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Interpreting Judeo-Christianity in America

Since Mark Silk's article "Notes on the Judeo-Christian Tradition in America" appeared in 1984, historians have extended, and in certain respects modified, his analysis. Silk argued that the term emerged from the antifascist initiatives of the late 1930s and rose to prominence during World War II, becoming a mainstay of postwar American public culture before falling into disrepute in the early 1970s. Subsequent interpreters have traced the emergence of Judeo-Christian terminology in specific local contexts, but no one has followed Silk in examining the discourse in its entirety or acknowledging the political tensions within it. This piece surveys the historical scholarship on the idea of America as a Judeo-Christian nation.

During the middle decades of the twentieth century, a sizable number of Americans took it as an article of faith that their democracy grew out of a coherent set of "Judeo-Christian" values with ancient roots. Like all concepts, the very idea of a "Judeo-Christian tradition" has a history of its own. Judeo-Christian rhetoric figured prominently in American public discourse during the tumultuous years from World War II until the mid-1970s, when

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many abandoned Judeo-Christian language. Yet there was a time when the phrase "Judeo-Christian tradition" bore little meaning for ordinary Americans and the adjective "Judeo-Christian" carried very different connotations for the small, specialized groups who used it. Exactly when and how did a Judeo-Christian discourse explicitly linked to American democracy and national identity take shape and become a feature of mainstream public culture? Where did it first appear, and what purposes has it served, then and since?

The current scholarly consensus holds that Judeo-Christian formulations of American identity emerged in the late 1930s and became widespread during World War II. In those years, commentators frequently counterpoised American democracy, with its vaunted respect for the freedom and dignity of the individual, to Nazi despotism, with its glaring disregard for the sanctity of the human person and basic human rights. However, antifascism was not the only factor in the advent of the Judeo-Christian discourse. The massive demographic shifts brought about by industrialization also played a decisive role. Before the Gilded Age, America had been an overwhelmingly Protestant country, although members of many other religious groups, especially Catholics, Jews, and Mormons, had established a significant presence.[1] But the vast influx of Catholic and Jewish immigrants between 1880 and 1920 transformed the nation's religious makeup. Scholars agree that Judeo-Christian formulations arose at a cultural crossroads where opposition to fascism converged with a burgeoning interfaith movement that sought to unite the three major religious groups—Protestants, Catholics, and Jews—into what was often referred to as a "tri-faith" nation.

If the Judeo-Christian tradition was constructed during World War II, it was enshrined during the early years of the Cold War, when the fight against "godless Communism" made it seem imperative to view America as a religious nation. The civil rights movement took shape within this idiom, laying bare the hypocrisy of a nation that touted the freedom and dignity of the individual in theory without mandating it in practice. In the 1960s and 1970s, however, a series of disillusioning events (including a spate of devastating assassinations, the Vietnam War, and Watergate) coupled with further demographic and cultural diversification caused many Americans to abandon Judeo-Christian formulations in favor of broader, and often more secular, descriptors of their nation's identity.

[1] For more on this, see R. Laurence Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) and Robert T. Handy, *Undermined Establishment: Church-State Relations in America, 1880–1920* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

Portraying the early Judeo-Christian discourse as essentially liberal in its orientation, scholars have emphasized its use to combat anti-Semitism and religious intolerance more broadly, both in Nazi Germany and at home. For example, in a 1986 *Christian Century* article, Martin E. Marty describes the Judeo-Christian concept as "an invention of American politics" that "grew out of an effort to promote interfaith concord and to put an end to ageless prejudices" during the World War II and postwar years. However, Marty adds, its orientation changed markedly in the 1970s and 1980s, when the Judeo-Christian discourse became a tool for the promotion of the Christian Right's conservative agenda. This development prompted "not a few Jews and other Americans" to regard "Judeo-Christian" as "a code word for those promoting a Christian America."[2] Yet Marty does not explore the possibility that earlier uses of the term may also have been less liberal and inclusive than historians have suggested. Mark Silk, whose widely cited 1984 article on America's Judeo-Christian tradition offers a considerably more nuanced portrait of the discourse, likewise asserts the primacy of the liberal fight against fascism in Judeo-Christianity's rise to prominence as a descriptor of American national identity.[3]

