

BOOK REVIEW

Imagining Judeo-Christian America. Religion, secularism, and the redefinition of democracy, by K. Healan Gaston, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 2019, x+349 pp., index, \$35 (paperback), ISBN-13 978-0-226-66385-2

This book is a valuable contribution to our understanding of the religious roots of democracy in the United States of America. The author is a historian of American religious history and ethics at Harvard Divinity School. She takes the reader through the historical development of “Judeo-Christian” ideology and locates it in the political and social development of the country from the early twentieth century, concentrating on its relationship with democracy. The book is exhaustively researched, drawing on various, mainly historical, sources. It would be of interest to those who regard the United States today as an interesting example of democratic failure. It is often averred that the presidency of Donald Trump is both a consequence and proximate cause of the country’s political polarization, underpinning many perceptions of democratic failure.

Gaston explains the historical roots of today’s political polarization and explains that “Judeo-Christian” ideology is centrally linked to white supremacy. It was an ideologically derived position, seeking to justify white domination in relation both to the slavery of millions of African-Americans until ended by the civil war in the 1860s, which was followed by increasing racial and religious diversity, especially during the twentieth century. The term “Judeo-Christian” derives from a claim that America’s democratic foundations are the result of an eliding of beliefs from Judaism and Christianity to produce a characteristically American political culture and democracy (Chapter 1).

Early chapters comprise a historical summary of how the ideology of “Judeo-Christianity” developed in America in the twentieth century, linked to white supremacy. The chapters are chronologically structured and illustrate that “Judeo-Christian” beliefs have not remained static but have responded to both internal and external developments. They are characterized by both plasticity and change over time. Chapters are divided into three sections: “The Genesis of America’s Judeo-Christian Discourse” (Chapters 1–3), “Secularism and the Redefinition of Democracy” (Chapters 4–6), and “From Tri-faith to Multireligious America” (Chapters 7–9). Many readers of Democratization may find the most rewarding chapters to be Chapters 8 and 9. Chapter 8, “Judeo-Christian Values under Fire: New Patterns of Pluralism, 1965–1976,” traces the problematic relationship between “Judeo-Christian” ideology and America’s growing racial, ethnic, cultural and religious diversity from the mid-1960s. In 1965, the Hart-Celler Act liberalized the USA’s immigration policy, enabling millions of immigrants to the USA from Asia, Africa, the Middle East and elsewhere to make their homes in the country. The time of the passing of the Hart-Celler Act, Gaston explains, was also when African-Americans received both the right to vote and, more generally, greater social and political equality than ever before. Chapter 9 is entitled: “Multireligious Possibilities: JudeoChristian Discourse in a Multicultural Age.” It focuses on “Judeo-Christian” political understandings during the presidencies of Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Donald Trump.

Believers in “Judeo-Christian” ideology, who are especially prevalent among traditionally dominant, white Protestant males, found America’s social, cultural and political changes from the mid-1960s, highly problematic. For such people, the USA was “flooded” by people with alien habits, cultures, beliefs and attitudes. What did they make of these twin developments? To put it mildly, as Gaston explains, they did not like it. While they did not necessarily use this terminology, many among them would have believed that to keep America true to the values of the “founding fathers” – overwhelmingly white, Christian, financially well-off, males, many of whom owned often impressive numbers of African-American slaves – it was necessary to ensure that white supremacy endured, enabling such people to dominate politically, economically and socially. Gaston explains that “Judeo-Christian” ideology, as it developed in the twentieth century in America, was geared to ensure the perpetuation of white domination. Only white American men, were believed “obviously” to have the appropriate cultural and religious components to be democrats. Thus, democracy in America developed in conformity with the ideas of white supremacy, privileging the values of some Americans but not others.

Chapter 9 brings the story up to date, culminating with the Trump presidency. Gaston shows that after a few years when “Judeo-Christian” ideology was not at the forefront, the Trump presidency brought it back to centre stage. Gaston explains that Trump’s presidency underlines that “Judeo-Christian” is a term defined by exclusion, implying rejection both of secular values and those of different faiths, including Islam. It implicitly states that America’s values are not the values of the Enlightenment or the Constitution, but instead that “our” values are those of the Bible. Many white conservative Christians use the term to put a patina of universality on a certain Christian culture in the United States. Now, as Gaston asserts, the term basically means the Christian Right. Steve Bannon, Donald Trump’s former chief strategist of, helped to repopularize the term “Judeo-Christian.” Bannon’s political beliefs seem to boil down to a strong belief in three essential, interactive qualities: “Judeo-Christianity,” plus capitalism and nationalism. Gaston does not claim that Bannon’s views are representative of America’s political class more generally, although it may well be that Trump shares them (268, 273). During the 2016 presidential campaign, several presidential contenders, from different points on the ideological spectrum, referred explicitly to “JudeoChristian values” in America, and the need to defend them to ensure America’s religious freedom and political culture (266–274).

In conclusion, this is an interesting book which demonstrates how a political ideology can be used in defence of a particular class or section of society. Judeo-Christian ideology is used in America by many defenders of the status quo, in relation to the acceptability of US democratic arrangements. Gaston’s book should be read by anyone with an interest in the ideological roots of democracy in America.

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