Ever since the term “Judeo-Christian tradition” became popular in the USA in the 1940s, it has been used in opposition to five different Others: (1) the Christian tradition; (2) Greco-Roman culture; (3) modern secularism or atheism; (4) other religious traditions, e.g., Hindu, Zoroastrian, Shinto, Confucian, Buddhist, Taoist, African, Islamic, Sikh, or Native American; and (5) the Judeo-Christo-Islamic tradition, i.e., the Abrahamic or monotheistic tradition. In my following remarks, I should like to say some words about these five different usages of the term “Judeo-Christian tradition,” which correspond to its five significant Others.

I wish to emphasize at the outset that the distinction between these five different usages is no trivial matter. It is not academic nitpicking. It is very important to be able to distinguish between these five usages. When one hears someone affirm or deny the existence of the “Judeo-Christian tradition,” one must determine which of the five usages of the term is intended before one can decide if the user is a liberal or a conservative, a progressive or a reactionary, a tolerant person or an intolerant one, a philo-Semite or an anti-Semite, a do-gooder or an Islamophobe.

1 The Judeo-Christian Tradition vs. the Christian Tradition

I begin with the first significant Other of the term “Judeo-Christian tradition,” namely, the Christian tradition.

In the 1940s and 50s, the term “Judeo-Christian tradition” was used by Jews and liberal Christians in America in order to counter Christian exclusivism. A Christian might in the past have said, “The Christian tradition teaches love of neighbor.” This statement, innocent in itself, was often understood to mean that the Jewish tradition does not teach it. Jews responded that Judaism too teaches love of neighbor, as it is written in Leviticus 19:18: “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” Thus, one should not say, “the Christian tradition teaches love of neighbor,” but “the Judeo-Christian tradition teaches love of neighbor.” This ecumenical use of the term was intended to combat anti-Semitism, and to give Judaism a more accepted status among American religions.

Those who used the term “Judeo-Christian tradition” in this sense were not satisfied to interpret a verse here or a verse there. Their goals were much more ambitious. They argued that American values were not based on the Christian tradition, but on the Judeo-Christian tradition. The implicit premise of this argument was that Judaism and Christianity were somehow equals in American religious life. This sense of equality was perhaps most clearly expressed in the title of Will Herberg’s best-selling sociological book about religion in America: Protestant-Catholic-Jew (1955). Herberg considered this equality of “the three great religions” (viz., Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism) to be something distinctively American, and entirely incomprehensible to Europeans.2 Herberg wrote of the “Americanization” of Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism. He argued that in America, as opposed to Europe, the pluralism of religions was a basic value, and all religions were considered equal: “In America religious pluralism is...not merely a historical and political fact” but “an essential aspect of the American way of life.”3 The robust American use of the term “Judeo-Christian tradition” eventually had an influence on European intellectuals and ecumenists, but the influence was limited and conflicted.4

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3 Herberg, 85; cf. 96, n. 44.

Historians are confidently able to identify the precise day, nay, the precise hour, the term “Judeo-Christian tradition” achieved its vaunted victory over the term, “Christian tradition.” It was December 22, 1952, around noontime. On that hour of that day, then President-elect Dwight David Eisenhower made the following remark in the course of a speech: “[O]ur Government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply-felt religious faith, and I don’t care what it is. With us, of course, it is the Judeo-Christian concept, but it must be a religion that [teaches] all men are created equal.”5 On the eve of his first inauguration, Eisenhower thus stated clearly: our religion, our deeply-felt religious faith is “the Judeo-Christian concept.” In other words, according to Eisenhower, when the Declaration of Independence of the United States proclaimed “that all men are created equal” and “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights,” it did not allude to the Christian tradition, but to the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Earlier in 1952, the distinguished liberal Protestant theologian Paul Tillich published a very influential essay, “Is There a Judeo-Christian Tradition?” This essay was so influential that it determined the title of a conference in far-away Belgium 62 long years later. It may also have influenced Eisenhower’s comment. Tillich answered that there definitely is a Judeo-Christian tradition. Judaism and Christianity, he explained, are inextricably connected in history. However, he continued, this does not mean that they are identical or even compatible. Indeed, he observed, from the point of view of Christianity Judaism is a “Christian heresy” (the Jews rejected the Messiah) and from the point of view of Judaism Christianity is a “Jewish heresy” (the Christians rejected the Law). As a Christian theologian, Tillich insisted that Christianity must not try to deny its Jewish roots. Indeed, he intimated, a Christian who denies the “Judeo-Christian tradition” is guilty of the heresy of Marcion, who tried “to cut out of the [Christian Bible] not only the Old Testament but also everything in the New Testament reminding him of the Old.”6

