

GLOBAL

Steve Bannon's Would-Be Coalition of Christian Traditionalists

From American evangelicals to Russian Orthodox, they're united against Islam. Is that enough to overcome all that divides them?

By Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins and Brittany Pheiffer Noble



Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Kirill conducts a service at a Russian Orthodox church. (Arnd Wiegmann / Reuters)

MARCH 23, 2017

SHARE ▼

“If we do not bind together as partners with others in other countries then this conflict is only going to metastasize,” said Steve Bannon in 2014. He was referring to a conflict he perceived between “Judeo-Christian values” and “Islamic fascism.” Speaking to a conference held at the Vatican, he seemed to call for Christian traditionalists of all stripes to join together in a coalition for the sake of waging a holy war against Islam.

The rhetoric of a looming civilizational war has proved persistent. Recent years have seen religious leaders from both the American Christian community and the Russian Orthodox community coming together to bemoan the decline of traditional values. One example is the 2015 Moscow meeting between Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, and Franklin Graham, son of the evangelist Billy Graham. The Patriarch lamented to Graham how, after decades of inspiring underground believers in the Soviet Union with its defense of religious freedom, the West has abandoned the shared “common Christian moral values” that are the bedrock of a universal “Christian civilization.”

But even as Bannon and various religious leaders seek to pit the values of Christianity against those of Islam, there is also an internal competition to decide who gets to define Christian traditionalism. Two of the main players in this competition, American Christian traditionalists—including conservative Catholics like Bannon as well as evangelicals like Franklin Graham—and Russian Orthodox, are united in their desire to save Christendom from the perceived threat of radical Islam. But buried underneath that superficial agreement is a complex disagreement as to what Christendom even means.

In Bannon’s telling, the greatest mistake the baby boomers made was to reject

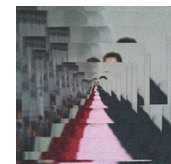
RECOMMENDED READING



The Alt-Right's Intense
Darling Hated Christianity
ANNA MOMIGLIANO



How Asia Became a
Hot Spot
TIMOTHY MCLAUGHLIN



America's Lie
YASMEEN SERHAN

the traditional “Judeo-Christian” values of their parents. He considers this a historical crime, because in his telling it was Judeo-Christian values that enabled Western Europe and the United States to defeat European fascism, and, subsequently, to create an “enlightened capitalism” that made America great for decades after World War II. The enormous amount of media attention he has received and his various interviews, talks, and documentaries strongly suggest that he believes the world is on the verge of disaster—and that without Judeo-Christianity, the American culture war cannot be won, enlightened capitalism cannot function, and “Islamic fascism” cannot be defeated.

This is where Bannon invokes the “Russian traditionalism” of Vladimir Putin, and it’s important to recognize why he does so. In his 2014 Vatican talk, Bannon made it clear that Putin is “playing very strongly to U.S. social conservatives about his message about more traditional values.” As a recent *Atlantic* essay convincingly argues, upon his return to office in 2012, Putin realized that “large patches of the West despised feminism and the gay-rights movement.” Seizing the opportunity, he transformed himself into the “New World Leader of Conservatism” whose traditionalism would offer an alternative to the libertine West that had long shunned him.

Yet Bannon suggested that Putin is not really interested in conservatism but in changing Western perceptions of Russia, and for one main purpose: “At the end of the day, I think that Putin and his cronies are really a kleptocracy, that are really an imperialist power that want to expand.” Putin, according to Bannon, must be viewed with a great deal of suspicion. Bannon seems to think that conservative groups in the United States, like those associated with the anti-gay World Congress of Families, are being hoodwinked by Putin on these very grounds.

In addition to his suspicions about Putin himself, Bannon also highlights differences between Judeo-Christian traditionalism and the thinking of Alexander Dugin, who he (hyperbolically) credits as being the intellectual

mastermind of the traditionalist movement in Russia. In contrast to mainline American social conservatives, Dugin sees the anti-globalism and anti-Americanism of certain expressions of Islam as having much in common with his own distinctive brand of traditionalism. In fact, Dugin views conservative American evangelicalism as an aberration from historical Christianity, and a cipher for neoliberal capitalism.

