descendants of Abraham" that were intended to "trace us back to Abraham and the love of one God." Meanwhile, on the academic front, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theologians and religious thinkers came together, in conferences and between hard covers, to identify similarities and points of contact among the three faiths. Historians of religion undertook comparative studies of their intellectual and cultural relationships — scholarly efforts that were connected to a commitment to interfaith understanding.

Meanwhile, as progressives were turning in an Abrahamic direction, Judeo-Christian terminology was being adopted enthusiastically by the Christian right, which burst onto the American scene at the end of the 1970s. In his best-selling 1980 manifesto, *Listen America!*, Jerry Falwell, Sr. praised the refusal of the state of Alabama to participate "in any conference that did not establish traditional Judeo-Christian values concerning the family." I suspect that Falwell used "Judeo-Christian" rather than "Christian" for the same reason that he called his organization the Moral Majority: to make the case that his was not a sectarian movement intended to undermine church-state separation but rather an exercise in civilizational protection, comparable to the struggles against fascism and communism. The enemy now was secularism, or secular humanism, embodied in the Equal Rights Amendment, the

gay rights movement, legalized abortion, the banning of state-sponsored prayer from the public schools, and so on. "Judeo-Christian values" became, and remains, the shibboleth of the conservative side of that clash of civilization we call the culture war.

This shift in usage made its presence felt in Supreme Court jurisprudence in 1986, when the state of Georgia petitioned the Court in *Bowers v. Hardwick* to permit it to uphold its anti-sodomy law on the grounds that "traditional Judeo-Christian [sic] values proscribe such conduct" — a point that was picked up by Chief Justice Burger, who wrote in his concurrence: "Condemnation of those practices is firmly rooted in Judeao-Christian [sic] moral and ethical standards."Writing for the minority, Justice Blackmun rejected this argument as religious special pleading:

> That certain, but by no means all, religious groups condemn the behavior at issue gives the State no license to impose their judgments on the entire citizenry. The legitimacy of secular legislation depends instead on whether the State can advance some justification for its law beyond its conformity to religious doctrine." **

So much for "Judeo-Christian" as code for the value system shared by all Americans.

No doubt, the religious right has largely been an evangelical Protestant enterprise, construing "Judeo-Christian values" according to its own social policy preferences. No doubt, "Judeo-Christian" has sometimes become, in the hands of some evangelical leaders, hegemonic and exclusionary in the way Jewish critics of the term have long alleged. One case in point is the reaction of Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council, to the DAR's decision 11 years ago to remove references to Jesus in its prayers in deference to differences in its members' religious beliefs. In his "Washington Update" radio show, Perkins declared:

> For the organization, which was established in 1890, this signals a dramatic change in the strong Judeo-Christian roots of the DAR. After all, this is a service group meant to perpetuate the memory of the American Revolution and the values for which we fought. Like it or not, those values and our nation's identity were rooted in the Christian tradition. And while society may have changed over the years, the intentions of our founders — to build a godly nation — has not.

Yet I would caution against thinking that Judeo-Christian language on the religious right has nothing to do with Jews and Judaism. The movement has from the beginning steered clear of anti-Semitism and enthusiastically supported the State of Israel. To that extent at least, it cannot be accused of using "Judeo-" as merely a fig leaf for a Christianist agenda.

However the use of Judeo-Christian language by the religious right vis-à-vis the Jews is parsed, far more consequential has been its deployment vis-à-vis Islam in the wake of the attacks of 9/11. Back in 2002, Franklin Graham remarked on Religion & Ethics Newsweekly, "The God of Islam is not the same God of the Christian or the Judeo-Christian faith. It is a different God, and I believe a very evil and a very wicked religion."After the midterm elections of 2006, Rep. Virgil Goode, a Virginia Republican, achieved some notoriety by publicly criticizing the decision of the first Muslim elected to Congress to take his oath of office by placing his hand on a Qu'ran — a position he justified in an op-ed titled "Save Judeo-Christian Values."

