

K. Healan Gaston
***Imagining Judeo-Christian America:
Religion, Secularism, and the
Redefinition of Democracy***

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Descriptions of the United States as a “Judeo-Christian” country have become a constant in our political discourse, invoked in battles about secularism, religious minorities and immigrants, school curricula, and abortion. The term is both a shorthand reference to the core moral values of our society and a deep fault line between opposing understandings of religion’s role in American democracy.

But what does this concept even mean, and where does it come from? In this book K. Healan Gaston, a lecturer on American Religious History and Ethics at Harvard Divinity School, explores the history of “Judeo-Christian” rhetoric in the United States and its very different manifestations and interpretations in various eras. Along the way she offers numerous insights into the multifaceted role (and interpretations) of religion in a pluralistic democracy.

The first part of her book traces how the predominantly Christian European colonization of North America shaped understandings of these issues. George Washington’s famous 1790 letter to the Jewish congregations of Newport promised that “every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid...the Government of the United States gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance...” Washington’s words emphasized the centrality of pluralism and tolerance in how the new democracy would define religious freedom. As a descriptive word for the religious roots of western values, however, “Judeo-Christian” is a far cry from the concepts that Washington referred to. Gaston traces the term as far back as 1841 (in an obscure reference to Jews who had converted to Catholicism but secretly remained Jewish), but during the nineteenth century the term (when used at all) was usually a cultural reference to the shared influence of these traditions on Western culture, often in conjunction with “Graeco-Roman.” In its earliest use, then, “Judeo-Christian” was more of a cultural signifier than a religious concept.

As Gaston shows, Christian supersessionism remained central to this narrative until well into the twentieth century (and in many ways, it still is). Indeed, it is

probably the reason that the term "Judeo-Christian" even exists. "Judeo" referred to what was seen as Judaism's secondary role in Christian history. Despite its semblance of inclusiveness, "Judeo-Christian" often went hand-in-hand with antisemitic tropes of tribalism and legalism. In his 1871 book *Ten Great Religions* the theologian James Freeman Clarke described Judaism as the "Preparation for Christianity" (31). For American Hebraists like Crawford Toy, who taught at Harvard and wrote the 1890 book *Judaism and Christianity*, Judaism was a narrow, legalistic faith and the foil for Christianity's "universalism." As Gaston observes, such viewpoints failed to recognize Judaism "as a viable faith in the modern world" (32).

Such perspectives began to shift in the early twentieth century as Jewish scholars and religious leaders pushed back on these assumptions. Morris Jastrow, a Polish-born professor of Semitic languages at the University of Pennsylvania, emphasized the convergence of ethics and religion in Judaism and the important contribution this made to American political culture. In 1906 the Menorah movement was founded at Harvard, publishing a journal by the same name that focused on Judaism's continuing significance and relevance for western civilization and the U.S.

These developments coincided with the beginning of Jewish and Christian collaboration on social and political issues, especially in the early twentieth century movements against racism, anti-Catholicism, and antisemitism. During the 1920s the "tolerance" movement united representatives of different faiths in this fight, leading in 1928 to the founding of the National Conference of Christians and Jews (NCCJ).

Among a very small group of American and British scholars, this was a time when a dialogue between Jews and Christians that included theological critiques of Christian supersessionism and proselytization began. While more extensive theological dialogue began after the Shoah, already in the 1920s some Christians, viewing Judaism as a living faith, recognized that it had an important place in a pluralistic cultural and political landscape. Interreligious cooperation and conversations between American Jews and Christians moved to a deeper level. The prominent Reform rabbi Stephen Wise for example recognized Jesus as a "great ethical personality" who had been shaped by his Jewishness. Christian thinkers like John Haynes Holmes (a close friend of Wise's) and Reinhold Niebuhr explicitly emphasized the ways in which Judaism contributed to their understanding of scripture and ethics.

This new commitment to Jewish-Christian relations and cultural pluralism did not yet mean the theological dismantling of Christian anti-Judaism or the rejection of proselytization. Organizations like the NCCJ and the Protestant ecumenical Federal Council of Churches (FCC) deliberately avoided these more difficult theological issues.

