

## **"Judeo-Christian and Other Political Inventions"**

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I suspect almost everyone in the United States has encountered the term "Judeo-Christian" many times and may even think that it's a historic term, with a long history of usage. After all, both religions have been around a long time. It is not. The first use that has been found came in 1899, and there were a few repetitions of it in the following decades. The term didn't really take off until after World War II, and then it came to be used primarily in the United States. According to Martin Marty, prolific Church historian of the University of Chicago, it was used then out of a desire to end prejudice against Jews. ("A Judeo-Christian Looks at the Judeo-Christian Tradition," *The Christian Century*, October 5, 1986, pp. 858-860; <http://religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=188>) But already by 1970 the term had its critics. Arthur Cohen published in that year his *The Myth of the Judeo-Christian Tradition*.

Today "Judeo-Christian" is usually employed to refer to a set of values and important ideas that are thought to be common to the religions of Judaism and Christianity. We often hear in speeches that these common values and ideas are at the very heart of the U.S. heritage, so that we often hear phrases such as, "America was founded on the Judeo-Christian heritage." We also hear "Judeo-Christian" used to distinguish "us" in so-called Western culture, from other cultures, such as "Eastern," or "Islamic" cultures.

If there had been some historic united Judeo-Christian heritage, why did it take until the 20<sup>th</sup> century for writers and religious thinkers to recognize it? Why didn't the founders of the United States, many of whom wrote much about their religious heritage, have such a term? Why have many historians rejected the term "Judeo-Christian" as a myth created to suggest a false unity and to exclude others?

Cohen argued that the term is a late invention mostly for political purposes and does not accurately reflect religious realities, values, or ideas. It is as problematic religiously for what it excludes as it is for what it includes.

Christianity and Judaism, both of which have many varieties within them, are often vastly different in many ways, even in their conceptions of a God. After early Christians and Jews parted paths in the first century, the two traditions developed in a multitude of varying ways, including in values and important ideas. Martin Marty made the point that if we are to do historical justice to the "Judeo-Christian heritage" "we would have to talk mainly about imposed ghettos, pogroms, persecutions and killings."

I am not saying there are no similarities between Judaism and Christianity; they are numerous. I am saying that there is not a common historically evidenced set

of values and ideas that somehow makes them one tradition or one heritage, as the term “Judeo-Christian” is so often intended to do.

Now, lest you think that I am trying to divide good friends or deny commonalities, let me quickly say that Judaism and Christianity have a relationship that goes back many centuries, that links them together in several ways and that can be mutually beneficial. The exact same thing is true of Islam and Christianity and Islam and Judaism.

#### Let’s talk about Muslim-Jewish connections:

For example, some of the great writings of Medieval Jews are in Arabic and were penned under happy influence and insight of Muslim cultures. The hugely influential and prolific Jewish thinker Moses Maimonides (remember the saying, “from Moses to Moses there was no one like Moses”), 13<sup>th</sup> century Islamic Spain, wrote in Arabic and was heavily influenced by Islamic scholarship, in many fields. In his philosophy, his politics, his religious thinking, his method of interpretation share hallmarks of Islamic writers such as al-Farabi, Avicenna, and Averroes. Should we call him a Judeo-Islamic writer? To read about this influence see the article “The Influence of Islamic Thought on Maimonides” in the online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/maimonides-islamic/>) and “Influence of Arabic and Islamic Philosophy on Judaic Thought” (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/arabic-islamic-judaic/>).

A second Muslim-Jewish connection: during the middle ages, and even today, Muslims and Jews were often critical of Christianity regarding monotheism—Despite the explanations of Trinity—how 3 can be 1—many Jews and Muslims simply didn’t buy it and considered Christian beliefs about Jesus to be abandonment of true monotheism. In this regard Muslims and Jews were together standing counter to most Christian teachings.

And a third and most interesting connection takes us to some specific texts. John Reeves, chair of the Judaic studies program at UNC Charlotte, in his tracing of the intertwining of Bible and Qur’an makes connections between the Qur’an and a motif known from rabbinic literature, namely, the argument of angels against the creation of humans.

In several rabbinic writings, we find a story that goes like this:  
(Genesis Rabbah 8.5)

R. Simon said: When the Holy One, blessed be he, came to create Adam, the ministering angels formed themselves into groups and parties, some of them saying, “Let him be created’ whilst others urged, “Let him not be created.” Thus it is written, Love and Truth fought together, Righteousness and Peace combated each other (Ps 85.11) Love said, “Let him be created, because he will dispense acts of love’; Truth said, “let him not be created, because he is compounded of falsehood’; Righteousness said, “let him be created, because he will perform

righteous deeds'; Peace said, "Let him not be created because he is full of strife.' What did the Lord do? He took Truth and cast it to the ground. . . . R. Huna the Elder of Sepphoris, said: While the ministering angels were arguing with each other and disputing with each other, the Holy One, blessed be he, created him. Said he to them: "What can ye avail? Man has already been made!"

Now this story is fascinating and entertaining in many ways; just think of reflective and homiletical value of that story. But let's look at another point brought up by Reeves ("Some Explorations of the Intertwining of Bible and Qur'ān" in *Bible and Qur'ān: Essays in Scriptural Intertextuality*, 2003). The Qur'an 2.30 states that the angels asked God if he really should create human "because he will be corrupt and a shedder of blood." What is striking is that this is not the argument that we find in the several rabbinic accounts and some other Christian and Muslim references. In none of those is the blood shed mentioned. So where did this argument come from?