While it is certainly true that the majority of those who mobilized Judeo-Christian formulations during the 1930s and early 1940s were antifascists and proponents of interfaith amity, my own research shows that some early adopters of the new discourse had other political and cultural goals. The emerging Judeo-Christian discourse was neither as productive of stable cultural consensus nor as liberal, tolerant, or inclusive as historians have generally assumed. A linear narrative that treats the rise of Judeo-Christian formulations as evidence of an ever-widening sphere of tolerance cannot account for the spirit animating many such formulations, particularly those of the war and postwar years. While it is true that most who invoked the Judeo-Christian tradition sought to extend an olive branch to groups previously marginalized by the Protestant majority, some used the term to directly attack an increasingly secular American liberalism, calling it too long on tolerance

[2] Martin E. Marty, "A Judeo-Christian Looks at the Judeo-Christian Tradition," *The Christian Century*, October 8, 1986, 858–60.

[3] See Mark Silk, "Notes on the Judeo-Christian Tradition in America," *American Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (1984): 65–85, and *Spiritual Politics: Religion and America Since World War II* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 40–53. Silk addresses the multiplicity of the term's meanings in the Cold War era, but he insists that antifascism accounts for its rise in the earlier period.

and too short on genuine religious commitment. Historians are just beginning to explore these alternative meanings of the Judeo-Christian tradition, which strongly prefigured today's uses by conservatives.[4]

Even so, Silk's groundbreaking article "Notes on the Judeo-Christian Tradition in America" and the corresponding chapter in his *Spiritual Politics* (1988) remain the most comprehensive treatments to date of the Judeo-Christian discourse that flourished in mid-twentieth-century America. Silk explains that invocations of America's "Judeo-Christian tradition" emerged during the late 1930s and early 1940s among those who sought "a common faith for a united front" against fascism. "Fascist fellow-travelers and anti-Semites had appropriated 'Christian' as an identifying mark," he explains, and "'Judeo-Christian' thus became a catchword for the other side." As Silk summarizes, Judeo-Christian formulations signaled an "antifascist affirmation of a shared religious basis for western values."[5]

In exploring various arenas where the Judeo-Christian discourse took hold, subsequent interpreters have followed Silk's lead by identifying that language as an outgrowth of liberal antifascism that made Jews full participants in the American project. For example, this approach characterizes Deborah Dash Moore's article "Jewish GIs and the Creation of the Judeo-Christian Tradition" (1998) and book *GI Jews* (2004). However, Moore turns her attention from public discourse to institutions. "Military policy," she argues, facilitated "the emergence of a civil religion for American democracy," one variously signaled by the phrases "Judeo-Christian tradition" and "Protestant-Catholic-Jew." As Moore explains, military officials sought to improve interfaith relations among the troops by providing Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish chaplains and by stressing the spiritual unity of the three faiths. Indeed, Moore calls the Judeo-Christian tradition "largely a creation of the American military in World War II." Ironically, she notes, an institution hardly known for its progressive views helped to make a place for American Jews at the national table, just as it later stood in the vanguard of racial integration during the Truman years.[6]

[4] K. Healan Gaston, "The Genesis of America's Judeo-Christian Moment: Secularism, Totalitarianism, and the Redefinition of Democracy" (Ph.D. Diss. University of California, Berkeley, 2008).

[5] Silk, "Notes," 66–68.

[6] Deborah Dash Moore, "Jewish GIs and the Creation of the Judeo-Christian Tradition," *Religion and American Culture* 8, no. 1 (1998): 31–53, *GI Jews: How World War II Changed a Generation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), xi.

