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The Judeo-Christian Tradition: A Project of Discursive Invention and Exclusion

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary American scholarship and political discourse—predominately on the political right—see a reliance on appeals to notions of a “Judeo-Christian tradition” to define the moral and ethical values of western society. Upon first glance, it may seem that such references are substantial in that they correlate to a theological, historical, and/or cultural consensus between Jews and Christians. However, upon further investigation, notions of a shared tradition between the two religious groups seem questionable at best. Instead of fostering inclusivity, the term’s discursive use has defined rigid boundaries which exclude possibilities of broader cohesion between Abrahamic traditions and reenforces Christian normativity. This essay is an attempt to demystify the enigmatic hyphenated tradition through an exploration of the term’s usage and appropriation, European and Jewish cultural identity throughout the long nineteenth century, and antisemitism. It is through these vantage points that we return to the Judeo-Christian tradition as it exists today and the challenges which it faces in light of multifaceted critique and internal dissent.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
Introduction.....	1
Judaism: The Mother of Christianity.....	2
Jewish and Gentile Christians.....	2
A Christian Emancipation.....	3
Oriental Jews.....	5
The Oriental and “ <i>Ostjute</i> ” Jewry.....	6
Arabian Synagogues?	7
The Discursive Function of “Antisemitism” and “Semitism”	9
“Antisemitism” or Judeophobia?	9
The Forgotten Arabian Semite.....	11
The Exportation of Antisemitism.....	12
Contemporary Challenges to the Judeo-Christian Tradition From Within and Without.....	15
Jewish Dissent.....	15
A Judeo-Christo-Islamic Tradition.....	17
A Political Redefining.....	18
Conclusion.....	19

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“[A tree without strong roots is at the mercy of harsh winds]” is the rough translation of the motif which my Arabic teacher, Mr. Asem Mashrafa emphasized time and time again in his routine in-class tangents of the importance of being rooted firmly in principle. This sentiment is the motivating force behind this thesis; for that and for more than I could elaborate on in an acknowledgement which I intend to keep brief, I would like to thank Mr. Mashrafa.

Introduction

In Chief Justice Burger's concurring opinion in the landmark decision of *Bowers v. Hardwick* which upheld Georgia sodomy law, he writes that the "Condemnation of [homosexual practices] is firmly rooted in Judeo-Christian moral and ethical standards" *Bowers v. Hardwick et al.*, 478 U.S. 186, 196 (1985). The court's decision was ultimately overruled by *Lawrence v. Texas* wherein the court curiously undermined Chief Justice Burger's argument through appeals to precedent in domestic and international European courts whereby comparable laws were repealed or overruled *Lawrence et al. v. Texas*, 539 U.S. 1, 12 (2003). In spite of the court's dissatisfaction with the Chief Justice Burger's argument, they give his appeal to "Judeo-Christian moral and ethical standards" credence by acknowledging its existence and relevance to the case at hand. In the court's rebuttal of Chief Justice Burger's argument, lies a complicit attitude towards the postulation that a shared tradition between Jews and Christians underscores the foundation of Western civilization.

For a tradition which is almost accepted as a given in contemporary western discourse, the substance to which it refers is troublingly vague [i.e., when we speak of a 'Judeo-Christian tradition,' to which historical epoch(s) of Jewish and Christian social cohesion do we refer? Do we speak primarily of a cultural tradition, a theological one, or both? What moral and ethical standards define it?] I argue that the notion of a 'Judeo-Christian tradition' revels in its own obscurity, and it is only through its incoherence that it retains its discursive function. Rather than a tradition, it signifies the stronghold which Christianity and the Christian worldview have over western standards. This paper aims to disentangle the historical from the imagined and the accurate from the imposed to assess the historicity and credibility of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

In the first chapter, we will look to the earliest writings which refer to the earliest Jewish converts to Christianity as “Jewish Christians” and subsequently assess the Church’s relationship with its Hebraic origins. The third chapter will grapple with conceptions of Jews as Orientals in Central Europe throughout the course of the long nineteenth century. Following that discussion, we will assess the meanings and roles of notions of “Semitism” and “antisemitism” historically and contemporarily. Chapter 5 will see the most comprehensive and direct challenges to the validity of the Judeo-Christian tradition and lead us in finality to our conclusion in the last chapter of this paper.

