

THE MYTH OF A MONOCHROME “WESTERN” CIVILIZATION

Trump and Bannon’s Version is Perverse and Reactionary

If Western civilization is defined by religion and culture, then Mexico—with its Catholic heritage and historic ties to European monarchies—is unquestionably an outpost of “the West.” But for Trump and his advisers, it too is a threat to the Western order.

—Jamelle Bouie, *Slate* (7/7/17)

From this perspective, the ideal allies are not liberals who prize tolerance, diversity, and an open society, but rather hard-core, blood-and-soil nationalists who like walls, borders, strong leaders, and the promotion of narrow cultural values.

—Stephen Walt, Harvard University Professor

For more on Trump’s Right-Wing European Allies
see www.NickGier.com/TrumpEuropeAllies.pdf

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When I traveled to India for the first time, I found it initially puzzling that the newspapers called the Middle East “Western” Asia. Distinguishing cultures by the cardinal directions is obviously arbitrary and confusing. To avoid these confusions, I now tell people that I teach Euro-American and Asian philosophy and religion.

Over 50 years of study, I have found more similarities than differences. For example, I have demonstrated that Aristotle, Confucius, and the Buddha shared a common moral philosophy based in the cardinal virtues. As I will show below, early Buddhist and Muslim governments were proto-democratic, so one could argue for a World Civilization based on common values.

Before I leave Asia, I can’t help but share one of Gandhi’s rare jokes. When he was asked what he thought of Western Civilization, his response was: “I think it would be a good idea.” Significantly ironic is the fact that Gandhi’s first in-depth knowledge of Hinduism and Buddhism came from English theosophists in London.

Not Just Judeo-Christian, but an Abrahamic Religious Tradition

If one takes Istanbul as the traditional dividing line between the East and the West, then the so-called “Western” religions are Eastern/Asian faiths. Moving West with Greek texts in Arabic translation, Muslims lived in Spain for 500 years, and their scholars had a profound influence on Judeo-Christianity and “Western” culture in general.

St. Thomas Aquinas, the most respected Catholic theologian, was indebted to a Spanish Arabic philosopher named Averroes. While Medieval Christians lived in a cultural Dark Age, Muslim scholars preserved Greek culture (Averroes read the Greek philosophers) and made contributions of their own in science, especially math and astronomy.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have a common father in Abraham, so one could argue that we have an Abrahamic, not just a Judeo-Christian, religious culture. Adding the secular democratic contribution of Ancient Greece, one could say that today we live in a Greco-Judeo-Christian-Islamic civilization.

In the US Supreme Court there are statues of ancient law-givers, and one each of Mohammed and Confucius stands with those of Moses and Solomon. Muslims have lived in the US even before Independence, and Islam, along with Judaism and Hinduism, was recognized as a faith that should be respected.

Ben Franklin once declared that “if the Mufti of Constantinople were to send a missionary to preach Mahometanism to us, he would find a pulpit at his service.” In 1780 representatives of the people of Massachusetts made sure that their constitution gave “the most ample liberty of conscience to Deists, Muslims, Jews, and Christians.” Hindus were sometimes included in the list, so early America was welcoming place for all religions and cultures.

Jefferson, Clinton, Bush, and Obama Celebrate Eid; Trump Passes

Thomas Jefferson undertook a serious study of the Qu’ran, and he may have been taken legal inspiration from it. There was an annual slaughter of lambs at Monticello, so Jefferson was allowing his Muslim slaves to celebrate Eid. In 1805 Jefferson hosted an Iftar dinner at the White House to break the Ramadan fast.

Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama resurrected the White House Eid celebration, but the current occupant skipped the occasion this year. He was obviously too busy trying to enforce his unconstitutional Muslim ban.

Ancient Democrats and Republicans

The original Buddhist Sangha was an egalitarian, proto-democratic institution. The monks made their own decisions by reasoned discourse without any appeal to religious authority. B. R. Ambedkar, author of the Indian Constitution, described groups of monks as “parliaments,” and declared that the Buddha was a “torch-bearer of democracy and an ardent exponent of liberty, equality, and fraternity.” These Buddhists joined our Protestant Congregationalists in practicing democratic self-government.

Buddhism first thrived in Northeast India among republican city states, which one Sutra described as holding “regular assemblies” where they carried on “their business in harmony.” The pacifying force of countries that hold deliberative assemblies has been demonstrated by the fact that no liberal democracy has ever gone to war with any of its peers.

Early Muslim government was based on elections, broad deliberation (including women), and the protection of religious minorities. Islamic hereditary caliphs ruled non-

democratically for centuries just as did Christian kings. The French and American Revolutions heralded the overthrow theocratic conservatism and gradually most countries returned to ancient democratic roots.

Muslims and Arab Christians Succeed in America

Even after the attempted genocide by Christian Serbs in the early 1990s, Muslims continue to thrive in their 663-year residency in Southeastern Europe. Trump wants immigrants to share our values, and Bosnian Muslims, fleeing their Serbian oppressors, have met his challenge by becoming some of the most successful people in St. Louis. Now 50,000 strong, they have restored an abandoned part of the city. American Muslims tend to be more skilled and more educated than their native counterparts, and they have lower crime and unemployment rates.

Contrary to popular belief, 63 percent of Arabs living in the US, with roots in this country going back over a century, are Christians. Steve Jobs, Ralph Nader, Gen. John Abizaid, and former Senator George Mitchell are all from Christian Arab families. According to the Prejudice Institute: “Fewer than 11% of Arab Americans live below the poverty level [national rate is now 16%]. On average, the Arab American income is 22% higher than the US national average.”

