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Secularism and the Question of the "Judeo-Christian"

This essay comments on the papers in this special issue, paying special attention to "Judaism," "Christianity," and "Judeo-Christian" in relation to discussions of secularism and civil religion. It attempts an explanation of why "Judeo-Christian" has become a term we take for granted, suggesting that the term derives from a tradition of naming and group identity that combines obvious and subtle expressions, habits, and patterns. Finally, it poses questions for further research into the meaning and use of the terms "Judeo-Christian" and "civil religion."

The papers collected here demonstrate the perennial challenge of understanding the relationship of Judaism and Christianity, but their focus on the term "Judeo-Christian" across historical and disciplinary boundaries generates new insights and directions for study. My primary question in response to the papers is more probing than critical: how can we understand

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the self-evidence of Judeo-Christianity today in light of the long and anxious history of differences between the two traditions? What language can we use to model the process that led to the acceptance of Judeo-Christianity as a given? Was this a merger of two religions into one, perhaps seeking to regain influence and critical mass lost to secular institutions? For those who consider religious institutions to be already dead or dying, the regrouping of Judaism and Christianity into a single new formation would represent an understandable survival tactic.

One may also—with Benjamin E. Sax in "Judeo-Christianity and Holocaust Denial"—interpret Judeo-Christianity to be a takeover, perhaps even hostile, of Judaism by Christianity.[1] The clear disproportion in size and influence of the two groups, together with the Christian need for exculpatory gestures after the Holocaust, goes far to support this view. An even more ominous suggestion would be that "Judeo-Christian" represents an alliance against such external threats as secularism and Islam.[2] In this scenario "Judeo-Christian" serves mostly to define what one is *not*, over against other groups. Yet another possibility is to regard "Judeo-Christian" as a superficial slogan of "ecumenist public relations," a term that has ceremonial purpose but little substance.[3] This perspective would reduce "Judeo-Christian" to a cliché or rhetorical figure, a marriage of convenience between two still-distinct parties. Finally, it may in fact be the case that "Judeo-Christian" represents not "public relations" but a genuine effort to cultivate "civil religion" among two groups that already have much in common.

Addressing these issues raises two prior questions sometimes taken for granted in the papers: What is Judaism, and what is Christianity? Not until we get a handle on the problem of definition, of the status and claims of these terms, can we really undertake a serious inquiry into Judeo-Christianity. Noting how various any definitions of religious groups can be, my initial, provisional suggestion is to focus more on reference than sense, that is, on how the terms "Jew," "Christian," and "Judeo-Christian" work to establish

[1] See also Marshall Grossman, "The Violence of the Hyphen in Judeo-Christian," *Social Text* 22 (Spring 1989): 115–22.

[2] The best survey of ideological uses of "Judeo-Christian" in modern American discourse is still Mark Silk, "Notes on the Judeo-Christian Tradition in America," *American Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (1984): 65–85. A good recent survey of civil religion and secularity is Tom Crook, "Civil Religion and the History of Democratic Modernity: Probing the Limits of the Sacred and the Secular," *Religion Compass* 4, no. 6 (2010): 376–87.

[3] John Murray Cuddihy, *The Ordeal of Civility* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 231, cited in Silk, "Notes," 85n53.

group identity. The advantage of this approach is that it pays attention to the names themselves and those who use them. In other words, what I find compelling about these two terms is their part in the speech act of naming.

To study the act of naming is to examine the historical and cultural conditions that make a term like "Judeo-Christian" become widespread and self-evident. It is a virtue of these papers individually and as a collection that they attend carefully to specific historical and cultural circumstances, discourses, persons, and texts. At the same time, each of the papers goes beyond its particular period—late antique, medieval, or modern—to explore comparative and transhistorical inquiries into the "Judeo-Christian." The papers engage in textual and philological research, cultural history, and theory, lingering over categories of analysis in the study of religion and culture. Finally, several of the papers frame their analysis partly or largely in terms of ideological critique, naming and criticizing particular understandings of "Judeo-Christian" as politically or morally suspect. While none of the papers makes ideology its central focus, this interest calls for a broader analysis of political economy in future research.

Together, these papers demonstrate the contingent, often tendentious nature of the Judeo-Christian; dramatic historical changes in traditional Jewish and Christian institutions, especially in early modern and modern history; the possibility of unintended and paradoxical consequences of historical changes in Judaism and Christianity; and the importance of terms and names to denounce and valorize groups in the history of Judaism, Christianity, the "Judeo-Christian," and scholarship about them. A less obvious thread connecting these papers is a trans-historical interest, a willingness to imagine how ancient, medieval, and modern iterations of "Judeo-Christian" share common patterns and dynamics.