The idea that historically-speaking Christianity cannot be severed from Judaism had been affirmed three centuries earlier by Baruch Spinoza, who held that one cannot understand the Greek of the New Testament if one does not know Hebrew, for although the external language of the New Testament is Greek, its underlying language is Hebrew.7 Spinoza held that Christianity cannot be under-

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stood apart from the Hebrew or Jewish tradition. It cannot be separated from the language, beliefs, and customs of the Jews. Had he known the term, he might have said that the New Testament is part of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Whatever heresies the Jew of Amsterdam was guilty of, he was not guilty of Marcionism.

In 1966, the prominent historian Jack H. Hexter published his erudite book, *The Judaeo-Christian Tradition*, which in effect gave the term “Judeo-Christian tradition” an academic respectability among historians. According to Hexter’s historical analysis, Christianity, in its initial stages, was simply Judaism without the Law: “Christianity shared with Judaism…a profound vision of God, a rigorous standard for the conduct of life, a highly organized community life in synagogue or church, and the requirement of conversion.” Hexter explained that Christianity was more “successful” than Judaism in converting gentiles because it rejected “the minute and exacting requirements” of the Law, including circumcision, thus offering the potential convert “those aspects of Judaism that the gentiles found most attractive,” while removing “the obstacles.”

The liberal ecumenical campaign on behalf of the term “Judeo-Christian tradition” was successful in the United States beyond all expectations. Indeed, for many Jews, it was too successful. Far too successful! The differences between Judaism and Christianity were being forgotten. Judaism was beginning to be seen as a Christian sect that had one or two idiosyncrasies – like preferring the menorah to the Christmas tree, or the matzah to the Easter egg. Jews now feared that this blurring of distinctions between Judaism and Christianity could lead to assimilation and intermarriage. The same well-meaning progressives who had energetically campaigned for the slogan “Judeo-Christian tradition” now energetically campaigned against it. The term “Judeo-Christian tradition” had become a sort of Frankenstein or Golem, audaciously turning against its creators and arousing fear in them. The term that had once represented the hope of civil equality had now suddenly come to represent the threat of religious assimilation.

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10, 150, where it is said that the New Testament was originally written in Hebrew. Cf. Epistle 75 (to Oldenburg), *Opera*, vol. iv, 315, on the Hebrew nature of the Gospel of John.
In an essay published in 1964, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, the eminent Talmudist and philosopher, argued that the term “Judeo-Christian tradition” was justified culturally, but not religiously: “[I]t is quite legitimate to speak of a cultural Judeo-Christian tradition... However, when we shift the focus from the dimension of culture to that of faith...the whole idea of a tradition of faiths... which are by their very nature incommensurate...is utterly absurd, unless one is ready to acquiesce in the Christian theological claim that Christianity has superseded Judaism.”

The pros and cons of the term “Judeo-Christian tradition” were presented thoughtfully in a 1965 lecture by Robert Gordis, a well-known rabbi and prolific scholar. His lecture was entitled, “The Judeo-Christian Tradition – Illusion or Reality.” He explained that the concept “came to flower” sometime during “the first half of the twentieth century” in response to “practical needs,” encountered little opposition “in its heyday,” but recently had come under attack. Some Jewish theologians, he continued, “dismiss[ed] it as an imaginary notion concocted to serve apologetic ends or political purposes.” In the end, he concluded, the concept has difficulties since there are basic differences between Judaism and Christianity, but it is not an “illusion” or a “myth,” since Judaism and Christianity do have partially common Scriptures and a partially common history.