Moving forward, in 2014 the irrepressible Tony Perkins said on his Washington Report, "We are a nation that was founded on Judeo-Christian principles, that's the foundation of our nation, not Islam, but the Judeo-Christian God." In 2016, retired Air Force Colonel Tom Snodgrass, a contributor to a website called Right Side News, referred to "the overt and covert war being conducted by the political forces of Islam in order to subjugate the Judeo-Christian religions and their societies."Such examples could easily be multiplied. I'd just make two points. First, there is in such language the setting up of a clash of civilizations between the Judeo-Christian on one side and the Muslim on the other — a clash that, unsurprisingly, is mirrored in the ideology of al-Qaeda and other radical Islamist groups. And second, in service of that end, the Christian right has been at pains to declare that Muslims do not have the same God as Judeo-Christians. This is a complicated subject that I do not propose to get into in the time I have left, except to note that for conservative evangelicals it was anything but innocuous for Larycia Hawkins, a tenured political science professor at Wheaton College, to have posted on Facebook that Christians and Muslims worship the same God. So far as the rhetoric of the religious right is concerned, the Judeo-Christian stands in direct opposition to the Abrahamic. Just as "Christian" had served as a fascist cue for hostility to Jews in the 1930s, so has "Judeo-Christian" become an emblem of evangelical hostility to Muslims in the post-cold war era.

Let me turn, finally, to the latest twist in Judeo-Christian civilizational conflict; namely, Bannonism. Steve Bannon has for some time been an evangelist for "the Judeo-Christian West," in his conception of a value system as well as a place. Here's how he described it in a talk he Skyped into a meeting of the conservative Catholic Human Dignity Institute held at the Vatican in the summer of 2014.

> So I think the discussion of, should we put a cap on wealth creation and distribution? It's something that should be at the heart of every Christian that is a capitalist — "What is the purpose of whatever I'm doing with this wealth? What is the purpose of what I'm doing with the ability that God has given us, that divine providence has given us to actually be a creator of jobs and a creator of wealth?"
>
> I think it really behooves all of us to really take a hard look and make sure that we are reinvesting that back into positive things. But also to make sure that we understand that we're at the very beginning stages of a global conflict, and if we do not bind together as partners with others in other countries that this conflict is only going to metastasize.

Notice that there's no evidence of support for either government regulation of wealth or the kind of private charity customarily advocated by religious conservatives. The "positive things" capitalists should be "reinvesting" in, we know from Bannon's other work, is investment in economic activity at home.

Such "enlightened Capitalism" — investment presumably undertaken voluntarily against pure bottom-line calculation — he believes to be the result of Judeo-Christian values that have been under assault in the West for several decades. Not that we, America, can go it alone. National "partners" are needed. The Judeo-Christian West is threatened from the inside by global elites and from the outside by "Islamic Fascism" and, even more, by Chinese-dominated East Asia. Taken down to essentials, this vision consists of economic nationalism joined to a simplified version of Huntington's conception of the "clash of civilizations." As Bannon told *The Economist* shortly after leaving the White House in 2017, "I want the world to look back in 100 years and say, their mercantilist, Confucian system lost. The Judeo-Christian liberal West won." Over the past year, Bannon has been stumping around Europe to advance a nationalist anti-migrant agenda, thus far with mixed results — better in Hungary and Italy than in Poland and France. To train an intellectual cadre,

he is setting up an Academy for the Judeo-Christian West in a former monastery outside of Rome. The potential role of Bannonism in the emergence of a transnational rightist ideology needs to be taken seriously. ***

During the 1930s, "Judeo-Christian" came into American public discourse as a way of opposing Fascist anti-Semitism. After World War II, it became the watchword of an America standing for human freedoms against communism. With the rise of the religious right, it was transformed into a synonym for traditional sexual mores and, later, into a shibboleth for Islamophobia. In Bannonism, it has been made into the underpinnings of populist economic nationalism — of neo-fascism in our time. In the hands of its protagonist, it has become the watchword for what it was pressed into service to attack. This is not a happy evolution.

* *Perhaps not coincidently, White's blaming of the Judeo-Christian harked back to Aldo Leopold's blaming of the Abrahamic in the forward of his environmentalist classic,* A Sand County Almanac*(1948): "Conservation is getting nowhere because it is incompatible with our Abrahamic concept of land. We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us." Leopold (2013: 4).*

** *In* Imagining Judeo-Christian America*,an important study coming out this year from University of Chicago Press,Healan Gaston differentiates between Judeo-Christian pluralism and Judeo-Christian exceptionalism. In his* Bowers*concurrence, Burger embraces the exceptionalist position of the new religious right. Seven years later, in Lawrence v. Texas, Justice Kennedy considered the Judeo-Christian "standards" referred to by Burger as having been effectively superseded: "As with Justice White's assumptions about history, scholarship casts some doubt on the sweeping nature of the statement by Chief Justice Burger as it pertains to private homosexual conduct between consenting adults. See, e.g.,Eskridge, Hardwick and Historiography, 1999 U. Ill. L. Rev. 631, 656. In all events we think that our laws and traditions in the past half century are of most relevance here."*

*** *See Mark Lilla,* "*Two Roads for the French Right*," New York Review of Books *(December 20, 2018).*

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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