Judeo-Christian Shifts in History

Jason van Ehrenkrook's "The Specter of Judeo-Christianity and the Politics of Gender Deviancy: From St. Paul of Tarsus to St. Paul, MN" begins with the contemporary right-wing preoccupation with homosexuality, a striking introduction to a scholarly analysis of Roman, Jewish, and Christian texts on sexuality, politics, and religious identity. Paul and Josephus turn out in this reading to walk a "well-worn path" of linking particular sexual behaviors to social and religious problems. Without overstating the parallel between ancient and contemporary discourse, van Ehrenkrook's use of the

term "specter" to describe the afterlife of these ancient discourses is suggestive. A complementary approach is taken in Jeremy Schott's "The Library of Caesarea Maritima and the Construction of 'Hellenistic Judaism,'" where the intertextual and paratextual methods of Eusebius's *Gospel Preparation / Gospel Demonstration* produce a polyphonic text drawn from and suggestive of the ancient library. Yet, by its ambivalence toward the category of ethnicity, this early Christian text performs a kind of anxious drama of group identity formation. Schott helpfully adds that modern scholarship has too often reinscribed the binary of Hellenistic and Palestinian Judaism projected by the texts of late antiquity, thus uncritically affirming their ideology. The most far-reaching implication of Schott's paper is that "theology" and "religion" can be read today as the product of power relations and exegetical processes. Matthew Gabriele's "The Chosen Peoples of the 11th and 21st Centuries" likewise attends to exegesis with its dual focus on the Franks' typological self-understanding as a "novus Israel" and in the appropriation of biblical traditions at Florida's Holy Land Experience theme park. Gabriele's further claim that Christian uses of Jewish election discourse seem to arise at times of historical stress is particularly suggestive for further research across historical contexts.

Healan Gaston's survey of modern Judeo-Christian discourse provides a useful framework for this entire collection. Her detailed study builds on the work of Mark Silk, and the distinction between pluralist and exceptionalist uses of Judeo-Christianity is an effective way to sort ideological positions of the modern period. Her observation that Silk's work belongs to the tradition of Matthew Arnold is particularly significant for the role of Judeo-Christian discourse in civil society today. Does it divide or unite? If it cannot be "true" religion, can "Judeo-Christianity" serve as a kind of civil religion? And can civil religion of any kind provide a way out of religious and political conflict, or does it fail to overcome the criticisms of other liberal paradigms such as toleration and multiculturalism?

Paradoxes of the Judeo-Christian

As the historical studies just mentioned show, Judeo-Christian discourse involves at least two paradoxes. The first is the dynamic of strength and weakness particular to the histories of Judaism, Christianity, and Jewish-Christian relations. Biblical traditions celebrating the victory of the few over the many, the weak over the strong, and the younger over the first-born animate many

strands of Jewish and Christian exegetical tradition. The adoption of Christianity by the Roman empire in the fourth century decisively established the long-term hegemony of Christianity, but discourses of persecution and divine favor against worldly power were already coded into the tradition. How these dynamics played out historically, particularly for Jewish-Christian relations, needs no rehearsal here, but it was in many ways the combination of exclusivist claims in both traditions (and later Islam), along with extreme asymmetries of actual and perceived power, that made these histories so volatile and violent. Post-Holocaust scholarship is replete with discussions of this problem, but one can find it already in the works of Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud. All of the essays address this paradoxical and dangerous asymmetry of real and imagined power, but Tristan Sturm's study of Christian Zionists, which demonstrates complex exchanges of identity and power between Jews and Christians, and Sax's erudite "Judeo-Christianity and Holocaust Denial," which examines efforts to "redeem" and "sublimate" the Holocaust as Judeo-Christian discourse (330), demonstrate how elaborate and dangerous these dynamics can be today. Toward this end, Sturm employs what could be called a critical geography of eschatology, while Sax develops a critical historiography of the present.

A second paradox concerns religious group identity formation more generally. In the biblical traditions at least, formation of group identity leads to intense bonds of solidarity and loyalty within the group as part of a larger worldview that includes a far-reaching set of beliefs and actions. But this group identity necessarily excludes others: the very strength and security provided by the traditions for members contributes to the fierceness of violent conflicts with non-members. Insofar as today's wars gain momentum from Judaism, Christianity, or Judeo-Christianity, the question becomes whether and how these traditions, which inherently affirm exclusive group solidarity, can contribute to reductions in wars and other forms of political violence. The problem becomes particularly significant when Judeo-Christian discourse permeates powerful "secular" institutions, for it is when secularism drives religion underground that the paradox of strength and weakness tends to resurface with great political power. Heather Rubens's study of the "Judeo-Christian" in US Supreme Court opinions reveals how this term can provide "special protections" against legal challenges to the interests of a Christian majority (317). Her study suggests the need for further studies of "secular" texts of all kinds.