Emblematic of the negative reaction to the big success of the “Judeo-Christian tradition” slogan was the Jewish theologian Arthur Cohen’s 1969 essay, “The Myth of the Judeo-Christian Tradition.” Gordis, three years earlier, had marshalled much damning evidence against the concept of a “Judeo-Christian tradition,” but ultimately affirmed it and denied it was a “myth.” Cohen rehashed much of the same evidence but concluded that the concept is indeed a “myth.” The “Judeo-Christian tradition” was thus not real, not historical – but a fiction, a myth. How, asked Cohen, could one speak of a “Judeo-Christian tradition” when one religion says the messiah has not come and the other says he has come? Cohen ignored the fact that only people who belonged to the same Scriptural tradition could fervently debate whether cryptic proof-texts from Isaiah or Daniel referred or did not refer to a certain Jew named Jesus of Nazareth.

Many Jews tended to agree with Cohen that the “Judeo-Christian tradition” was a “myth,” but they argued against him that it was a useful myth, or what Plato would have called “a noble lie.” The poet Edward Kaplan responded pensively: “even the myth, so-called, of the Judeo-Christian tradition is...a powerful and expedient religious posture, valid for most people here and now, and bearing witness to a...relationship with very real meaningfulness.” The response of Rabbi Jacob Chinitz was more pragmatic: “But what lies in store for...the Zionist venture?... The State of Israel makes sense to a world brought up on the Bible, but not to a secular, humanist world... There is, therefore, a political stake, to put it bluntly, in the retention of the concept of the Judeo-Christian tradition, even though, admittedly, it does not stand theological analysis.” In effect Chinitz was saying: As a rabbi I reject the notion of a “Judeo-Christian tradition,” but as a Zionist I affirm it. As a Jewish theologian, Chinitz had no use for the notion of a “Judeo-Christian tradition,” since it obscured the distinctiveness of the Jewish religion. However, as a supporter of Israel, he recognized its “political” usefulness: the reestablishment of Jewish independence in the Land of Israel was, in a real sense, a return to the Bible – and this return could be best appreciated by those who know the Bible and believe in it. Christians who perceive the modern State of Israel as part of their own biblical tradition could be expected to have sympathy for the Zionist cause.

The counter-campaign to denigrate the term “Judeo-Christian tradition” was itself very successful. For example, the celebrated Christian philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre, wrote in 1989 that Christians “need badly to listen to Jews,” but “not speak in their name”; for “the attempt [of Christians] to speak for [Jews], even on behalf of that unfortunate fiction, the so-called Judeo-Christian tradition, is always deplorable.” According to MacIntyre, the “so-called Judeo-Christian tradition” is an “unfortunate fiction,” and it is “deplorable” when a Christian speaks

14 Ibid., 4, 6.
15 While the notion of a “Judeo-Christian tradition” is wholly alien to internal Israeli discourse, representatives of Israel, when addressing Christians, regularly appeal to the common religious tradition of Jews and Christians. Cf., e.g., David Ben-Gurion’s letter to President Charles de Gaulle of France (6 December 1967), who was a devout Catholic: “[T]he entire...Christian world considered Palestine...to be a single country, which the Jewish people had hoped would someday belong to it again, as was promised by the Bible and the Prophets... For thousands of years we believed in the vision of our prophets... When a British royal commission [= the Peel Commission] came to Jerusalem at the end of 1936 to weigh the future of the Mandate, I said to it, ‘Our Mandate is the Bible.’”
on its behalf. MacIntyre, I would bet, had previously been criticized by Jewish colleagues for using the term “Judeo-Christian tradition,” and accepted the criticism uncritically. I do not know how MacIntyre would defend himself against the charge of Marcionism.