Judaism: The Mother of Christianity

Jewish and Gentile Christians

Upon inception, the term, ‘Jewish Christianity’ was interchangeable with ‘Hebrew Christian,’ ‘Christian Jew,’ and ‘Jew Christian;’ they were used to refer to the early Christians “of Jewish descent and upbringing” in early exegetical commentaries of the bible (Jones 2016: 18). Later, these terms were also used to “describe Jews who converted to Christianity in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and Christians of the radical reformation who adopted Jewish customs in conformity with the Hebrew Bible” (Jones 2016).

In the early eighteenth century, John Toland employed that terminology to study the differences between Jewish and Gentile Christian traditions. His idea was that the universal law found “necessary and particular” expression in various cultures. In his study of the Jewish and Gentile cultures, he found instantiations of what we understood as the universal law. Therefore, proselytization was “contrary to reason” in so far as it prescribed that peoples break from their respective traditions (Jones 2016: 20). All cultures were necessarily particular expressions of the

universal law, and since there exists no disparities between their expressions of it, there would be no rational justification for one to be acculturated. While Toland does maintain that Gentile Christianity derives from Judaism, his study does not admit of a shared tradition between Christians and Jews. For him it would have been irrational for Jewish Christians to break from their Jewish culture in an effort to form a greater Judeo-Christian one. The Jewish Christians—that is, ethnic Jews who converted to Christianity—were to remain cultural Jews. And while one could identify the Jewish Christians which Toland describes as early originators of the Judeo-Christian tradition, no such concept is to be found in his writings.

A later adopter of the term ‘Jewish Christianity’ was Ferdinand Christian Baur. Baur’s project was a Christo-centric and historical; conceiving of Christianity as the most perfect form of religion, he organized history into pre-Christianity and post-Christianity. This is clearly articulated in his work, *Symbolik und Mythologie oder die Naturreligion des Alterthums* (1824–1825) where he speaks of Christianity “[as that form of religion in which, just as the internal unity, so also the external (unity) must be the most perfect]” (Baur 1:161 as cited in Jones 23). In his paper, Jones recognizes that in Baur’s writings, “Judaism is never treated as a (significant) entity in itself” and that it is “subsumed under the broader category of oriental religion” (Jones 2016: 24). The Jewish Christians, or the Ebionites as Baur calls them, are not to be thought of as early Jewish converts to Christianity. Rather, the Ebionites represent a “re-[Judaized]” Christianity in so far as they were “mixing in doctrines and practices of the Essenes with Christian doctrine” (Baur 181a, 31, as cited in Jones 26). Baur also sees in Judaism a particularism stemming from its “genuinely national profile” which Christianity overcomes and transcends (Baur 19 as cited in Jones 26). Hence in the Ebionites’ intermediary position between Judaic tradition and (mostly) Christian theology, they—

unlike the Gentiles— represent a regressive movement which ultimately fails to surrender the narrow particularism of the Judaic faith which was rendered obsolete by the death of Christ.

Although neither author mentions a Judeo-Christian tradition, the consequences of their independent assessments of the two faiths both discredit any attempt to ground this shared tradition in the cultural affinity between early Gentile and Jewish Christians. Toland mitigates the need for conceiving of a shared Judeo-Christian tradition to understand the relations which defined Jewish and Gentile Christians under the pretense that the cultures that flow downstream from either faith are particular expressions of the universal law. And in his Christo-centric inquiry, Baur conceptualizes Judaism and Christianity in terms of particularism and universality respectively. In that analysis, he illustrates a rigid heterogeneity between the two faiths which would undermine an attempt to ground ideas of a shared tradition in theology. In our investigation of the earliest references to a “Jewish Christianity” (or any other similar notion), we find assessments of the relation between Jewish and Gentile Christians which either mitigate against the need for or make impossible a theological linkage between Christians and Jews sufficient to ground notions of a Judeo-Christian tradition.

