

Situational Criticism of William P. Barr's *Judeo-Christian Tradition vs. Secularism*

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To quote the unforgettable line from Bob Dylan: “The times, they are a-changin’.” And ever since the moral revolution of the 1960’s, the effects of these changes have been analyzed. This scrutiny takes varied forms depending on whether it is done by conservatives or liberals, by religious believers or secularists. One such conservative to impart his opinion on the matter was former Attorney General of the United States, William P. Barr. On October 6<sup>th</sup>, 1992, Barr delivered an after-dinner speech at a conference in Washington, D.C. held by the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights and the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars (Associated Press, 1992). In his speech, Barr presented and defended his case that Judeo-Christian values and religious public morality are essential for successful public government.

The concept of morality, where it comes from, and how to approach it not only spans but transcends the disciplines of philosophy, political science, psychology, business, and scientific research. Our moral values cause us to accept or condemn ourselves and others in our own homes, personal relationships, workplaces, and society at large. There is no aspect of life that is not colored by what we value and which moral philosophy we employ. This is why, when William Barr’s conclusion on how all Americans ought to live their lives was so jarringly and unsettlingly wrong, his speech begged to be examined. The claims of this man who has falsely blamed secularism for a moral decline in our country must be scrutinized and investigated just as he has investigated the actions of his fellow citizens from the lens of his own worldview.

In the twenty-six years since this speech was delivered, most reporters have focused on Barr’s mention of a male celebrity’s affair with a young girl as a pinnacle of America’s morality spinning out of control. Comparisons have been made between this speech and one by Vice President Dan Quayle condemning the television character Murphy Brown for being a bad role model by being a single mother. (Johnston, 1992). Presumably, these examples have basked in

the rhetorical spotlight due to their nativity in the entertainment industry. Barr's speech is less likely to engross those familiar with only the atmosphere of pop culture and not the philosophy of morality and its relation to culture, or religion's role in government. The overall matter addressed in Barr's speech, however, has become all the more pressing as the speech has aged and the moral zeitgeist in America has cumulatively evolved.

In order to accurately analyze the objective success of Barr's speech, one must hold it to a measurable standard. Within the field of rhetorical criticism, there are many approaches that a critic can take when studying the spoken word. As Barr's speech was an attempt to propose a solution to a perceived problem, it will be most effectively evaluated through the lens of situational criticism. This method is utilized when the critic examines the rhetorical situation in which a speech takes place and judges whether the speech was an appropriate and productive response to the identified situation (Graham, 1985). In the present essay, I seek to answer the question, "Was William Barr's speech, *Judeo-Christian Tradition vs. Secularism*, a necessary and fitting response to the changing moral and cultural situation in the United States in 1992?" Indeed, Christianity's stronghold on our secular nation should be considered at length, especially in light of the views of those such as Barr, who in his speech played a role, albeit a small one, in propagating its overwhelming influence.

In the case of Barr's scrutiny of modern morals which took place twenty-six years ago, it is also worthwhile to research what, if any, influence Barr had on the moral scene overall. The way that culture has continued to evolve and change with an increasingly postmodern attitude, as well as the ongoing tug-o-war between conservatives and progressives, is evidence that Barr's speech is but one shout in America's cacophony of dissenting voices.

At the time that this speech was delivered, most Americans would have likely agreed with Barr's claims, considering that 84 percent of citizens identified as either Christian or Jewish in a poll on religious composition of the nation (Religion, 1944-2018). However, this percentage increases when one hones in on Barr's immediate audience on the night of the speech. Because the address was delivered to the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights and the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars (Associated Press, 1992), the audience was presumably of a Catholic majority. The Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights holds very strongly to their conservative values, most saliently opposing abortion and all forms of secularization and apostasy (Donohue, 2016). Dining and listening alongside their doctrinal brethren was the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars. The Scholars are less offensive than the League, with a mission statement focused on boosting up the kingdom of God rather than concerning themselves with the personal decisions and lifestyles of others (Fellowship of Catholic Scholars, n.d.).