In 1987, there was an important scholarly conference on the “Judeo-Christian Tradition and the U.S. Constitution,” held at the prestigious Annenberg Research Institute in Philadelphia (now the Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies of the University of Pennsylvania), just a few blocks away from Independence Hall. It was reported there that many Americans, Jews and Christians alike, now considered the term “Judeo-Christian tradition” to be “apologetic, euphemistic, hypocritical” and “not authentic.”

Writing in 1986, the noted American Lutheran historian, Martin E. Marty, keenly distinguished between the early use of the term “Judeo-Christian tradition” in the 1940s and 1950s and the “new” use that became common in the 1970s. Agreeing with Cohen that the term was “essentially an invention of American politics,” he exclaimed: “Three cheers for that earlier political use, for it grew out of an effort to promote interfaith concord and to put an end to ageless prejudices.” However, he complained, the term had now been appropriated by “conservative intellectuals, politicians, and populists,” and was obscuring the important historical and theological differences between Judaism and Christianity, while at the same time excluding Muslims, Buddhists, secular humanists, and many others.

In short, the first of the five abovementioned usages of the term “Judeo-Christian tradition” is in contradistinction to the “Christian tradition.” It was a liberal and ecumenical usage. This is the usage that made the term voguish in the United States, but its popularity caused a violent backlash against it.

16 Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989, 10–11. I wonder what MacIntyre considers “deplorable.” There are many non-Jewish scholars who are capable of presenting Jewish teachings just as competently as any Jew, and similarly there are many Jewish scholars who are experts in the teachings of other religions. Moreover, how can MacIntyre interpret Aristotelian ethics, if he’s not a Greek?


2 The Judeo-Christian Tradition vs. Greco-Roman Culture

The second major Other of the “Judeo-Christian tradition” is Greco-Roman culture. Here the term “Judeo-Christian tradition” is used in the sense of “Hebraism vs. Hellenism” or “Jerusalem vs. Athens.” A good example of this usage is found already in 1941 in a lecture by James Luther Adams, the renowned Unitarian Universalist theologian. Replying to Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Adams presented “the Judeo-Christian tradition” as a worthy alternative to Apollonian intellectualism and Dionysian voluntarism. “According to the Judeo-Christian view,” he said, “God is a righteous will fulfilling his purpose in history.” Adams argued that while the ancient Greek view of life was melancholic, the Judeo-Christian view is moral, purposeful, and optimistic.

In the widely-used 917-page college sourcebook, *The Traditions of the Western World*, edited by Jack Hexter, together with J.W. Snyder, P. Riesenbarg, F.L. Ford, and K. Epstein, it was affirmed: “The principal sources of the traditions of the Western world are two – Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman”; and these two traditions are sometimes complementary and sometimes in “confrontation.” A fundamental task of students of Western civilization is thus to try to distinguish between its “Judeo-Christian” and “Greco-Roman” elements. For example, philosophy and democracy are Greco-Roman elements, while love of God and love of neighbor are Judeo-Christian elements.

This usage of the term “Judeo-Christian tradition” is often best replaced by the term “biblical tradition.”

3 The Judeo-Christian Tradition vs. Modern Secularism or Atheism

The third rival of the “Judeo-Christian tradition” is modern secularism or atheism. Here the term is used in the loose sense of *religion* vs. *irreligion*. An instructive example is found in a 1955 essay by the historian Irving G. Williams, who stated

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that the “cold war” is the “definitive struggle” between “Western Judeo-Christian civilization with its concepts of freedom” and “atheistic nihilistic Communism.”

In response, the philosopher Mordecai Roshwald wrote: the author forgets that atheists like “John Stuart Mill and Bertrand Russell have a share in Western Civilization and its tradition of freedom” and “Communism is a Western product [which] may to some extent be traced back to Judeo-Christian tradition (e.g., the eschatological element in Marxism).”

This usage of the term “Judeo-Christian tradition” as a synonym of “religion” is problematic for two reasons: first, it ignores the fact that there are religions other than Judaism and Christianity; second, many versions of modern secularism and atheism, including (but not exclusively) Marxism, exhibit distinct Judeo-Christian elements.