A Christian Emancipation

Semitic roots are dry, inorganic and quite incapable of giving birth to mythology [...] the roots in this family of languages are, if I may say so, realistic and nontransparent; they did not lend themselves to metaphysics or mythology [...] the physical imaginary which in the Semitic languages is still almost on the surface obscures abstract deduction and prevents anything like delicate background in speech. (Renan 1895-96: 40-41)

The terms “Semite” and “Semitic” were first introduced in 1781 by the German Orientalist, August Schlözer to primarily refer to the linguistic family including Arabic, Aramaic, and Hebrew. These terms also articulated a “cultural, religious, and pseudo-racial set of characteristics, all of which were interchangeably associated with Jews, Arabs, or Muslims” (Hochburg 2016: 203). At

a time where Europe was determined to understand itself and other on the basis of racial, ethnolinguistic, and religious memberships, the “Semitic” represented a group which was separate from itself. Charged by the technological feats of the Industrial Revolution and imperialism, Europe saw a brewing essentialist discourse which credited its technological feats to a superior culture. European exceptionalism was the logical conclusion which justified the imperialist and colonialist missions of the latter half of the 19th century. But this is not entirely within the scope of our inquiry. What should be said here is that European identity became increasingly Christian, Aryan and Indo-European by contrast; and the brunt of this emerging classification was to be borne by the internal Semites, European Jews.

Saying little of Europe’s imperialist conquests, the impeccability of its own ethnic and cultural character was threatened by an internal Other. Jews were relics of a time and place far removed from modernizing Europe. And along with the categorization of peoples into “distinct civilizations” came their “hierarchical classification [...] in the name of modern scientific knowledge” (Hochburg 203). Christian Europe was haunted by the historical reality that their theology once clung to the inferior, Semitic womb of Judaism. When we speak of the inferiority of the Semitic peoples we speak not exclusively of racial or cultural inferiority, but also of linguistic inferiority. Pervasive in nineteenth century European thought was the idea that only Indo-European languages provided their speakers with “the intellectual freedom necessary for philosophical, artistic, scientific, and all abstract thinking” (Hochburg 204). The perceived cultural, intellectual, artistic, and philosophical shortcomings of non-Indo-European peoples were proposedly imposed on them by the deficiencies in their languages (ibid). This spirit also animated the Church’s efforts to cleanse the Bible of its Judaic, or Semitic, roots.

The fact that philology was the first ‘secular’ science accepted by the Church represents the lengths to which the Church underwent in order to detangle itself from its Hebraic origins. (Olender 2002: 15, as cited in Hochburg 206). By accepting as scientific fact that Semitic and Indo-European linguistic traditions were fundamentally different, the prospect of a Christian emancipation from Judaism was tenable and *scientific* (Hochburg 206). Hochburg claims that any attempts to understand the formalization of philology in terms of “secular scholarship” are at best “misguided” (ibid). Instead, philology was developed as a means to deal with “Christian theological concerns and with the practices of biblical exegesis” (Marchland 2010: 2, as cited in Hochburg 206 f.). The Church’s philological project to emancipate itself from Judaism mirrors Europe’s growing and growingly paranoid awareness of Jews as its internal Other. It is an attempt to achieve scientifically what could not be justified hitherto. Science merely became the vehicle in which bias and prejudice arrived at their chosen destination. The Church’s acceptance and instrumentalization of philology to validate theses of fundamental and irreconcilable difference between Christianity and Judaism represents a theological deidentification which Christian Europe initiated in a greater effort to de-Judaize itself.

Oriental Jews

As I touched upon in the previous chapter, the concept of Semitism owes its origin to German oriental scholarship. As the language of the Orient, Semitism was intertwined with Orientalism from the very beginning. The joint scholarship of philologists and philosophers throughout the eighteenth century depicts the relation established by the Christian West towards the Orient. In Georg Hegel’s *Philosophy of History*, Judaism and Islam represented a “western Orient” which occupied an intermediary position between the less developed “purely oriental

religions” of India and China and the most developed culture of the (Protestant) Christian West (Hulin 1979: 133, as cited in Kalmar 60 f.). While Hegel does not completely dismiss the legitimacy of either religion, he certainly asserts their uniform inferiority to Christianity. Hegel admits that the Christian West would not have been possible were it not for the role played by the so-called western Oriental religions. However, they have been superseded by Protestant Christianity which stood to mark the end of the history of religions. Jews and Muslims are also clearly demarcated as Semites and sometimes conflated with Arabs. Kalmar points out that, in his work, Hegel actually refers to both religions as “Arabian” and later refers to them as “Semitic” (Kalmar 61). The ideas demonstrated here are two-fold: the Jews of Europe are originally people of the Orient belonging alongside the Muslims and Arabs; and Judaism and Islam are equally developed religions which were necessary in the development of Christianity but have nonetheless been overtaken by it.