Naming, Cursing, and Judeo-Christian Secularity

Critically organizing the many and ever-shifting definitions of Judaism, Christianity, and the Judeo-Christian may be impossible, and it is a virtue of the papers in this collection that they resist the temptation to do so, focusing instead on particular cases of how these names are used and only then suggesting their wider implications. A few remarks on patterns in this history of naming follow here, as an attempt to broaden the discussion. Judaism and Christianity emerged in late antiquity partly though mutual anathemas and heresiology. Earlier biblical tradition also used curses to produce and maintain boundaries of group identity, in the case of Canaanites and Gibeonites, for example, two groups whose close resemblance to the Israelites appear to have required the production of these boundaries (Gen 9 and Josh 9). The operation of creating group identity through identification of the other is familiar enough to seem nearly universal, but Jan Assmann, combining the insights of Sigmund Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* with his own research on Egyptian and biblical traditions, locates this either/or tendency in biblical tradition specifically in what he calls the "Mosaic distinction."[4] If we play this out just a little, we can find the operation of the Mosaic distinction in the monotheisms of ancient Israel, Christianity, and Islam.

In making these distinctions of group identity, monotheistic groups often speak the language of ethnicity, even in the socially-diverse case of Christians, as Denise Buell has shown.[5] The creation of ethnic or quasi-ethnic and exclusivist groups through anathemas is exactly what seems to be at stake in the early history of rabbinic Judaism and Christianity. In the second century, according to Daniel Boyarin,

> anxieties about boundaries between the newly defined groups… were the immediate catalyst that produced the invention of the category of heresy as a means of policing borders that were hitherto not problematic because the categories that they defined did not yet exist.… Both Justin and the Mishna were engaged in the construction of the borders of orthodoxy via the production of others who are outside them. These are the heretics, the *minim*.[6]

[4] Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

[5] Denise Kimber Buell, *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

[6] Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 66.

The long history of these boundaries can be written partly as a long history of discourses, including anathemas, racial laws, and other identity-creating curses, but it is very important not to forget that these boundaries are needed in the first place because these groups' differences are not obvious by themselves, at least not to the anxious Christians who seemed unable to get the Jews out of their minds. It should also be remembered that biblical tradition usually pairs blessings with curses, even using the terms "blessing" as a euphemism for "curse" in the book of Job and in the rabbinic *birkat ha-minim*, a curse that takes the form of a blessing. American English, particularly in the Southeast, reveals this dynamic quite clearly in the damning expression "Bless his heart." Curses, meanwhile, have a remarkable tendency in biblical tradition to backfire and become blessings, as the biblical story of Balaam (Num 22–24) shows.

Just as curses so easily become blessings and *vice versa*, so do Christian-Jewish relations reverse themselves with great agility. The intimacy of these two traditions allows anti-Judaism to morph into philo-Judaism almost instantly, partly because they are two sides of the same othering coin. It should thus be no complete surprise that historical changes allow one-time enemies to become fast friends, since their separation arose from anathemas between groups that felt too close for comfort in the first place.

Like the curses that provisionally separated them, Judeo-Christianity provisionally unites the two groups. Just as separation itself guarantees no specific political or theological outcome, neither, I suggest, does the discursive "technology" of Judeo-Christianity. This is not to say we should not be suspicious of Judeo-Christianity—in fact, just the opposite. Given its highly provisional nature, and the history of what we could euphemistically call power relations between the two traditions, we should be very suspicious of this category. We might ask, for instance, why, if it is simply a self-evident, descriptive term, Judeo-Christianity has so often served to justify the use of force in the modern period. We might ask why this term, and not what Richard Bulliett has cogently described as "Islamo-Christianity," rolls off the tongue so easily.[7] And we should certainly wonder what in the world Judeo-Christianity means for the religious traditions it seems to appropriate and displace.

[7] Richard W. Bulliett, *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004). The adoption of the term "Abrahamic" to describe Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions together, for example in the projects associated with the Children of Abraham Institute, represents an attempt to include Islam in a map of traditions sharing values in civil society (online at http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/abraham/index.html).