Of the two groups, the Catholic League was responsible for selecting the night's speakers, as the organization hosted the event. In addition to Barr, Henry Hyde and William Ball had been selected to speak that evening. Hyde also opposed abortion, and he served on the House of Representatives. William Ball was himself an active member of the Catholic League, devoting his life to "[defending] religious doctrine and practice against secular encroachment" (Saxon, 1999, para. 1). The choices of these three likeminded speakers is not only appropriate but predictable, given the audience and their demonstrated tendency to gravitate towards the traditional, persuasive style of rhetoric rather than invitational. In their case, the speaker can be biased and closed-minded as long as the listeners are likely to agree with his opinions.

William Barr's practice of defending "religious freedom" in public government results from his experience in law and government as well as in the religious community. Barr is a

Roman Catholic who has devoted his life primarily to government work. He earned his bachelor's degree in government from Columbia, and he went on to pursue a master's degree in Chinese studies—in his free time, Barr enjoys learning about China as well as playing the bagpipes—before continuing his education at George Washington University. Here, he earned a Juris Doctor degree via evening classes while working for the Central Intelligence Agency during the day (Virginia, n.d.). Building his professional career, Barr worked as a court clerk under Judge Malcolm Wilkey before serving in the Reagan White House and finally becoming the United States Attorney General during the presidency of George H.W. Bush (Virginia, n.d.).

These men whom Barr has served can act as clues to his religious, moral, and political alliances. Reagan strongly supported prayer in schools, and in a radio address similar to Barr's speech, made a shabby case for the United States being a Christian nation, emphasizing the second half of the First Amendment's statement on religion and leaving the first half untouched (Reagan, 1984). Additionally, George H.W. Bush stated once in an interview, "I don't know that Atheists should be considered as citizens, nor should they be considered patriots. This is one nation under God" (Bush, 2004, para. 7). Other close colleagues of Barr include the White House Chief of Staff and Counsel to President Bush Samuel K. Skinner and C. Boyden Gray, respectively, who both worked with Barr in the Bush White House.

Most of the speeches uttered by Barr were during his time serving as the Attorney General from 1991 to 1993. Nearly all were reminiscent of his law career, focusing on crime, justice, and government, although one particular speech was notable in that its topic more closely aligned with that which was delivered to the Catholic League than were delivered to judges and lawyers. Barr delivered an acceptance speech in May of 1992 (only months before the speech being studied presently) for the Humanitarian Award to an audience of Orthodox Jews known as

the Agudath Israel of America. The purpose of the speech delivered at that dinner was twofold: it sought to expose anti-Semitism in America and infuriate the Jews towards those committing unconstitutional hate crimes so that Barr could then convince them that religion is necessary for a peaceful nation (Barr W. P., 1992). This is the same line of thought that he would repeat to a Catholic audience months later. A Catholic himself, William Barr believed that any religious tradition would trump the new moral relativism manifested in secularism. If he could build his army to include not only Protestants and Catholics, but Jews as well, then he may have a greater chance of stripping away all freedom from those who did not wish to participate.

In the speech at hand, *Judeo-Christian Tradition vs. Secularism*, Barr took a specific route in achieving his goal of manipulating facts to fit his biased and selfish agenda. He carefully painted a picture of America as its morals had loosened between the 60s and the 90s, leading the audience to believe that all hope was lost for traditional values. Not to be defeated, Barr used the indignation he had stirred within his Catholic friends in an attempt to rally them to rise up against this moral revolution. In a nation that had dropped from being 96 percent Judeo-Christian in 1962 (Religion, 1944-2018) to 84 percent at the time of the speech in 1992, Barr would not rest until not a single soul was left unconverted. Without any reference to data regarding the shift in the nation's religious demographics at the time, Barr used specific language throughout his speech to paint a narrow picture of what he wanted his audience to know, demonizing words like "secular" and "culture" while raising up terms such as "traditional morality" and "natural law".

In order to create unity between himself and his audience, Barr frequently employed the pronoun "we"; his Catholic listeners were personified, but "the secularists" were never explicitly referred to as "they". Rather, the trends of the "secular age" were barely attributed to anyone at all. At one time in the speech, Barr utilized the metaphor of public morality as a pendulum,

almost as if the acts and their negative consequences were an animal of their own. Instead of saying “We cannot sit back and just hope that they adopt our Judeo-Christian morals,” he said “We cannot sit back and just hope that somehow the pendulum is going to swing back toward unity” (Barr, 1992, p. 41). By taking away the agent and relaying only the scene and the action, Barr was able to assign the crime culprits of his own choosing, namely secularists, pop culture, and the government.