This new phase coincided with the rise of fascism and antisemitism in Europe. Gaston traces the first modern use of the term "Judeo-Christian" to P. W. Wilson, a British journalist who used it in the early 1930s to describe the cultural values of western democracies that opposed totalitarianism. In Gaston's view, this led to two

very different understandings of totalitarianism, paralleled by two distinct but not entirely exclusive understandings of what “Judeo-Christian” meant. The first was a more inclusive emphasis on tolerance and pluralism as the very cornerstones that strengthened democracy in its fight against totalitarianism. This concept, similar to what George Washington had articulated in 1790, was the worldview being promoted by the NCCJ and the FCC. The other perspective viewed totalitarianism as a dangerous anti-religious expression of modernity, aligned with atheism and secularism, which could only be combatted by a democracy committed to explicitly religious values. In both perspectives, according to Gaston, “Judeo-Christian” became a “religio-political category” (72). Characterized by the embrace of western religious values in their battle against secularism, modernity, and liberalism, the term was useful shorthand for an alliance of Jews and Christians that “identified shared religious principles, rather than religious tolerance, as the cornerstone of democracy” (74).

These developments became the foundation of the postwar “tri-faith” alliance in which Jews, Protestants, and Catholics sought to ensure that the American agenda and its values were consistent with their religious values. Gaston offers numerous examples of how leaders of these different faith traditions became engaged on issues ranging from public school religious education to the civil rights movement. By the post-1945 section of the book it is apparent that she views the “Judeo-Christian” ethos as a religious form of exceptionalism that was employed in constant battle with various forms of “secularism.” This led to growing divides about public issues between members of different faith groups as well as within the respective traditions. It also led to a backlash against the politicization of religious principles and values, including the 1948 founding of a group initially called Protestants and Other Americans United for the Separation of Church and State (formed in opposition to Catholic advocacy for federal aid to parochial schools).

The intertwined language of religion and democracy also gained new traction internationally, especially in the war against “godless Communism.” References to “Judeo-Christian” values became a standard part of political speech, and people like evangelist Billy Graham became influential public figures. Gaston’s book offers a fascinating overview of how such rhetoric influenced various churches, from mainline Protestants to evangelicals to Catholics to Black churches. Inevitably this rhetoric also began to drive the culture wars, with deep debates about individual freedoms vs. the strengthening of common ground and shared community. Her overview includes a far-ranging discussion of how different faith communities responded to McCarthyism, foreign policy, demographic changes, the civil rights movements, and the rise of neo-conservatism, particularly within the Catholic and Jewish communities.

By the 1960s, she writes, all this had led to the “fracturing” of Judeo-Christian alliances: “where such claims had once seemed to indicate consensus...they now fueled the ongoing social conflicts” (209). In one of the most significant insights of her book, Gaston argues that in the second half of the twentieth century the early inclusivist understanding of “Judeo-Christian” (i.e., as a unifying principle around which different religious groups could find their place in our democracy) had

changed to an exclusivist understanding. This exclusivist influence of Judeo-Christian “exceptionalism” is evident in the cultural and political divisions that have intensified up to our present day (230-31).

In the book's last section Gaston traces the post-1945 trajectory of “Judeo-Christian” rhetoric in U.S. politics. In 1980 the Republican Party was the first to use the phrase in a political party platform; since then the GOP has used it in five more platforms. It has never appeared in a Democratic Party platform. There is a fascinating analysis of how each different postwar president (beginning with Truman, up to and including Trump) has spoken about his own faith and the role of American pluralism. As the first Roman Catholic president, John F. Kennedy made a point of expressing his respect for the division of church and state, bringing a new awareness of how religious faith could coexist with a constitutional system. The openly evangelical Jimmy Carter was the first president to link his faith explicitly to appeals to pluralism and human rights. Carter also explicitly emphasized the moral teachings of the Jewish tradition and was the first president to describe the United States as a “mosaic,” not a “melting pot.” The Christian Right that emerged during the Reagan presidency pushed back against Carter's openness to other faiths, and its support for Christian Zionism led many evangelicals to embrace a more deeply politicized understanding of “Judeo-Christian.” As Gaston notes, “one could argue that the 1980s, not the 1950s, represented the heyday of Judeo-Christian rhetoric in the United States” (242).

The Reagan years may have been the “heyday” of such rhetoric but they are crucial for understanding the deepening tensions ever since, particularly in American Protestantism. The emergence of a politically activist Christian Right and its absolutism on certain policy issues (notably the abortion issue) became a cornerstone of the Republican Party. Bill Clinton was the first president to describe the United States as multireligious (and the first to use the term “Abrahamic”), but Gaston notes that “to Clinton, American unity was civic, not religious” (250). George W. Bush tried to counter the wave of Islamophobia after 9/11 with an inclusive appeal to civil society and religious values, but by this time the advocates of “Judeo-Christian America” dominated a significant sector of Republican voters.