The Oriental and the “Ostjute” Jewry

The orientalization of Jews from without takes on a similar character as did the casting of the “Semitic” lasso over them. When we speak of Jews in Europe throughout the long nineteenth century as “Semites” on the basis of their religious commitments to the Hebraic Old Testament, we fail to capture the reality that very few of them actually spoke Hebrew. Hence the ‘ethnic’ element of Semitism functions to draw a sort of kinship between Jews and Arabs (which was a term interchangeable with “Muslims”). It is through this lens that one can understand the orientalization of Jews i.e., through their ethnic affinity with the Arabs. Irrespective of whether this kinship is real or imagined, the conceptual relationship between Jews and Arabs achieved through the moniker of “Semitism” related Jews to Arabs in the European mind.

Identifying the Jews as an Oriental people was not derogatory despite the scholarly and theological missions aforementioned. This claim is best substantiated by the fact of Jewish self-orientalization. It was actually the acculturated German Ashkenazi Jews who proudly wore the “Oriental” lapel. And when we refer to “German Jews” we do not simply mean German-speaking Jews in Germany, but also German-speaking Jews in Budapest, Prague, and throughout the European world (Kalmar 58). It is important to stress the paradoxical reality that it was the modernizing German Jews who self-orientalized. The German Jews looked down upon the Yiddish speaking Orthodox and Hassidic Jews, also known as *Ostjuden* or “Eastern Jews” (Kalmar). Although *Ostjuden* was a cultural label rather than a geographical one, most of the *Ostjute* Jewry lived in Eastern Europe (ibid). More ironically, the more orientally-suited *Ostjute* Jews had “never heard of the concept [of Oriental Jews] or opposed its expressions” (ibid). What is notable here is that the Jewish self-orientalization movement found expression in the most unlikely candidate of Ashkenazi German-speaking Jews.

Arabian Synagogues?

In the early nineteenth century, it appears that the Bavarian government ordered that all “new synagogues be built in an oriental style” (Kalmar 56). The reason as to why this was is not entirely clear, however, it is likely that the Catholic kingdom made this order in an effort to clearly distinguish them from predominant churches. From the street, a subject of the kingdom could clearly identify a synagogue as an essentially Oriental place of worship which was different than the modern churches which were for Europeans.

Kalmar directs our attention to the Cincinnati Synagogue, known today as the Rabbi Wise Temple, which was built in 1862. Remembered as a feat of its immigrant German Jewish founders and reformist rabbis, the Rabbi Wise Temple’s architecture embodies a distinctly Moorish style.

While there were synagogues in Moorish Spain, they were not well known in other parts of Europe (ibid). Rather, the Moorish style was referred to as “Arabian” rather than “Moorish,” and was associated with Muslims. The architecture of temples like The Rabbi Wise Temple and The Great Synagogue of Budapest (and this is by no means an exhaustive list) depicted Jews as the people begotten of a marriage of East and West. Such synagogues have two minaret which proudly stand on the middle-ground between the two steeples common in churches and the functional unitary minaret of Mosques from which the call to prayer would be chanted (ibid). This infusion of religious tradition was also to be heard in the liturgical music played by a “renowned gentile musician” who played the compositions of Jewish composers who “emphasized, or even invented, elements in the Jewish musical tradition that resembled the elements of the chants of the East” (ibid).

The bi-focal movement which consisted of both an external and internal identification of the Jews with the Orient is clearly represented in the legislative, architectural, and artistic forces which culminate in so-called, Arabian synagogues.

The complex and contested identity of the Oriental Jew of the long nineteenth century was a label that was both given to—at times enforced upon—and celebrated by the acculturated German Jews of Europe. The categorization of Jews as Oriental from without the diaspora is but the creation of an internal ‘Other,’ which as other scholars have argued (see Mufti: 2007), gave Europe a “template” for treating their colonial subjects (Kalmar 66-67). It suffices to note that one cannot understand the phenomenon of Jewish orientalization without situating it within the greater European obsession with the categorization of populations into ethnic, racial, linguistic, and traditional groups. The vagueness of the “Oriental,” however, permitted both Gentiles and Jews

alike to tack on their interpretations of the type of categories and content which such a term included. To German Jews, the Oriental was the bridge between themselves and the Arabs which they saw themselves sharing a sort of racial, cultural, and/or linguistic affiliation with.

The Discursive Function of “Antisemitism” and “Semitism”

Antisemitism or Judeophobia?