Barr very slyly chose what bits of information he would relay to his audience and which he would keep hidden. He was able to use the Judeo-Christian religion as a weapon to push his agenda without alluding once to its holy texts or doctrines. His confidence that his Catholic audience would not detect his selfishness or dishonesty is blatantly insulting.

Barr’s attempt at a persuasive speech, riddled with holes in logic and data meant to stay unnoticed, begins with a contradiction. He points out that Christopher Columbus is remembered as having brought cruelty and a “watershed of evil” to the indigenous North Americans. Barr suggests that his audience keep in mind that these civilizations had always known cruelty, slavery, and injustice long before Columbus added to their misery. Instead, says Barr, the only new thing introduced by the Europeans was what he continually refers to as the “Judeo-Christian tradition,” which he describes as “a moral culture which provided a critique of injustice” (Barr, 1992, p. 37). Barr deftly avoided blaming religious ancestors for their own famous injustice, and instead he praised their despicable actions as noteworthy simply because they were introduced alongside a religion. Needless to say, this taints the image of their religion more than it will ever justify what they did.

After this jarringly unsettling anecdote introducing the genesis of the Judeo-Christian faith in America, Barr fast forwarded the setting of his speech five hundred years. He presented a

great moral crisis, colored by his own religious and conservative worldview. Claiming that the Judeo-Christian tradition was “the foundation upon which this great republic rests,” (Barr, 1992, p. 38) Barr described how we had gone astray from our traditional morals and how the solution was a “moral renewal.” His perception of this great crisis was that two fundamentally different systems of values were at odds with each other: secularism, otherwise referred to as the “doctrine of moral relativism,” which was growing, and the Judeo-Christian moral system, which was being “steadily [eroded].”

Barr began by informing his audience about the Judeo-Christian moral system. To him, the answer to all of America’s problems lay in religion’s objective standards of right and wrong. In this Lewisian fashion, Barr made three points about God’s natural law which is supposedly revealed through scripture, reason, and experience. With no studies to back his claims, he asserted that this vague “natural law” consists of “the ultimate practical, utilitarian rules for human conduct;” it can be enforced through law, custom, and moral education; and it is the “only secure basis for human rights,” which are only secure when they exist “independent of the will of man” (Barr, 1992, p. 38). Once Barr believed that he had persuaded his audience to rely on a transcendent and objectively moral law-maker, he took his claims a step further.

Expanding from his idea that our nation was founded upon Christian ideals, Barr offered several questionable quotes from the founding fathers. First Barr pulled from the Declaration of Independence an utterance by Thomas Jefferson about “the laws of nature and nature’s God.” Unfortunately for Barr’s precarious case, this quote is most likely an allusion to Jefferson’s lifelong fascination with Newton’s laws of physics than with any obscure moral law (Fauvet, 1999). Barr went on to present an alleged quote from James Madison: “We have staked our future on the ability of each of us to govern ourselves according to the Ten Commandments”

(Barr, 1992, p. 38). To anyone familiar with Madison's deistic reputation or fervent support of the separation of church and state, this quote seems rather out of place. As a matter of fact, this quote was never discovered among Madison's recorded writings (Allison, n.d.; Mikkelson, 2013). His view of religion's role in government was more accurately articulated in a quote he once scrawled in a letter to Edward Livingston:

“Every new and successful example, therefore, of a perfect separation between the ecclesiastical and civil matters, is of importance; and I have no doubt that every new example will succeed, as every past one has done, in showing that religion and Government will both exist in greater purity the less they are mixed together . . .”  
(Madison, 1822).

Madison's real beliefs do not only contradict Barr's bogus quote. They also disprove Barr's idea that the framers believed that licentiousness, which he defined as “abandonment of Judeo-Christian moral restraints,” is “the greatest threat to free government” (Barr, 1992, p. 38).