4 The Judeo-Christian Tradition vs. Other Religions

The fourth opponent of the “Judeo-Christian tradition” is any of the other religions, e.g., Hindu, Zoroastrian, Shinto, Confucian, Buddhist, Taoist, African, Islamic, Sikh, or Native American. Thus, for example, in a discussion of Japanese Bible translations, one might say: “There are some terms in the Judeo-Christian tradition that are difficult to translate into Japanese.” Tillich concluded his article on the Judeo-Christian tradition as follows. If someone raised on Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, or Greek religion, were to be told about Judaism and Christianity, with all their disputes and conflicts, he would be “astonished at the identity of structure at all points, and at the identity of content in most,” and would affirm unhesitatingly that there is a Judeo-Christian tradition.

It may be noted that the use of the term “Judeo-Christian tradition” in this sense is relevant even with regard to the third Abrahamic religion, Islam. Thus, one might contrast the portrayal of biblical characters, like Abraham, Joseph, Miriam, or Ezra, in the “Judeo-Christian tradition” with their portrayal in Islam. This does not, of course, mean that Judaism is always closer to Christianity than to Islam. There is also a “Judeo-Islamic tradition,” which may be contrasted with

22 Mordecai Roshwald, Review, Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 18 (1957), 279.
Christianity. Islam was formatively influenced by Jews and Judaism, and Jews living in Islamic lands were profoundly influenced by Islam and Arabic. In many – possibly most – areas, Judaism is closer to Islam than to Christianity. One might say, for example, “The place of law in the Judeo-Islamic tradition is more central than it is Christianity,” or “Theologians in the Judeo-Islamic tradition developed theories of strict monotheism, while Christian theologians were committed to the Trinity.” In sum, the use of the term “Judeo-Christian tradition” should not be taken to mean that Judaism is necessarily closer to Christianity than to other religions, just as the use of the term “Judeo-Islamic tradition” should not be taken to mean that Judaism is necessarily closer to Islam than to other religions. Is Judaism closer to Christianity or to Islam? Compelling arguments may be advanced for both opinions, and each historian or theologian is welcome to espouse his or her preferred narrative.


26 Needless to say, most Europeans presume that the “Judeo-Christian” connection is more important than the “Judeo-Islamic” one. Cf., e.g., Lyotard’s remark: “The hyphen...in the expression ‘Judeo-Christian’...is distinct from the other hyphens that associate or dissociate the name of the Jew from those of other nations where Jews are dispersed or exiled: Judeo-Arab, Judeo-Spanish, Judeo-Roman. For it is not at all the result of the diaspora or the galuth” (Lyotard and Gruber [cited above, n. 4], 15; French, 26). Cf. Gil Anidjar’s introduction to Jacques Derrida, Acts of Religion, ed. Anidjar, New York: Routledge, 2002, 10, n. 32: “Lyotard seems not to consider how the term Arab Jew could singularly disrupt the hyphen of Judeo-Christian.” Lyotard’s point regarding the Land of Israel vs. the Exile has its merits. However, one would not want to argue that the Jerusalem Talmud is culturally more significant than the Babylonian Talmud since the former was composed in the Land of Israel and the latter in the Diaspora.
5 The Judeo-Christian Tradition vs. the Judeo-Christo-Islamic Tradition, i.e., the Abrahamic or Monotheistic Tradition

Let us now turn finally to the fifth and most recent competitor of the “Judeo-Christian tradition.” Today, with the increase in the Muslim population in Europe and America, there has emerged a new polemical use of the term “Judeo-Christian tradition.” The term is now used by conservatives—and sometimes by Islamophobes—in opposition to what may be called the Judeo-Christo-Islamic tradition, which is also known as the Abrahamic tradition, the monotheistic tradition, or, in the phrase of Harry Austryn Wolfson, the tradition of “the three religions with cognate Scriptures.”27 According to this fifth usage, someone might say, “Religion in the European Union today is mostly part of the Judeo-Christian tradition.” However, since there are currently about 15 million Muslims in the European Union and only about 1 million Jews, it would be more accurate to say, “Religion in the European Union today is mostly part of the Judeo-Christo-Islamic tradition.” Thus, the term “Judeo-Christian tradition,” which was originally used to include Jews is now used to exclude Muslims.28

