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Introduction

State of the Question

THE BULGARIAN-BORN, Sephardic-Jewish, German-writing, Nobel-prize-winning modernist Elias Canetti wrote: "Jews are a people who most widely differ from themselves."[1] Franz Kafka's musings in his diary echo Canetti: "What have I in common with my fellow Jews, I hardly have anything in common with myself."[2] *A fortiori*, what would Canetti and Kafka have in common with Christianity? Jewish identity may require a hyphen, but attaching Christian to it could not possibly have made sense to them. Yet some Jewish thinkers have indeed imagined it. The German-Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig, for example, argued that translating Hebrew texts

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[1] Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1984), 178.

[2] Franz Kafka, *The Diaries of Franz Kafka*, ed. Max Brod, trans. Martin Greenberg, vol. 2 *1914–1923*, 2 vols. (1949; New York: Schocken Books, 1965), entry of January 8, 1914, 267.

into German was a way of Christianizing them. In fact, Jewish identity, at times, has been trapped in Christian languages. Jews actually used Christian categories of thought to define their religious sensibilities.[3]

But can we imagine the roles reversed? How natural would it be for some to speak and how cultural would it be for some to listen? Let us answer with a Yiddish joke: A Jew converts to Christianity. The morning after his visit to the baptismal font, he wakes up, puts on his *tephillin* and *tallit* and begins to pray. "Moysche," his wife yells, "*Host zikh nekhtn geshmat*?" ("You converted to Christianity?") He stops praying, slaps his head and shouts "*Goyisher kop*!" ("Gentile head!" or "simpleton"). Another Yid is passed over for a promotion at work and says "*Ikh hob zikh geshmat*" ("Have I converted to Christianity?" i.e., "Am I not relevant?"). The whole point in speaking Yiddish (or "Jewish"), is not to speak *Goyish*. Amazingly though, terms like *goy*, *shmuck*, *schmagagee*, *shiksa*, *schlep*, and *shalom*, roll off the American-English tongue easily.

However, we discovered something different when co-teaching an undergraduate course, entitled "Jews and Christians: Creating Difference," in Autumn 2010 at Virginia Tech.[4] These students, some from Appalachia but most from the cosmopolitan suburbs of Northern Virginia and points northwards, seemed quite comfortable using the term "Judeo-Christian," yet were uncomfortable accepting the "Judeo" part of the term. In fact, there were more than a few students who believed Judaism was a form of Christianity. The course was a learning experience for everyone involved—both the students and us. It is because of this experience that, with the help of a grant from the Jerome Niles Faculty Fellowship given through Virginia Tech's College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, we hosted a symposium on "Revisiting the 'Judeo-Christian' Tradition" on October 28–29, 2011. The essays here presented grew from that symposium, as well as—and more significantly—from the generous and rich conversations that were engendered over the course of those two days.[5]

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[3] Fritz A. Rothschild, ed., *Jewish Perspectives on Christianity: Leo Baeck, Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, Will Herberg, Abraham Joshua Heschel* (Continuum: New York, 1996), 6.

[4] We must, first and foremost, thank these students. As we note, we learned as much as we taught that semester. And let us also offer a special note of thanks to Nicole Faut, our undergraduate assistant in 2011–12, who was working on her own research project related to Judeo-Christianity in Southwest Virginia.

[5] Here, let us thank the editors at *Relegere* for their work on this issue, as well as Prof. Hannah Johnson and Prof. Mark Silk, the other participants in our original symposium, who were not able to be included in this issue.

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In contemporary American society, the adjective "Judeo-Christian" rolls more easily off the tongue than *schmagagee*. Yet, as often as "Judeo-Christian" is deployed,[6] it rarely is defined, perhaps because few feel the need to define it. Yet, historically, Jews and Christians spent many centuries trying to distance themselves from one another. Daniel Boyarin has done excellent, provocative work on the relationship between Jews and Christians in antiquity— how tricky it was to distinguish between them, yet how each nonetheless tried so hard to be distinct.[7] Jonathan Boyarin and Jeremy Cohen (among many others) have done similar work on the Middle Ages.[8] David Nirenberg's work, in particular, has been provocative in arguing how violence by Christians defined their relationship to the Jews.[9] In the modern period, the word "Judeo-Christian" was first used in the early nineteenth century but only gained widespread acceptance in the early twentieth century, when American progressive groups attempted to counter a rising tide of xenophobia. Political and social conservatives of the 1950s then used it as a counter to the atheistic streak in Soviet communism and "Judeo-Christian" now suffuses the rhetoric of the religious right, especially in their support of the state of Israel.[10] In the early 1970s, Arthur Cohen attacked the use of the term

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[6] A quick Google News search revealed more than 240 unique uses of the term within the space of seven days alone (search conducted November 17, 2011).