Similarly, in *Religious Pluralism in America* (2003), William R. Hutchison seeks to pinpoint how the Judeo-Christian discourse of the mid-twentieth century differed from invocations of that term in an earlier era. According to Hutchison, scholars had long used "Judeo-Christian" to signal the assumption that "Christianity had retained some elements of Judaism but also had 'fulfilled' and in effect replaced it." He claims that while this supersessionist strain of thought flourished among American Christians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the term "Judeo-Christian" and the phrase "Judeo-Christian tradition" took on new meanings when they began to circulate widely in the years around World War II: "*Judeo-Christian* became a shorthand term for a worldview, and a set of beliefs, that Jews and Christians held in common." Hutchison's account implies that the supersessionist dimensions of Judeo-Christian discourse had largely vanished by the World War II era.[7]

Stephen Prothero enters the interpretive fray in *American Jesus* (2003), where he argues that Jewish leaders were the originators and staunchest defenders of Judeo-Christian formulations. Taking Silk to task for overemphasizing both the extent of Jewish skepticism about the Judeo-Christian discourse and the role of neo-orthodox theology in its rise to prominence, Prothero claims that "Jewish writers embraced the [Judeo-Christian] concept, in some cases long before the Christian thinkers cited by Silk." Prothero's analysis rests on his reading of works by the Jewish authors John Cournos and Sholem Asch. He credits Cournos with "a daring effort to interpret Jesus and Christianity in a Jewish light." And both Cournos and Asch, Prothero notes, "hoped that Jesus could serve as a bridge holding the Jewish and Christian traditions together." Prothero aligns these writers with John M. Oesterreicher, a Jewish convert to Catholicism who founded an Institute for Judaeo-Christian Studies at Seton Hall in 1953 to bring Jews into a deeper engagement with Christianity. Yet Prothero's interpretation falters when one considers how far beyond the mainstream of American Jewry these figures stood when compared to the Reform rabbi Stephen S. Wise, another central character in Prothero's account whom he describes as "the best-known rabbi in the United States."[8]

[7] William R. Hutchison, *Religious Pluralism in America: The Contested History of a Founding Ideal* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 197–98.

[8] Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2003), 258–61, 231, 253.

Despite Prothero's attempt to yoke Wise together with these less representative characters, the historical record suggests that the efforts of Oesterreicher, Cournos, and Asch provoked considerable resistance from Wise and other mainstream American Jewish leaders. Prothero himself acknowledges that Oesterreicher's Jewish critics characterized "his attempt to construe Jesus as the connecting link between Jews and Christians" as "a thinly veiled missionary effort." He also mentions that Cournos provoked harsh words from the likes of Rabbi Louis I. Newman for seeking "to make a place for Jews at the American table by minimizing the distance between Christianity and Judaism."[9] In the end, Prothero's effort to read Cournos as an ally of Wise in a concerted push to reclaim Jesus for Judaism founders on the missionary dimension of Cournos' writings. In a *New York Times* article from 1938, Wise vocally rejected Cournos's suggestion that "the answer to the Jewish problem lies in the acceptance of Jesus Christ." Jews, Wise pointedly insisted, "cannot believe in 'the Christ of dogma' in order 'to be saved or to be safe.'" The fact that Cournos drew fire from Wise is doubly significant because Wise himself courted charges of heterodoxy for his longstanding association with the Unitarian John Haynes Holmes and his Community Church. Even in interfaith circles, Wise's less theologically charged advocacy of brotherhood between Christians and Jews still struck many as overly syncretistic in its emphasis on union between the faiths.[10]

Prothero's critique that Silk overlooks Jewish uses of the Judeo-Christian terminology falls short in another respect as well. The earliest user of Judeo-Christian discourse that Silk cites is Joseph Freeman, a communist writer and editor who was culturally, though not religiously, Jewish. Overall, however, the historical record frustrates any attempt to trace Judeo-Christian discourse exclusively to American Jews. My own research reveals not only

[9] Prothero, *American Jesus*, 260, 253.

[10] "Totalitarianism Is Scored: Dr. Wise Declares Jews Cannot Believe in 'Christ of Dogma,'" *New York Times*, April 18, 1938, 15. Wise's disavowal of Cournos is particularly interesting when examined in tandem with the reflections of a reviewer who described Cournos's call for "the acceptance of Jesus by the Jews" as devoid of both "historical realism" and "sociological analysis." The reviewer wondered whether Cournos would be treated differently than "liberal Jews who cooperate with Unitarians and other liberals on social issues." And he specifically asked whether "the action of Rabbi Wise in taking such a position [had] changed his status appreciably in relation the to Christian Church" (Maynard Cassady, review of *An Open Letter to Jews and Christians*, by John Cournos, *Journal of Bible and Religion* 7, no. 1 (1939): 49–50). Wise's own remarks suggest that he viewed his efforts "to reclaim Jesus for Judaism" as very different in tenor from Cournos's project.

that both Wise and Newman used Judeo-Christian formulations earlier than did Cournos, but also that non-Jews used them even earlier. Still, Prothero's work on Cournos and Asch adds an important dimension to our understanding of the range of Jewish opinion concerning Judeo-Christian formulations in the era of World War II.