With the election of the first African-American president the discourse grew uglier and more polarized. The Obama presidency in particular confronted Americans with the reality that the United States was growing more ethnically and religiously diverse, and he took a more inclusive approach when discussing the role of religion in American democracy. Obama “portrayed religious difference not as a static condition to be managed but rather as a vital dynamic...to be actively celebrated” (266). I would argue that Obama's understanding of the “Judeo-Christian” heritage—as a philosophical influence that reflected “broader, universal truths” in a “formally secular state”—mirrors the perspective of many mainline Protestants, ecumenists, and interfaith leaders in the early twentieth century (260).

American evangelicals however portrayed Obama's views as “unvarnished—and implicitly totalitarian—secularism” (266). “Judeo-Christian” rhetoric took a new turn—or perhaps one could see it as a return to the ugly nativism and open racism of previous eras in U.S. history. Evangelicals embraced Donald Trump, who

openly appealed to Christian nationalism while ignoring “basic theological tenets” (266). While I think Trump’s language (and his audience) have their parallels in American history, Gaston is correct that in many ways the Trump presidency broke with the postwar traditions of religious conservatism.

As this overview indicates, this is an extraordinarily ambitious book that covers a great deal of territory. Its shortcomings may be the inevitable outcome of its scope, and I would note three in particular.

The first is a lack of terminological consistency and precision, beginning with the term “Judeo-Christian” itself. There are references throughout the book to “Judeo-Christian rhetoric”, the “Judeo-Christian tradition,” “Judeo-Christian exceptionalism,” “Judeo-Christian faiths,” and even “Judeo-Christianity.” None of these are defined, but by the second half of the book it is clear that Gaston’s focus is the cultural meaning of the term “Judeo-Christian.” In particular, she studies its use in religious and political polemics that are anti-secular, anti-liberal, and grounded in the conviction that “theological principles and ethical ideals” are foundational to democracy (15). Her analysis is based upon a perceived dichotomy between “Judeo-Christian” and “secularism.”

This perspective however was not shared or articulated by all the groups she describes, particularly when it comes to the ecumenical and interfaith movements of the 1930s and 1940s and the self-understanding of post-Shoah and post-Vatican II Jewish-Christian dialogues (which she largely ignores). As Gaston notes herself, the phrase “Judeo-Christian” did not get much use until after the Second World War, even if there were occasional references to it in the 1930s and 1940s.

This raises a second issue. Gaston is painting with a very broad brush on a big canvas, creating a masterful narrative about the historical role of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews in American public life. In the process, however, a number of significant distinctions are lost. The articulation of “theological principles and ethical ideals” in the public sphere varied considerably among different sectors of these three traditions, as did their understandings of church / state issues. There are numerous generalizations like “Many mainstream Protestants moved away from Jews and naturalists and toward liberal Catholics, uniting with their own theological foes against the threat of secularism” and “virtually all Jewish leaders steered clear of antisecularism” (67). Who (and what) exactly is being described here? She interchangeably uses “mainstream” and “mainline” Protestants without defining either, and there is only a brief reference to the early twentieth century fundamentalist wars within American Protestantism, which were significant precursors of today’s culture wars. Nor is there much analysis of the battles within and between different sectors of American Jews during the 1920s and 1930s about interfaith relations. A number of Jews had working relationships with Christian colleagues and organizations during that era, but they held very different positions on key issues and Jewish-Christian conversations were often contentious. Rabbi Stephen Wise, for example, was involved in interfaith work. However, by the end of 1933 he was a bitter foe of the NCCJ because of its lukewarm reaction to events in Nazi Germany (the NCCJ chose to focus on American issues), and the NCCJ itself came

under growing fire from Jewish organizations both because of its response to National Socialism and because of its anti-Zionism.

Such distinctions are crucial for understanding the very different perspectives among and within religious groups in this country when it comes to the proper place of faith issues in the public sphere, particularly with respect to the issue of “secularism.” By the time Gaston addresses the issues of the 1930s and 1940s, she is treating “Judeo-Christian” as shorthand for religiosity, and she interprets much of this history as a battle between religious Americans and secularism. For example, during the 1930s and 1940s (the history with which I am most familiar) she writes, “those defending pluralism on explicitly theistic grounds—mostly liberal and moderate Protestants—found their views defined out of existence in the 1930s. Figures such as the FCC’s Samuel McCrea Cavert understood that antisecularism forced them to choose between their faith and a pluralist conception of democracy” (69). Elsewhere she dismisses the claim by Carlton Hayes (a Baptist convert to Catholicism who served on the NCCJ board) that the “NCCJ was ‘a civic organization’ promoting ‘good citizenship,’ not a common creed” (112). On the contrary, Gaston says, the NCCJ sought “a substantive alliance of Protestants, Catholic, and Jews sharing an understanding of democracy as a religious phenomenon” (113).