Without pausing to verify his facts, Barr moved on to propose that the framers were beginning a great experiment: whether a “free people [could] retain a moral culture that would promote the self-discipline and virtues needed to restrain licentiousness” (Barr, 1992, p. 39). He suggested that this experiment began its downfall in the 1960s as traditional morals gave way to moral relativism, objectively purposeless autonomy, and the pursuit of individual pleasures. This led him to zero in on a quote by Woody Allen in a measly justification of an affair with a young girl: “The heart wants what it wants” (Barr, 1992, p. 39). Giving no heed to legitimate secular moral systems, Barr urged listeners to consider the chaos that would ensue if we were to use this aphorism as a moral foundation.

In an attempt to demonstrate the manifestation of a self-centered moral system, Barr offered examples of how this shift in values had played out. He spoke of the rise in violence, drug addiction, abortions, suicide, divorce, and more. Ultimately, Barr identified the breakdown of the traditional family as the “root of most of our social problems today” (Barr, 1992, p. 39). Considering his overall goal of restoring Judeo-Christian values, one can’t help but wonder what correlation these examples have with the nation’s shift in Judeo-Christian belief from 96 percent to 84 percent. Were the individuals involved in these cases particularly nonreligious? What does the Old Testament actually say about violence, drug addiction, or divorce? Would a restoration of a biblical authority in America truly help end these new harmful trends more than research and new solutions tailored by experts in culture, social issues, and family studies?

William Barr thought so. He entertained the idea that society will “correct” itself and “the pendulum will naturally swing back” to traditional Judeo-Christian morals. Before presenting the formula for this backwards cultural shift, Barr provided three reasons why morality might instead continue to change, much to his dismay. His first culprit was something that his generation loves to demonize: the “high-tech popular culture” which he said was “[fueling] the collapse of morality” (Barr, 1992, p. 40). Next Barr pointed out his view that the government is “[perpetuating] misconduct” by working to keep the younger and more secular generation safe and healthy with things like free contraceptives.

Barr’s final reason for the momentum of this changing zeitgeist was twofold. He believed that “the law [was] being used as a weapon to break down traditional morality and to establish moral relativism as the new orthodoxy” (Barr, 1992, p. 40) anytime culturally impractical laws were not only eliminated but replaced with new, more tolerant laws. Barr was indignant that male lawmakers no longer had authority over women’s reproductive rights and that Georgetown

University was required to treat homosexual activist groups equally with other campus groups. In an attempt to play the victim as a Christian in an 84 percent Judeo-Christian country, Barr argued that anyone with traditional Judeo-Christian morality was “viciously attacked and held up to ridicule” (Barr, 1992, p. 40).

When Barr’s audience was surely feeling under attack by the nation’s shift towards equality and secularism, Barr was able to make his final push for them to take society back under the reign of their religious laws under his thin guise of “regaining our moral compass.” He encouraged his listeners first to “[put] our principles into practice in our own personal daily lives.” From there he urged them to teach the faith to the next generation, place an emphasis on the “moral education” of their children, and “do all we can to promote and support religious education at all levels.” Barr’s final piece of advice was for his listeners to fight for and defend their values whenever they come under attack. At last, he closed his speech with a tired cliché: “Together, I believe that we *can* change the world” (Barr, 1992, p. 41).

It does not take an atheist to know that religious education and indoctrination aren’t the solutions to all of the world’s problems. True as this may be, any reasonable skeptic wouldn’t accept such an assertion without researching even their own criticism and conclusion in regards to claims such as Barr’s. As a rhetorical critic, I truly want to know: “Was William Barr’s speech, *Judeo-Christian Tradition vs. Secularism*, a necessary and fitting response to the changing moral and cultural situation in the United States in 1992?”

The best and most unbiased way to find this out is to explore how his speech interacted with the nation’s situation. To identify whether rhetoric is called for in a particular situation, three primary constituents must be identified, namely the audience, “who are capable of being influenced by discourse and of being mediators of change” (Bitzer, 1968, p. 8); the constraints,

which are “persons, events, objects, and relations which . . . have the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence” (Bitzer, 1968, p. 8); and the exigence, or the obstacle to be overcome. Constraints of the rhetorical situation exist within two classes: Aristotle’s artistic and inartistic proofs. One can remember that artistic proofs come from the rhetor himself, and inartistic views are out of the control of the rhetor; they can include the previously held beliefs and biases of the audience or the audience’s willingness to act upon the exigence after hearing the case made in the speech. In my quest for a critical response to this research question, I will take into consideration the rhetorical situation at hand in terms of audience, constraints, and exigence before measuring Barr’s success in addressing and proposing a solution to the situation.