In recent years, the number of analysts of Judeo-Christianity in America has grown considerably and the interpretive landscape has become more polarized. In *Inventing the "American Way"* (2008), Wendy Wall identifies the Judeo-Christian tradition as one of many competing visions of "consensus" that emerged as powerful new modes of American nationalism during the World War II era. "Ecumenical religion," Wall writes, "could serve simultaneously as a symbol of American pluralism and American consensus."[11] On the other hand, J. Terry Todd's 2010 essay on "The Temple of Religion and the Politics of Religious Pluralism: Judeo-Christian America at the 1939–1940 New York World's Fair" argues that the "new tri-faith model" of American identity projected by the New York Temple actually narrowed the boundaries of interwar religious pluralism. Todd's piece shows that, at least in this case, "the rhetoric of American religious pluralism was driven by a politics of exclusion that … rendered invisible the messy realities of religious life in order to present the illusion of a nation united."[12]

According to Todd, one visitor to the Temple "smartly exposed the contradiction at the heart of the project" when he asked "whether the New York fair could really claim to present a 'Temple of Religion' if it shut out every tradition other than Judaism and Christianity." This visitor concluded that the Temple needed a new name: "'The Temple of the Established Religions of America.'" Especially fascinating is Todd's juxtaposition of New York's Temple of Religion with that found at San Francisco's Golden Gate Exposition during the same years. The San Francisco Temple, he notes, included "Mormons, Seventh-Day Adventists, Baha'is, and Christian Scientists—groups that had been barred from New York's temple"—as well as a very visible Buddhist presence.[13]

[11] Wendy Wall, *Inventing the "American Way": The Politics of Consensus from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 9–10, 77–87.

[12] J. Terry Todd, "The Temple of Religion and the Politics of Religious Pluralism: Judeo-Christian America at the 1939–1940 New York World's Fair," in *After Pluralism: Reimagining Religious Engagement*, ed. Courtney Bender and Pamela E. Klassen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 207, 203.

[13] Ibid., 215, 217.

In sharp contrast to Todd's emphasis on the exclusionary dimensions of Judeo-Christianity, Kevin M. Schultz describes Judeo-Christian rhetoric as "religious, inclusive, untainted," a much-needed "salve" for interfaith conflict. Identifying that rhetoric closely with the National Conference of Christians and Jews (NCCJ), Schultz contends that Judeo-Christian language was "adopted broadly in the late 1930s, when a variety of intellectuals"—foremost among them NCCJ director Everett R. Clinchy—"were searching for an inclusive ideal to counter fascism and its cynical alignment with Protestantism and Christianity." Calling the NCCJ the "organizational midwife" of the term "Judeo-Christian," Schultz says that "Clinchy began using the phrase in nearly all his talks" by November of 1938.[14]

Furthermore, Schultz claims, the phrase acquired "two distinct meanings during the war": one "theological, pointing to the common texts shared by each of the three faiths," and the other "civic," indicating "a broad arrangement where Protestants, Catholics, and Jews could all participate in the American project without losing their religious identities or having to accommodate to a Protestant cultural hegemony." The civic connotation, according to Schultz, was the "less demanding and controversial meaning of Judeo-Christianity, one without a theological core, but one that might more easily promote civic harmony." Schultz invokes this distinction in his account of Will Herberg's *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* (1955), a book that he says "affirmed the arrival of tri-faith America" even as it signaled "the triumph of the civic version of Judeo-Christianity at the expense of the prophetic one."[15]

Collectively, the works of Moore, Hutchison, Prothero, Wall, Todd, and Schultz have contributed much to our understanding of the Judeo-Christian discourse in its various local settings: in the military and the interfaith movement, in debates concerning the meaning of Jesus for Jews and the trope of "the American way," in presentations of religious pluralism in the Temples of Religion and wartime public discourse. Yet two agendas from Silk's pioneering effort remain unfulfilled. First, it is crucial to put the pieces back together and gain a sense of the full range of locations in which the Judeo-Christian discourse took shape before and during World War II and evolved thereafter. As yet, no subsequent interpreter has followed Silk in essaying a comprehensive view of the Judeo-Christian discourse as a whole.