Trump’s Perverse and Reactionary View of Western Civilization

In his recent speech in Poland Trump talked about threats from the “South” and the “East,” the former presumably Mexicans of “Western” European heritage and the latter “Middle Eastern” Muslims. He praises these “Eastern European” Catholics, who are taking on an authoritarianism like Putin’s Russia to the East (certainly more of a threat than any number of Islamic militants), but he condemns more democratic Catholics south of our border.

Hispanic Americans were thriving in the Southwest before most Northern Europeans came to our country. Jamelle Bouie of *Slate* (7/7/17) puts the point this way: “If Western civilization is defined by religion and culture, then Mexico—with its Catholic heritage and historic ties to European monarchies—is unquestionably an outpost of ‘the West.’ But for Trump and his advisers, it too is a threat to the Western order.”

Steve Bannon—amateur intellectual, Alt-Right founder, and Trump’s right-hand man—may be correct in claiming that Middle Eastern refugees are “not Jeffersonian democrats” (with his denial of church-state separation neither is he), but he may want to arrange a meeting with the Bosnian Americans mentioned above. (He should be pleased, however, the fact at least one Iraqi, Haider Bahar of Columbus, Ohio, who became a citizen just before the election, voted for Trump.) Bannon is simply ignorant and bigoted when he said that Mexicans with European heritage “are not people with thousands of years of democracy in their DNA.”

The Perverse Preference for Anglo-Saxon Culture

Some who clamor for a return to Western Civilization define it narrowly as “Anglo-Saxon” culture. Former Congressman Tom Tancredo, a second-generation Italian-American, once declared that “people who are not white Anglo-Saxon have become American by adopting a white Anglo-Saxon culture.” This is really odd: all the Italian Americans I know celebrate their Southern European heritage and their cuisine is one of the most popular in America.

In his book *Suicide of a Superpower*, conservative Pat Buchanan predicts that “historians will look back in stupefaction at 20th and 21st century Americans who believed the magnificent republic they inherited would be enriched by bringing in scores of millions from the failed states of the Third World.” Buchanan should join Bannon in meeting with St. Louis’ Bosnian Muslims and the Arabs of Dearborn, Michigan.

Due primarily to Anglo-Saxon oppression and a belief that the Irish were not full human beings, Ireland was once a failed “Third World” state. But no one would now say that Irish Americans such as Buchanan himself, especially after building the transcontinental railroads along with their despised Chinese co-workers, are not welcome in this nation. Today Ireland is being promoted as the “Celtic Tiger,” a European economy growing almost as fast as Social Democratic Sweden.

Confucian Influence in the UN Declaration of Human Rights

One may be forgiven in thinking that the UN Declaration of Human Rights is primarily a Western liberal democratic document. However, one of the most influential members of the drafting committee was P. C. Chang, representing the Republic of China.

A highly respected intellectual in international circles, Chang’s influence is seen in all 30 articles, but it was especially clear in Articles 18 and 29. With regard to the former, Chang convinced the delegates to vote against the Saudi representative who objected to the right to change one’s religion. He insisted that the UN must “ensure the inviolability of that profound part of thought and conscience.”

Change also convinced the delegates to balance individual rights with duties to the community in the final wording of Article 29. Chang argued that only by putting aside “selfish gains” and devoting themselves to their communities could humans “increase their moral stature. This is a fundamental principle of Confucian ethics.

Trump and His Allies Undermine the Right to Asylum

Article 14 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights states: “Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.” In 1951 the UN Convention on the Status of Refugees clarified their rights in great detail. Article 3 prohibits discrimination based on “race, religion or country of origin.”

Article 31 holds that signatories such as the US are legally bound to accept refugees even if they come to another country illegally. They are required to report to authorities to explain the exigencies surrounding their entry. The Trump administration is violating this UN Convention, just as Bush 43 did the Convention on Torture.

Trump and His Allies: The Real Threat to “Western” Civilization

During the Cold War the “West” was defined as the world’s liberal democracies, which stood firmly against Soviet and Chinese totalitarianism. The principal military alliance in this conflict was NATO, which Trump once called “obsolete,” and he only recently affirmed Article 5, which calls for unified action if any NATO country is threatened. The other bulwark against the

Soviet (now Russian) threat was the European Union, which Trump and his allies have denigrated.

In his speech in Poland, Trump asked: “Do we have the desire and the courage to preserve our civilization in the face of those who would subvert and destroy it?” After presenting this challenge, Trump and Polish President Andrzej Duda criticized press coverage of their respective administrations and condemned “fake news,” a corrosive tactic that threatens the foundations of liberal democracies everywhere. In addition to reporters, this shameless duo has also criticized judges who rule against their attacks on basic rights and freedoms.

Harvard professor Stephen Walt states that Trump’s “allies are not liberals who prize tolerance, diversity, and an open society, but rather hard-core, blood-and-soil nationalists who like walls, borders, strong leaders, and the promotion of narrow cultural values.”

Trump’s and his allies—the French Marine Le Pen, the Dutch Geert Wilders, the Austrian Norbert Hofer, the British Nigel Farage, and the Hungarian Viktor Orban—are the real threats to the Free World.

Against these forces, we must defend the universal values of freedom of religion, freedom of the press, freedom of movement across borders, freedom of trade, and freedom to form multi-lateral agreements that support the interests of every participating government.

I predict that Trump will fail in getting “better deals” on side, and he will isolate the US from the true torch bearers of World Civilization.

Nick Gier taught religion and philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years. Read all his columns on the 2016 election at www.NickGier.com/Election2016.pdf.