France must face its eternal enemies, the Semites, so it can find anew its true direction. The Jewish Semites must be defeated with an intellectual strategy. The Muslim Semites must be defeated militarily. But the technique in both cases is the same. (Kimon 1897: 115)

Up until this point we have understood “Semitism” and “Orientalism” as inventions of the West, as -isms which described something approximating the ethno-linguistic family to which Jews in Europe belonged. Although not always derogatory, they were Othering terms which qualified a western discourse that casted Jewish heritage away from Europe and southwards towards the distant deserts inhabited by Arabs and Muslims. How then do we find ourselves at a point where a term such as “antisemitism” is used to refer to prejudices taken exclusively towards Jews? In other words, at what point could the hateful attitudes of Arabs and Muslims towards Jews be deemed ‘antisemitic’ rather than ‘*Judeophobic*’ (or the like)?

If we can understand ‘Semitism’ as a philological project aimed at uprooting Christianity from its Hebraic soil— ‘Orientalism’ being a product of the enterprise which promulgates ideas of Jewishness and Jewish relatedness to Arabs—then, we can understand ‘antisemitism’ as its logical extreme. From the very beginning, the Semitic project was born into an air of European exceptionalism expedited by an obsession with the pseudo-racial hierarchization of populations which they a-priori reigned superior. Antisemitism merely made these internalized biases explicit and articulated them in biological terms (Hochburg 211). Antisemitism is “Semitism” expressed

in terms of a deplorable biological reality which is inherent to Jews. Now we may return to the question (which, I realize may strike many as foolish): when did anti-Semitism become solely about Jews and not about Semites more broadly?

In her insightful paper, “Remembering Semites,” Gil Hochburg writes,

Throughout the twentieth century and all through the legislation of the Third Reich, we witness a growing transformation of the Semitic threat from the realm of religion and language to the realm of bodily interactions and spatial configuration, with a particular focus on the contaminating nature of Jews and Jewish blood (Hochburg 211).

Here she describes the “growing transformation of the Semitic threat from the realm of religion and language” to one increasingly fixated on the “contaminating nature of Jews and Jewish blood”. The type of paranoia described above, what we would refer to as a textbook example of antisemitism, is more accurately a manifestation of Judeophobia. It is an irrational fear or hatred of Jews rather than an antithetical stance or attitude towards Semites per say. The nature of so-called ‘antisemitic attitudes’ are also unfounded precisely due to the irrational and aversive nature of phobias. The prominent Zionist and physician, Leon Pinsker himself preferred the term, “Judeophobia” over “antisemitism” to describe what he described as “a form of demonopathy” (Pinsker 1906: 3 f.). His diagnosis aside, this term was used and preferred by some Zionists—*whose movement was a counterreaction to the pervasiveness of antisemitism in Europe and its widescale systematic appropriation during the Nazi regime.*

Another way to approach the query would be to ask: if antisemitism is truly anti-Semitism, then why does it not apply to prejudices expressed towards Arabs? Regardless of their religion, one could reasonably argue that Arabs and Jews are equally Semitic peoples. Hochburg goes on to write that “the very rise of anti-Semitism as a discourse and politics that targets Jews (understood as a “people” and a “race”) has since played a key role in advancing the *forgetting* (my italics) of

Semitism” (Hochburg 211). Elementary ideas of the Semites as an inferior people to Aryans took on a new, more malevolent fate as Jews began to be seen as an “internal Semitic menace, which threatens to taint and destroy the Aryan legacy of Europe *from within*” (ibid). This attitude, of course, found its final expression in the horrific events which transpired in the Holocaust. And as the racialization of Jews as Semites proliferated and became more extreme, the tie that bonded Arabs and Muslims to the Semitic moniker loosened, if at least for a moment, in the European mind (ibid).

The Forgotten Arabian Semite

You see Israeliness as total Jewishness, and I don't see where you fit me, the Arab, into that Israeliness. Under the rug? In some corner of the kitchen?... France and Frenchness come from the same root. But Judaism and Israeliness are a different matter. That's why I advocate the de-Judaization and de-Zionization of Israel... I am asking you for a new definition of the term 'Israeli', so that it will include me as well, a definition in territorial terms that you distort, because you're looking at it from the Jewish point of view... (Kimmerling 2002b, 183).