This process of modern change is sometimes called 'secularization,' but I prefer to avoid the grand, linear narratives this term suggests. Specific historical circumstances in early modern Europe led to the general weakening of religious institutions and the rise of secular and secularist ideologies that celebrated these changes. Current discussions on "secularism" and "secularization" have debated the meaning of these terms and the extent to which they describe historical changes since the early modern period.[8] Today, secular institutions such as the nation-state, science, and the arts, which once appeared to replace religion, have begun to lose legitimacy, most notably in the end of the Cold War and in the current "culture wars" that have growing numbers of Americans denying the credibility and legitimacy of science. In other words, secularism now faces its own disenchantment. Perhaps like the Christians whom Freud describes as being "badly Christened," the Western tradition was badly secularized, and secularism never got a chance.[9] But whatever the reason for the decline of secularism, it does not, in my opinion, signal a pendulum-like return of religious institutions—far from it. Instead, I think we see new alignments and rear-guard maneuvers, including the formation Judeo-Christianity. Like other religious and ethnic monikers, "Judeo-Christian" marks boundaries of insiders and outsiders—I leave the details on who they are to others. But the key suggestion I am making is that current forms of Judeo-Christianity are neither Judaism nor Christianity but instead a discursive alliance that combines the enduring influence of religious traditions with the need for legitimacy among secular institutions. Judeo-Christianity should thus be called Judeo-Christian-secularism or the like, but like the dwarf named theology inside Benjamin's chess-playing automaton, secularism here must stay out of sight.[10]

The new formations of Judeo-Christianity look, in my view, like a creative attempt to buttress the legitimacy of secular institutions based on the wager that it would also somehow strengthen some interests and parties iden-

[8] Here I find the work of Michel de Certeau (e.g., *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Randell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984)), Talal Asad (e.g., *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003)), and Dipesh Chakrabarty (e.g., *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002)), especially helpful.

[9] Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (New York: Vintage, 1959), 117.

[10] Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, 1938–1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Harry Zohn, vol. 4 (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2003), 389.

tified with Judaism and Christianity. Does it work? The question demands some discussion of tradition and secularity. The history of these rear-guard attempts to balance secularism and tradition would allow us to draw a line connecting such texts as John Locke's *Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689), Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), the neo-orthodoxy of Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971), and contemporary neo-conservative political theology.

This still leaves the question of self-evidence: How did "Judeo-Christian" become a term we take for granted? Without attempting a full answer to the question, I contend that "Judeo-Christian" could only become so familiar so quickly because it comes from a tradition. The concept of tradition I have in mind combines obvious and subtle expressions, habits, and patterns; its features are dynamic but recognizable. This idea of tradition draws from Freud and Max Weber, who recognize transformations of earlier formations in much different, later ones (Christianity and capitalism); from Alasdair MacIntyre, who considers tradition to be a matter of historically-embodied debates; and from Michael Fishbane, whose studies of biblical and rabbinic tradition attend to tradition as a combination of *traditum* and *traditio*.[11]

Cautions and Challenges, Further Discussion, Research

The essays collected here all hint at such a notion of tradition, one comprised of dynamic but patterned configurations of Judaism, Christianity, and the Judeo-Christian. Further research will benefit from these insights and should press toward models for understanding this tradition, if such a term can be used. A second area raised but not exhausted here is the ethics and politics of the many forms of "Judeo-Christian," as well as the standpoint for making scholarly judgments on them. Given how imbricated modern scholarship is with the history of monotheism in general, it is important to add scholarly reflexivity to the list of desired further studies: How does scholarship mirror the objects of its analysis, given its Judeo-Christian origins? As Jonathan Z. Smith has argued, religious studies runs the risk of deploying

[11] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (1930; London: Unwin Hyman, 1989); Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1984); Michael A. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985). My attempt to synthesize and articulate this notion of tradition appears in *Biblical Curses and the Displacement of Tradition* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011).

categories of analysis that are less flexible than the terms under study.[12] In other words, there is still work to do in discovering what "Judeo-Christian" means at different times for different people; there is a tendency toward over-reading or under-reading this common trope of public discourse without tying it to genuine material contexts and commitments and interpreting its various modes and meanings. Finally, these studies recognize and begin an important shift in the study of the "Judeo-Christian" from the context of contemporary American society to pre-modern and cross-cultural contexts. "Judeo-Christianity" is now (and has always been) a global phenomenon.

Beyond these relatively descriptive tasks, the study of "Judeo-Christianity" always involves evaluative and normative claims, as the subtle and overt political criticisms of many papers in this collection attest. The most robust defense of the term as a part of public discourse remains Mark Silk's idea of "Judeo-Christianity" as a kind of civil religion, even one that contains "prophetic" potential for social change.[13] A thorough consideration of Silk's defense of "Judeo-Christianity" in light of the work collected here, along with the work of Boyarin and others, would be the first step toward a normative critique of "Judeo-Christianity." Can the prophetic tradition of civil religion survive in the form of the Judeo-Christian, in spite of its self-evidence and customary bad faith? On the other hand, can we do without it?

[12] Jonathan Z. Smith, "Manna, Mana Everywhere and /‿/‿/‿," in *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004), 117–44.

[13] Silk, "Notes," 71.