In contrast to Bannon's realpolitik, Sergei Lavrov, the Russian minister of foreign affairs, has called for a greater long-term cooperation with the West—for a “partnership of civilizations” to combat modern geopolitical problems, especially ISIS. In his words, “We believe that universal human solidarity must have a moral basis resting on traditional values which are essentially common for all of the world's leading religions. I would like to draw your attention to the joint statement made by Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia and Pope Francis, in which they reiterated their support for the family as a natural center of life for individuals and society.” The same values that motivate Russia's foreign policy (especially its role in the Middle East) are, to Lavrov, the bedrock of the Christian civilization represented by the Patriarch and the pope.

Meanwhile, the major moral actor in Russia—the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC)—has worked hard to influence “pro-family” legislation in the state. Family values are more than just principles in Russia; they're also a cornerstone of efforts to repopulate a nation after the collapse of the Soviet Union led to plummeting birthrates and soaring emigration. The government enacted a variety of social plans to counter its demographic freefall, and in 2016 Russia boasted a 1.8 percent fertility rate, higher than all but a few countries in the EU. While the government's project to grow its population



Popular

Latest

The Atlantic

Sign In

Subscribe

nuclear family and, in turn, of society—a symptom of a problem of Western decadence. Russia as a nation has adopted the Orthodox Church's challenge to Western progressivism, and the message is resonating with American

conservatives like Franklin Graham.

Here is where the ROC and ultra-conservative Russians have found allies in the West, and in particular among evangelicals: In a global fight for traditional families, it falls to them to promote heterosexual marriage, childbearing, and adoption as part of an overarching defense of “civilization.” Masha Gessen recently wrote about how the World Council of Families has found an eager audience in the post-Soviet world (namely Russia and the Republic of Georgia), where wealthy conservatives have joined forces to promote the traditional family and to slow or repeal pro-LGBT legislation. The scholar Kristina Stoeckl has charted how the ROC has become involved in issues of religious freedom in the EU. These Russian-led efforts, Stoeckl noted, are not unlike other international groups promoting a clear set of values and trying to enact corresponding legislation; the difference here is that we’re seeing an emergence of Christian traditionalist, rather than progressive, global coalitions.

If American evangelicals and Russian Orthodox join forces, will they overcome the reality that each of their creeds sees the other as heretical?

Yet the movements part ways on fundamental values elsewhere. There are American voters who have tied moral convictions to economic freedom in their battle to not sell to gay patrons or pay taxes for women’s contraceptives. Whereas previously many conservatives focused on disputing the legal

legitimacy of progressive policies, some conservatives have switched to opposing these policies under the banner of religious freedom.

Russian conservatives, led by the Orthodox Church, frame their need for moral conservatism and family values as a different type of freedom. Russian moral leaders insist that theirs is a freedom of association, the freedom to adhere to tradition rather than to the “totalitarian freedom” of the capitalist, pluralist West. In the words of Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev, the West offers “freedom from moral principles, from common human values, from responsibility for one’s actions. We see how this freedom is destructive and aggressive. Instead of respect for the feelings of other people, it preaches an all-is-permitted attitude.”

Alfeyev has framed this battle as one to be fought by an alliance of conservative Christians, ones who can no longer count on their liberal co-religionists to stand on the right side of history. Theirs is a battle for the very heart of Western civilization. And when it comes to social values, the ROC now has the state on its side.

Can America say the same? Bannon represents his own brand of conservative Catholicism in the White House, but can American evangelicals count on Donald Trump to represent their concerns or do they need to look beyond the state for institutions of moral traditionalism? And if American evangelicals and conservative Russian Orthodox believers join forces, will they be able to overcome the reality that each of their creeds sees the other as heretical?

The possibility of a new global resistance to the values that have become stays of the mainstream progressive West raises the question of who will lead this resistance. While there are obvious connections between Trump and Bannon, Bannon and Dugin, American evangelicals and Russian Orthodox, there is no clear social, political or ideological framework tying them all together. And the gap between conservative and extreme right seems to be rapidly widening. Many devout young evangelicals don’t recognize fringe conservative groups as

part of their tribe, and the anti-Islam and anti-immigration concerns of far-right groups do not resonate with mainstream evangelicals who are more concerned with family values and “biblical” principles guiding legislation.

If a charismatic and morally inspiring leader were to emerge, that might change. Interestingly, one person who could fill this role, Pope Francis, is an outspoken critic of the turn to nationalism and anti-Islam sentiment. Alfeyev has the most robust message of defending traditional Christian values, but American evangelicals may be slow to embrace a man in a cassock whose superiors live in Moscow. In a void that prelates and preachers struggle to fill, Trump will continue to be the face of a new traditionalism.