[14] Kevin M. Schultz, *Tri-Faith America: How Catholics and Jews Held Postwar America to Its Protestant Promise* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 58, 79.

[15] Ibid., 58–59, 85.

Nor have scholars picked up on another lead: Silk's recognition of both the diversity of meanings assigned to the Judeo-Christian tradition and the lingering opposition to that concept's use, not least among some Jews. Even as Silk termed America's Judeo-Christian tradition "a common faith for a united front," he paid close attention to the exceptions to this rule and emphasized the political and theological ambiguity of Judeo-Christian formulations. Observing that "the Judeo-Christian forces were not always precise about the meaning of their rallying cry," he pointed out that "greater precision might have provoked unwanted disagreement." Silk also explored the objections of Jewish writers such as Trude Weiss-Rosmarin and, later, Arthur A. Cohen, who rejected the idea of a corporate Jewish-Christian religious identity. Finally, he considered the arguments of other "recusants" from "the Judeo-Christian enterprise," including Catholics such as John Courtney Murray. Indeed, Silk noted that when Judeo-Christian formulations did appear in postwar Catholic writings, as in the work of Jacques Maritain, they were "always qualified, often amounting to no more than an acknowledgement of the Jewish roots of Christianity."[16] Perhaps, Silk's account hints, the supersessionist connotations of the term had not faded so fully from view by mid-century.[17]

The question of Catholic participation in Judeo-Christian discourse during the 1940s and 1950s remains open. Historians of American Catholicism have routinely insisted that Catholics had little incentive to participate in Judeo-Christian discourse, and plenty of reasons to abstain. For instance, John T. McGreevy characterizes Judeo-Christian formulations as implicitly anti-Catholic, due to their rejection of top-down authority and their emphasis on the prophetic and scriptural foundations of Judeo-Christian faith. McGreevy, Philip Gleason, and others have linked the discourse of Judeo-Christianity with many liberals' increasingly strident criticism of the Catholic Church during the 1940s.[18] But a closer look at the postwar years suggests

[16] Silk, "Notes," 67–68, 77.

[17] For other critiques in this vein, see Marshall Grossman, "The Violence of the Hyphen in Judeo-Christian," *Social Text* 22 (Spring 1989): 115–22 and Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, "Getting Religion," in *One Nation Under God? Religion and American Culture*, ed. Marjorie Garber and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (New York: Routledge, 1999), 109.

[18] John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003); Philip Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002). McGreevy interprets Judeo-Christian conceptions of American identity as one example of the widespread effort of scholars to link "democratic traditions to the Protestant reformers," a strategy that "clearly distinguished Catholic from American." His analysis

that Catholics often did mobilize Judeo-Christian formulations, particularly to combat secular liberalism and strict church-state separation.

Needed now is a detailed account of the full range of meanings and purposes that Americans ascribed to the newly invented Judeo-Christian tradition. Such a project would follow Silk's lead by focusing directly on the spread of Judeo-Christian formulations rather than treating them as subsidiary to another story; by taking a comprehensive view of the discourse as a whole; and by acknowledging the divisions it produced. Indeed, it turns out that from its inception the Judeo-Christian discourse was even more fractured and contested than Silk realized. Relatively stable patterns of internal disagreement characterized the Judeo-Christian discourse from the get-go. We might think about that discourse as the site of a lingustically unified but widely divergent spectrum of views, with the polar positions resting on very different assumptions about the relationship between religion and democracy and the definition of the term "religion" itself. Elsewhere, I have termed those at the poles "Judeo-Christian pluralists," who celebrated religious diversity in theory, if not always in practice, and stressed tolerance as the centerpiece of democracy; and "Judeo-Christian exceptionalists," who endorsed a narrower conception of America's religious diversity and regarded belief in a Judeo-Christian God as democracy's indispensable foundation.[19]