Reeves argues that it is really a fairly easy reading of Genesis to connect the misdeeds of Adam and the misdeeds of Cain, who was the first to shed human blood. Reeves thinks that though later, especially Christian interpretation has made Adam's so-called fall overshadow Cain's shedding of blood in importance, in fact in both Genesis, and now much later in Qur'an, Cain's role is significantly more important. He also finds hints in other Rabbinic literature that connections between Adam and Cain were alive in their minds. Reeves concludes, correctly I think, that Qur'an and its interpretive tradition arguably functions here as valuable witnesses to the crucial nature of this theme within early Jewish narrative, a theme whose centrality within the first few chapter of Genesis has been obscured and then largely ignored by post biblical Christian commentators. In other words, a creative interpretation of Genesis that flowers and blossoms in the Qur'an was likely part of the Jewish vine of tradition/interpretation. Whatever the details might be, the big point to be made is there were close and interesting Jewish-Muslim connections in the interpretive process in both communities.

I'm delighted to say that there is a growing interest in scholarship tracing the threads of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim textual interaction.

#### **Let's turn to Christian-Islamic connections:**

Christianity and Islam share many theological ideas, and Muslim views of Jesus have much more in common with Christian views than do Jewish views of Jesus. In the Qur'an Jesus is born of a virgin and is one of the great prophets. The Qur'an and the New Testament both quote and refer to many characters from Jewish Scriptures. For more specifics we could turn to medieval Christian and Muslim pious love poetry and mysticism. We could also talk about the Islamic philosophical influence on the great 13<sup>th</sup> century Christian theologian Thomas Aquinas. Again, see the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Influence of Arabic and Islamic Philosophy on the Latin West,"

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/arabic-islamic-influence/> .

**And finally, let's turn to Jewish-Christian connections:**

These connections are perhaps the ones that are the best known in our culture. Christians and Jews share particular sacred texts—Hebrew Bible, though they understand and read them differently. And, of course, the earliest forms of Christianity were practiced as forms of Judaism in the first century CE. The linking of the two traditions also receives a classic boost from the Muslim tradition, for it is in the Qur'an that the two religions of Jews and Christians are united in the term "People of the Book."

We could go on for pages listing similarities and connections between any two of these religions—and these are just the surface issues. It is fair to say that there are as many similarities between Islam and Christianity as there are differences between Judaism and Christianity. And that there are as many historical and textual connections between Islam and Judaism as there are between Christianity and Judaism.

Because these historical, intellectual, and religious connections are strong, all three of them can legitimately be considered as historically related. Yet, they can and should also be considered as separate religions of what is sometimes called the Abrahamic tradition. That is, they all, in founding narratives, look to Abraham as their founding figure. Using Abraham provides another way to view these traditions.

I put it this way in my book, *Living Traditions of the Bible*:

My son has a book which begins a story and then allows the reader to choose one of several endings. Imagine with me what could happen to the story of "Goldilocks and the Three Bears." In chapter one the golden-haired adorable rascal enters the bears' house and proceeds to try the chairs, porridge, and beds, finally falling asleep in baby bear's bed. But after that, imagine having various options. In ending A she awakes in a fright and runs away from the bears' house. But if you are in the mood for something more gruesome (read any Stephen King lately?), you might choose ending B, where she is mauled to death and fed to the wolves. In version C, more to my liking, she awakes and teaches the bears Hebrew and they become her grateful students.

Jews, Christians, and Muslims begin their stories essentially the same. They share colorful characters from the pages of Scripture such as Adam, Noah, Abraham, kings, and prophets. But by the end of the story all three are reading radically different chapters of this storybook.

One has a chapter about a nation who was chosen by God in the person of Abraham and, commanded by God in the person of Moses. For them, the Jews, *Torah*, is God's ultimate instruction—the rich and living text and center piece through which all of life is read. The Torah (and Abraham and Moses), also figure in the Christian and Muslim stories, but not as the central chapter of the story.

One has a chapter about a son of Abraham and of God who came, died,

and was raised by God. And though he never wrote so much as a paragraph, he is for them, the Christians, the rich and living event, the Word, through which all events and all texts before and after him are read.

One has a chapter about the greatest and last prophet from God, named Mohammed. For them, the Muslims, the perfection of revelation is the rich and living *Qur'an*, which overshadows all previous revelations to all previous prophets, including Moses and Jesus.

None of these stories is said to be finished. Jews, Christians, and Muslims are waiting for final chapters about messiahs or second comings or kingdoms or triumphant victories or universal redemption. These Bible-begun stories are all in mid-sentence; they are still being written. They are "*Living Traditions of the Bible.*"

I think there is what we could legitimately and loosely call the Abrahamic traditions. Jews often look to Abraham as their ethnic and spiritual father. Christians, including the influential St. Paul, often see Abraham as their father of faith (New Testament Romans 4). Muslims, as stated in the *Qur'an* often view Abraham as their spiritual father in that he submitted to the one true God (e.g. *Qur'an* 2.130-132; 16.120-123).

Historically and today, in our time and place in history, we all know there are plenty of conflicts in the relationships between various Jews and various Christians and various Muslims. But the problems are not there because there is a Judeo-Christian tradition that somehow is opposed to the Muslim tradition.

The term "Judeo-Christian heritage" is problematic for many reasons. I think it is a term deserving to be discarded. However, we do know that Jews, Christians, and Muslims have many historical contacts, shared stories and heroes, and related ideas. These can all be (and are) the basis for rich and mutually enlightening and respectful relations among people of all three religions; sometimes history has demonstrated this, and, sadly, sometimes it has not. Of course, people of all three religions can also look to their own common humanity to form rich and mutually beneficial relations with all people of all religions and no religion.