[7] Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); and idem, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). His work is, of course, only the tip of the iceberg. The following brief survey of the scholarship will be necessarily supplemented by the essays to follow in this volume.

[8] Jeremy Cohen, *Living Letters of the Law: Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Jonathan Boyarin, *The Unconverted Self: Jews, Indians, and the Identity of Christian Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

[9] David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); but now see Jonathan M. Elukin, *Living Together, Living Apart: Rethinking Jewish-Christian Relations in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

[10] See Shalom Goldman, "What do we mean by 'Judeo-Christian'?," *Religion Dispatches*, January 21, 2011, http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/politics/3984/what_do_we_mean_by_'judeo-christian'_. Also, see the more substantive treatments in Kevin M. Schultz, *Tri-Faith America: How Catholics and Jews Held Postwar America to Its Protestant Promise* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); and 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).

but it remains ubiquitous.[11] Mark Silk traced the development of the idea in his seminal *American Quarterly* article and found it alive and well in the early 1980s.[12] Just a few years later, Martin Marty of the University of Chicago also championed the use of the term (albeit with some reservations).[13]

The political implications of this term are vast. Recently, the standards for high school social studies adopted in 2009 by the Texas State Board of Education directed teachers to "explain the development of democratic-republican government from its beginnings in the Judeo-Christian legal tradition," and "identify major intellectual, philosophical, political, and religious traditions that informed the American founding, including Judeo-Christian (especially biblical law)."[14] Chairman of the Texas Board of Education Don McElroy supported the changes by writing, "What is it about the development of the West that made it so remarkable and unique? … What is the ultimate source of these ideals of freedom, equality, and limited government? … I believe the best and really only answer to all the above questions is the gradual assimilation of Judeo-Christianity in the West."[15] For the political conservatives who proposed the inclusion of this language about the "Judeo-Christian" roots of the United States, it was only common sense, because "to deny the Judeo-Christian values of our founding fathers is just a lie to our kids."[16]

But there is something else going on here. The changes suggested by the Texas Board of Education occurred simultaneously with a move to eliminate (what they found to be) "objectionable pro-Islam" bias from textbooks used by the state. For the Board, "pro-Islam" meant "anti-Christian," hence "if you have world history books that downplay Christianity—Judeo-Christianity—and it doesn't even make it in the table of contents, I think there's a great con-

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[11] Arthur Cohen, *The Myth of the Judeo-Christian Tradition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).

[12] Mark Silk, "Notes on the Judeo-Christian Tradition in America," *American Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (1984): 65–85.

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

[14] Document available at http://www.tea.state.tx.us/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=2147485020.

[15] Letter reprinted at http://www.americanhumanist.org/2009/McLeroy_Letter.

[16] See James C. McKinley Jr., "Texas Conservatives Seek Deeper Stamp on Texts," *The New York Times*, March 10, 2010. A similar debate is also now unfolding near Virginia Tech, in the Giles County (VA) public schools. See Katelyn Polantz, "Ten Commandments Debate Returns to Giles County School Board," *The Roanoke Times* (May 20, 2011), http://www.roanoke.com/news/roanoke/wb/287103.

cern."[17] The implications here are rather subtle but nonetheless revealing; in this particular situation, the use of "Judeo-Christianity"—deployed, notably, as a noun and not an adjective—was a rhetorical move meant to evoke the earliest centuries of the Common Era, when the boundaries between "Jews" and "Christians" were still so blurry and when the monotheisms are remembered to have endured near-constant persecution at the hands of their enemies. This is an idealized Christianity untainted (in the eyes of the Texas conservatives and their allies on the Board of Education) by multiculturalism and secularism.