From the 1930s forward, in fact, Judeo-Christian formulations were arrayed not only against fascism but also against communism and even secular liberalism. The rise of the Judeo-Christian discourse paralleled the emergence of the term "totalitarianism" during the late 1930s and early 1940s. In the context of the struggle against totalitarianism, Judeo-Christian pluralism and exceptionalism offered different answers to a perennial political question: What sort of cultural foundation (if any) does democracy require? In answering this question, pluralists typically identified fascism as the primary enemy. To a surprising degree, by contrast, exceptionalists targeted atheistic Marxism or even the secularizing tendencies of the New Deal at home. Moreover, exceptionalists routinely interpreted fascism as an outgrowth of secularism, rather than emphasizing its affinities with Christian nationalism. By looking

suggests, in fact, that the primary architects of the Judeo-Christian tradition were secular and Jewish scholars (176). Similarly, Philip Gleason equates the Judeo-Christian tradition with the postulation of a "religion of democracy" by liberal scholars in the vein of John Dewey during the 1930s and 1940s (*Speaking of Diversity: Language and Ethnicity in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992)).

[19] Gaston, "Genesis of America's Judeo-Christian Moment."

squarely at Judeo-Christian formulations, one can see the full range of political and cultural functions that they served, while also attending to the deep and consequential divisions they so often obscured.

Also important are changes in the Judeo-Christian discourse in the 1950s and 1960s, an era that witnessed vigorous debates over the meaning and cultural dimensions of democracy. Among the surprises of these years is the fact that Will Herberg, the Jewish theologian and sociologist of religion whose 1955 book *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* is widely seen to have marked the arrival of Jews and Catholics in the American religious mainstream, actually sought to draw boundaries as well as to tear them down. As Herberg limned the contours of American religious pluralism in the heart of the early Cold War, he also moved steadily toward the political right, eventually ending up at William F. Buckley, Jr.'s *National Review*. Like many exceptionalists at the time, Herberg proposed that Jews—and Protestants—could find a place in the American project only if they defined their nation and themselves in religious terms and took a strong stand against secularism and strict church-state separation. As the example of Herberg shows, the postwar trajectories of Judeo-Christian formulations will richly repay further study by new generations of scholars.[20]

A final observation about methodology: America's Judeo-Christian tradition appears on its face to be a classic example of the invention of tradition, a notion theorized most prominently by Eric Hobsbawm.[21] The "invented-ness" of the Judeo-Christian tradition is especially apparent because of the term's hybridity and its comparatively recent rise to prominence. In addition, Judeo-Christianity still lacks the solidity of competing descriptors with much longer histories in American public discourse, such as "Protestant" and "Christian." Yet reading America's Judeo-Christian tradition as an invention

[20] K. Healan Gaston, "The Cold War Romance of Religious Authenticity: Will Herberg, William F. Buckley, Jr., and the Rise of the New Right," *Journal of American History* 99, no. 4 (2013). For more on Judeo-Christian discourse in Cold War America, see Jeremi Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); William Inboden III, *Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945–1960: The Soul of Containment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); T. Jeremy Gunn, *Spiritual Weapons: The Cold War and the Forging of an American National Religion* (Westport: Praeger, 2009); and Jonathan P. Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex: America's Religious Battle Against Communism in the Early Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[21] Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1–14.

may court the danger of suggesting that other traditions are uncontested or authentic. Taking the more consistent view that all traditions are invented focuses our attention squarely on the contexts in which ideas emerge, sensitizing us to the cultural work that ideas must do in order to come into being in the first place and to sustain their meanings over time.

Tisa Wenger makes precisely this point in her work on the Pueblo Indians. The "invented tradition" notion is particularly controversial in the study of indigenous peoples because it can be read as casting aspersions on the authenticity of their traditions. As Wenger observes, "analyzing some traditions as 'invented' can be misleading if it presumes a contrast with other putatively pure or authentic traditions." In her words, "all tradition is in a constant process of reinvention to meet contemporary needs." Wenger concludes by suggesting that historians should "talk not about invented traditions but about all tradition as adapted and adaptable."[22] A similar point could be made about Benedict Anderson's notion of "imagined communities," which refers explicitly to the construction of national identities.[23] In both cases, the emphasis can fall so heavily on the "invented" or "imagined" that it draws our attention away from the impact of the traditions and communities that a term like "Judeo-Christian" helped to promote.