If Barr’s proposal had indeed been the necessary solution to the downward spiral at hand, his immediate audience would have made all the difference as to whether or not his speech truly could have “change[d] the world.” Any rhetorical response to a situation must consist of an audience who is capable of “serving as mediator of the change which the discourse functions to produce.” (Bitzer, 1968, p. 8). Luckily for Barr, he was “constrained” only by artistic proofs manifesting themselves in his stubborn conservative views, and inartistic proofs consisting of the Catholic audience’s strong religious beliefs identical to his. Barr’s audience needed not be swayed; all they needed was for their previously held opposition to secularism to be bolstered. When Barr put the Judeo-Christian moral tradition on a pedestal and rhetorically stripped secular morality of its positive traits, he had surely won over the room of believers at his whim. As practicing Christians, any parents in the crowd carried an influence over the next generation in raising them with traditional morals as well as enrolling them in Christian schools. Additionally, any outspoken audience member who was persuaded or empowered by Barr’s speech would be willing to share and defend his or her values “when they come under attack” (Barr, 1992, p. 41).

Whether or not Judeo-Christian values were under attack at all, and whether it was worth fighting back, can be determined by examining the nature of the situation, which is in this case the rhetorical exigence. In Lloyd Bitzer's famed rhetorical theory, the exigence is the characteristic of the situation which calls for a rhetorical response. It is an "imperfection marked by urgency" or a "thing which is other than it should be" (Bitzer, 1968, p. 6). In Barr's case, the situation was the seemingly corrupt and licentious state of the nation, wreaking "immense suffering, wreckage, and misery" (Barr, 1992, p. 39). To know if this situation was indeed a rhetorical one, we must determine if it called for a specific rhetorical response that would eradicate the exigence (Bitzer, 1968).

In his speech, Barr named several "fruits of this new age" which exist in the observable world and presumably were not, for once, entirely conjecture. His examples of the manifestation of "the doctrine of moral relativism" in the United States range from increased rates of violent crime, drug addiction, venereal disease, abortion, psychiatric disorders, divorce, and poverty to teen pregnancy, suicide, and rape, to landlords being required to treat a married couple as they would a cohabitating couple, to schools being required to treat homosexual student activist groups the same as other student groups.

Giving Barr the benefit of the doubt that his statistics on these trends are correct, three conclusions can immediately be made in response to his list. First, his examples run a wide gamut; in no stretch of the imagination is activism for homosexual equality on the same plane as psychiatric disorders or violent crime. Because of the inconceivable diversity of Barr's list, one could reasonably conclude that each of these trends requires a very individually tailored solution—albeit only for those which can be demonstrated as having real negative consequences, unlike gender equality. This leads us to the second obvious flaw: certainly not all, and probably

none, of these cultural manifestations can be solved by Barr's proposed solution of preaching religious moral rules to the unchurched and the young. Finally, a resurgence of religious morality would simply not be an appropriate solution to this crisis, because 84 percent of Americans at the time were already religious. In fact, Catholicism, the demographic of his audience, had risen since the moral revolution began (Religion, 1944-2018). Without exhaustive sociological studies, we have no conclusive way of knowing that the primary moral deviants were not Christians the entire time. This necessitates the conclusion that Barr's speech is *not* a fitting response to the changing cultural situation.

The speech is, as rhetorical situation scholar Lloyd Bitzer might call it, comparable to “[imagining] a person spending his time writing eulogies of men and women who never existed: his speeches meet no rhetorical situations; they are summoned into existence not by real events, but by his own imagination” (Bitzer, 1968, p. 9). If one were to dig deeper to find empirically effective solutions to the problems that plague us, from abortion, to suicide, to poverty, these solutions would more closely resemble education (including sex education), stable and safe family environments, and opportunities for those born in dreary circumstances to advance and rise out of poverty. If Barr had researched the raw sources of these problems and used his platform to encourage his audience to do their part as citizens and work towards a real solution, perhaps he, as a rhetor, could have been an active agent of change. Instead, Barr presented a pejorative solution brimming with uplifting but empty jargon under a thin veil of religious unity.

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