But in fact, Hayes was correct; the NCCJ bylaws supported the “religious ideals of brotherhood and justice” but explicitly rejected a religious organizational identity. Everett Clinchy, the founder of the NCCJ, described its goals as a social science approach to intergroup work, and although he was ordained he preferred to describe himself as an educator. (The closest contemporary parallel to the early NCCJ is probably the Interfaith Youth Corps). Similarly, the mainline Protestant faith of Samuel Cavert and other ecumenists coexisted with their commitment to pluralist democracy, and their understanding of “secularism” was quite different from that of American evangelical and fundamentalist Protestants and Roman Catholics. They tended to frame totalitarianism (and the threat posed by American groups like the fascist Christian Front) not as secularism but as a nationalist distortion of religion.

Gaston seems to posit an inherent antagonism between “religious convictions” and “secular thought and institutions” (notably, there’s only one reference in the entire book to the phrase “civil society”) but the interplay between the two is key to understanding many of the issues she discusses. Mainline Protestantism (and certain sectors within the Jewish and Catholic communities) had an easier time navigating the boundaries between “religion” and civil secular society. In fact, one could argue that mainline Protestants were the ones who had drawn those boundaries—and that part of the story here concerns the growing challenges from other sectors within Protestantism, particularly in the wake of the fundamentalism wars. That in turn is important for understanding the fracturing of post-1945 American religious landscape. While Jews, Protestants, and Catholics came together during the Second World War in the name of patriotic unity, after 1945 old divisions reappeared and new ones developed.

Gaston’s binary distinction between “Judeo-Christian” and “secularism” prevents her from a deeper analysis of these divisions. In discussing the Protestant

ecumenical movement, the social gospel movement, social justice alliances of the 1960s and 1970s, and the rise of liberation theology she observes: “The culture wars framework identified two clearly delineated sides in the struggles of the day: on the one hand, advocates of traditional, Judeo-Christian values, and on the other, secular, pluralistic liberals” (245). Such sweeping statements allow little room for progressive Catholics, Protestants, and sectors within the Black Churches who viewed liberation theology, the social justice movement, ecumenism, and the feminist movements as expressions of their faith. The lack of attention to progressive Christian circles (both Protestant and Catholic) is a problem in this book.

I will add that Gaston may well be correct that her anti-secularist definition accurately describes those who most often invoke “Judeo-Christian” values. However, as her book illustrates, they comprise a very specific sector of religious and political leaders. It is hardly an accurate description of everyone who becomes engaged in interfaith work, and as she herself notes certain groups (like the NCCJ) rarely even used the term.

This brings me to my third observation and the one of greatest interest to readers of this journal: there’s very little analysis here of the Jews, Protestants, and Catholics who became involved in interreligious dialogue, and virtually none of Vatican II and the changes it generated within American Catholicism and in the realm of interreligious and related theological work. There is also no treatment of post-Shoah Jewish-Christian dialogue. On the one hand this makes sense. The concept of “Judeo-Christian” as outlined in this book is something quite different from what these post-Shoah developments were about, and yet she does try to argue that the Second World War and “the spread of Judeo-Christian formulations...substantially reshaped interfaith relations and the broader terrain of cultural controversy” (100).

Despite these criticisms, this book is thought-provoking reading, with numerous insights into how American understandings of the multifaceted and complex intersections between religion and democracy have been both productive and problematic. The construction of a civil society to which all groups have equal access and equal input is difficult in any multireligious, multiethnic society, and, as Gaston notes in her conclusion, there has never been “a stable consensus around either the meaning of democracy or the religious identity of the United States” (230). “Abrahamic” does not address the broader religious diversity in American society or the growing number of Americans who are not religious at all.

As she shows, however, the idea of “Judeo-Christian” America “was always deeply contested and served a wide range of political and religious purposes,” even if historically it was framed more inclusively than it is today (231). In previous eras “Judeo-Christian” (and the related notion of “tri-faith”) could bring people together around a narrative that connected cultural and religious diversity to democracy. For some, this gave American democracy a religious foundation from which they combatted secularism; for others it was closely bound to understandings of civil liberties and religious freedom.

Gaston concludes by summarizing the multiple challenges confronting us today, observing that “the ongoing shift from group-based thinking toward a more individualized and hybridized conception of religious identity is fundamentally altering the conditions of American public life” (272). She writes that Trump’s violation of religious, social, and political norms, which in previous eras might have derailed him politically, may illustrate a deeper disintegration of commonly shared political assumptions.

Her insight that this shift is indicative of a more profound shift in our other assumptions is a good one. She concludes her book with the question: “can people know who they are...without delineating who they are not?” (274) Answering this question individually is a far cry from answering it collectively and politically as a society or as a religious community.