Yet there is still a case to be made for the notion that America's Judeo-Christian tradition is not analogous to the religious traditions and communities to which we apply terms such as Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism, no matter how constructed or contested the latter traditions may in fact be. Like the amorphous phenomenon of civil religion, America's Judeo-Christian tradition lacks many of the features we associate with institutionalized religions. Indeed, it may be most accurate to regard the Judeo-Christian tradition as itself a form of civil religion, because those who tout it often simultaneously identify as members of institutionalized religions. Similarly, one could be a practicing member of a faith community in the middle decades of the twentieth century and still be accused of worshipping "the religion of democracy" or even "the religion of secularism."[24] Such foils to

[22] Tisa Wenger, "'We Are Guaranteed Freedom': Pueblo Indians and the Category of Religion in the 1920s," *History of Religions* 45, no. 2 (2005): 92.

[23] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (New York: Verso, 1991).

[24] See K. Healan Gaston, "Demarcating Democracy: Liberal Catholics, Protestants, and the Discourse of Secularism," in *American Religious Liberalism*, ed. Leigh E. Schmidt and Sally M. Promey (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 351–54.

America's Judeo-Christian tradition offer valuable insight into how civil religions differ from more traditional faiths.

Perhaps at bottom all of these variants of civil religion are spawned by the perennial debate about America's religious identity. Each provides an answer to the defining question of that debate: *Is America a religious nation or a secular one?* To call America a religious nation raises the question of its precise religious character: Is America Protestant, Christian, Judeo-Christian, Abrahamic, spiritual, pluralistic, or "religious" in some more amorphous sense? Alternately, to call America a secular nation provokes its own questions: What does the condition of secularity entail? Did America become secular at its founding or at some subsequent point in its history, such as the Progressive Era or the 1960s and 1970s? The welter of competing answers to this cluster of questions about America's religious identity has profoundly shaped our understanding of democracy and the conditions required for its maintenance. It continues to do so today, powerfully molding the contours of our political rhetoric and helping to demarcate the boundaries of the politically possible.

Some would even say that competing constructions of American religious identity fuel our contemporary culture wars. In April of 2009, President Barack Obama set off a firestorm of controversy when he noted during a visit to Turkey that, despite America's "very large Christian population," Americans "do not consider ourselves a Christian nation or a Jewish nation or a Muslim nation" but rather "a nation of citizens who are bound by ideals and a set of values."[25] A month later, Republican Congressman Randy Forbes, the founder and co-chairman of the Congressional Prayer Caucus, and twenty-four other members of the House of Representatives challenged Obama's position by introducing House Resolution 397, a bill designating the first week in May "America's Spiritual Heritage Week." In May of 2010, Forbes and his supporters redoubled their efforts with House Resolution 274, a bill "reaffirming 'In God We Trust' as the official motto of the United States and supporting and encouraging the public display of the national motto in all public buildings, public schools, and other governmental institutions."[26]

Although Judeo-Christian rhetoric no longer figures as prominently in American public discourse as it did during the middle decades of the twenti-

[25] J. Randy Forbes, "Obama Is Wrong When He Says We Are Not a Judeo-Christian Nation," *U.S. News & World Report*, May 7, 2009.

[26] http://forbes.house.gov/judeochristiannation/default.aspx.

eth century, the standoff between Obama and Forbes confirms that it remains alive and well in our own day. Most recently, Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney's repeated invocations of "Judeo-Christian values" have demonstrated the continuing relevance of the Judeo-Christian discourse to contemporary political contests.[27] As I have suggested here, this is true because Judeo-Christian rhetoric speaks to contentious and consequential questions that have preoccupied Americans since the founding of their nation—questions that will surely remain open to debate in any foreseeable future.

[27] For instance, see Daniel Burke, "Romney appeals to evangelicals through shared 'Judeo-Christian' values," *Religion News Service*, September 28, 2011, http://www.religionnews.com/politics/election/romney-appeals-to-evangelicals-through-judeo-christian-values.