To say that the term “Judeo-Christo-Islamic tradition” should sometimes be used in place of the term “Judeo-Christian tradition” is obviously not to say that it should always be used in place of it. Thus, an author discussing concepts of love might reasonably write: “In the Judeo-Christian tradition theories of love are often based on the Song of Songs, while in the Islamic tradition they are often based on Qurānic verses.” Again, a social historian might reasonably write: “The Judeo-Christian tradition underwent a process of secularization in the 19th century to a greater extent than did the Islamic tradition.” Such statements may sometimes be debatable, but are not anti-Islamic. However, our author discussing concepts of love should not write: “The great religious love poems written in medieval Spain belong to the Judeo-Christian tradition”; for they belong to the Judeo-Christo-Islamic tradition. Again, our social historian should not write: “The Judeo-Christian tradition is amenable to secularization because it is a monotheistic tradition”; for it is the Judeo-Christo-Islamic tradition that is monotheistic and therefore amenable to secularization. In these latter cases, the term

28 Cf. Jehan Sadat, My Hope for Peace, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009, 30: “In Europe and America, people talk about the Judeo-Christian tradition, yet Islam is also part of this tradition and indeed shares many of the fundamental tenets set down in the Torah and the Gospels.”
“Judeo-Christian tradition” is used to exclude Islam. The exclusion is unreasonable and reflects a bias against Islam. In such cases, the term “Judeo-Christo-Islamic tradition” is appropriate.

The best example of the Judeo-Christo-Islamic tradition is the Medieval period in the history of Western philosophy. Medieval Philosophy was common to philosophers of all three Abrahamic religions. It sought to interpret the Greek philosophical tradition in accordance with the values and visions of the three cognate Scriptures. With regard to their philosophic positions, Medieval philosophers were not divided along confessional lines. For example, an Aristotelian such as the Christian Thomas Aquinas was much closer in his philosophical position to the Muslim Averroes or the Jew Maimonides than he was to the Christians Augustine, Anselm, or Bonaventure.

An explicit use of the term “Judeo-Christian tradition” (or “Judeo-Christian inspiration”) in this fifth sense is found in the controversial book by the French medievalist Sylvain Gouguenheim, _Aristote au Mont Saint-Michel_ (2008): “Fundamentally, European civilization remained of Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian inspiration... Islam was, since the redaction of the Qur'an, the bearer of a different comprehensive system.” Gouguenheim argues that one can explain the renaissance of science in 13th-century Christian Europe without having recourse to the influence of the Islamic world. That great scientific renaissance was, according to him, inspired by the Judeo-Christian tradition, not by the Judeo-Christo-Islamic tradition. If one evaluates Gouguenheim's thesis from the point of view of the history of philosophy, one concludes that he is right regarding Bonaventure but wrong regarding Aquinas. You could have Bonaventure without Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes, but you could not have Aquinas without them – yet it was Aquinas, not Bonaventure, who was the great revolutionary of 13th-century philosophy, who changed the direction of all future Western philosophy. Medieval philosophy was a “Judeo-Christo-Islamic tradition.”

Thus, for the sake of accuracy and ecumenism, one should in certain contexts substitute the term “Judeo-Christo-Islamic tradition” for the term “Judeo-Christian tradition.” To be sure, the term “Judeo-Christo-Islamic tradition” may itself sometimes be exclusivist, e.g., when it is used polemically with the intent to depreciate non-Abrahamic religions.

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Conclusion

To conclude, the term “Judeo-Christian tradition” has been used in five different senses since it became popular in the United States in the 1940s. Some of its uses have been praiseworthy, some blameworthy, and others indifferent. If you hear someone use the term, please, please, be sure to clarify its context before you assign praise or blame.

Bibliography