On the other side of the political spectrum, the term "Judeo-Christian" may also provide an unlikely precedent for dealing with another crucial issue facing the future of religion in America: the integration of the LBGTQ community. Any reader of Christianity's historical documents discovers immediately a deeply embedded anti-Judaism that has historically driven Christian theology. In the wake of the Holocaust, more work has been done to tone down, or even abrogate entirely, this divisive theological element in Christianity than had ever been done in its two thousand year-old existence.[18] Cynicism aside, the idea of "Judeo-Christianity" may provide for an unexpected opportunity to bring Jews and Christians together. Theological rhetoric coming from mainstream American churches is now rarely anti-Semitic but is sometimes ferociously homophobic. Proponents of this hateful language link it to a literal reading of the Bible. They also base it on a "Judeo-Christian" tradition. If traditionalists were able to set aside a perceived antiquated anti-Judaism in favor of a Judeo-Christianity, why could they not do the same for the gay and lesbian community?

Although there has been some work done on the how American evangelicals have rhetorically framed themselves as a new incarnation of the persecuted Church,[19] very little has been done on how this elision of Jews and

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[17] "Texas Board of Ed: Textbooks Are Anti-Christian," *CBS News* (September 23, 2010), http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2010/09/23/national/main6893460.shtml.

[18] Pope Benedict XVI only recently "exonerated" the Jews' responsibility in the death of Jesus (Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth. Part Two. Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection*, trans. P. J. Whitmore (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 184–88). See also: A. Roy Eckardt, *Jews and Christians: The Contemporary Meeting* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986)); Peter von der Osten-Sacken, *Christian-Jewish Dialogue: Theological Foundations* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986); James Carroll, *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews, A History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001).

[19] For example, see Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), especially 172–203; and more recently

Christians works within this framework. So, is the overwhelming American evangelical support for Israel the same as support for Jews as a whole?[20] Why do certain Jewish groups use the term "Judeo-Christian" in the same way as evangelicals? Why do "secularists" and "progressives" use the term in the same way as both groups? Are all modern invocations of the term "Judeo-Christianity" done in the same register or are certain segments of contemporary society simply speaking past each other?

These are a few of the questions that drive the inquiries presented here in this issue. In the first set of essays, Jason von Ehrenkrook and Jeremy Schott will open the conversation by reconsidering, from the perspective of antiquity, some categories associated with the American Judeo-Christian tradition. Von Ehrenkrook considers the specter of gender, sex, and moral decline in Paul of Tarsus and Michelle Bachmann. Schott uses the life and work of Eusebius of Caesarea to question the distinctions scholars have traditionally made between types of Judaisms (and Christianities) in the late antique world. Matthew Gabriele next takes a more comparative approach, thinking about the implications of the parallels between medieval narratives of election in the Christian West and contemporary evangelical American nationalism.

K. Healan Gaston offers useful categories to understanding the Judeo-Christian tradition in America by separating "pluralism" from "exceptionalism" and showing how both varieties have been present in the discourse from the very beginning. Heather Miller Rubens turns her gaze to the Supreme Court and how Chief Justice Earl Warren's use of "Judeo-Christian" in the *McGowan vs. Maryland* case was gradually effaced and how contemporary uses of the term suggest a more strictly Christian meaning. Similarly, Benjamin Sax traces the arrogation of "Judeo-Christian" by some in the religious right, specifically when they have discussed the Holocaust. Doing so, Sax concludes, transforms the perpetrators and victims, suggesting that the Christians themselves were as much victims as much as the Jews. Moving from uses of the past to uses of the future, Tristan Sturm sees in certain man-

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idem, "Persecution Complexes: Identity Politics and the 'War on Christians'," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 18, no. 3 (2007): 152–80, doi:10.1215/10407391-2007-014.

[20] Most recently, see Todd Gitlin and Liel Leibovitz, *The Chosen Peoples: America, Israel, and the Ordeals of Divine Election* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010); Shalom Goldman, *Zeal for Zion: Christians, Jews, and the Idea of the Promised Land* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Michelle Goldberg, *Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007); Victoria Clark, *Allies for Armageddon: The Rise of Christian Zionism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); etc.

ifestations of Christian Zionism a transferral of redeemer-nation from the United States to Israel. Finally, Brian Britt offers some concluding thoughts and introduces the question of secularism into the mix. If Judaism and Christianity have, in the American experience, been largely "hollowed out" by secularism, can we then see the invigoration of a discourse of "Judeo-Christian" as a way to retrench these traditions against secularism, by way of an intellectual alliance.

These essays, in the end, are just a beginning. We hope that they will stimulate just as much discussion here as they did in our own symposium, raise as many questions as they answer, and lead to many more fruitful moments of conversation and collaboration. So, let's get started.