I (perhaps ridiculously) implore the reader to swap out every mention of “Israeliness,” “Israel,” and “Israeli” with “Semitism,” “Semitism,” and “Semitic” respectively. In seeing past the absurdity of such a request, my hope is that the irony will make itself known. If only the Arab were considered a “Semite,” could she be vociferously defended by the grand Western shield of public repudiation for antisemitic offences made against her. We must celebrate—even if somewhat hypocritical—the West's vehement and authoritative stance against hateful and baseless antisemitic attacks against Jews; we must, however, be equally aware, and therefore critical of the West in light of its history of antisemitism. The Arab has now been casted the villainous role of the Jew-hating, barbaric, but oil-rich “contaminating Semite within” in the Western imagination (Hochburg 211 f.).

To remember Semitism today and revisit the discourse of nineteenth-century philology is to remember that before anti-Semitism (i.e., before only Jews were Semites) and before Jews stopped being Semites (in becoming Judeo-Christians), and before Muslims alone became Semites, there was a long time when both Jews and Muslims were Semites. And it was this relation between Jews and Muslims and their interchangeability that marked the proper borders of Europe as modern, secular, and yet also fundamentally Christian. It is important that we remember this being together of the Muslims and Jews even if the Semite, like the Aryan, is nothing more than an invention of Christian-European mind-set (Hochburg 212).

The purpose of “re-remembering” the Arabs as Semites is not to advocate for some sort of reunification of Arabs/Muslims with Jews under joint identifications with Semitism; it is to remind ourselves not only of the fact that “Semitism” is categorically a western invention, but also that the group to which the label refers has changed since its conception. The vagueness and enigmatic nature of the term bolsters rather than limits the term’s discursive function. It is precisely this vagueness that allows for the expansion of the Semitic category and morphing of the Semitic subject. Ultimately, what all this leads to is a hegemonic western (and dare I say, Christian) culture which self-righteously steps up to take the responsibility of the *logos*. I am of course being facetious here, but my point stands: the “Semite” is “nothing more than an invention of [the] Christian-European mind-set” which labels and Others groups which it regards as unlike itself. Its vagueness is not an obstacle to its definition, but a feature of it and a function of power.

The Exportation of Antisemitism

Reframing antisemitism as antithetical attitudes towards “Semites” more broadly would seemingly ignore what we may call, Arab Judeophobia. This is a serious problem that exists within Arab communities and must not be ignored. However, in order to address the issue we must look to the root of the cause. In her paper, “The Challenge of Assessing Arab/Islamic Antisemitism” Esther Webman reminds that Arab antisemitism is a “*new phenomenon which developed out of the Arab-Israeli conflict. [It] was not a cause of the conflict but a product of it.*” The Arabs did not

oppose Jewish settlement for antisemitic motives; their opposition aroused antisemitic emotions among them” (my italics) (Webman 678). Now if we take seriously that that “In Herzl’s view it was antisemitism which had given the Zionist idea a *raison d’être*—both from the Jewish perspective, and that of the non-Jews,” we must understand Arab antisemitism as a product of European antisemitism (Shapira 215). What is currently perceived as “an organic part of Arab/Muslim worldviews” is in fact a phenomenon contingent upon a series of events which were had little to do with Arabs or Muslims. Must we be reminded that during the fall of the Ottoman Empire it was Britain which negotiated in bad faith with Hussein ibn Ali to secure Arab support in opposition to the Ottomans only to later contradict the terms of their agreement? Hussein, the self-proclaimed representative of the Arabs, was promised an independent Arab state which encompassed “the entirety of Arabic-speaking lands to the east of Egypt” except those which fell under French influence (Hussein-McMahon Correspondence, Encyclopedia Britannica). While Britain later claimed that Palestine was of those territories under French influence, this was in no way clear in the correspondence between Hussein and McMahon. In any case, the British made a deal with the Arabs which they either had no intention of upholding or had no business making in the first place. The bottom line is Arab antisemitism does not exist without Arab anti-Zionism; and Zionism is (at least in its inception) a *reaction* to European antisemitism.

I hope that it does not need to be stated that Arab antisemitism is deplorable, disgusting, and as baseless as any other form of hatred. I merely intend to showcase how it is was born of late and does not derive from some deeper cultural, theological, or historical animus. It is unfortunate that contemporary Arab antisemitism is used as a political tool to exaggerate the idea that Arabs are a violent and intolerant people from whom the Jews’ interests must be protected against. And I would not do the reader nor myself any justice if I were to affirm that Jewish interests are not at

all threatened by antisemitic Arabs. As deplorable as the symptom of Arab antisemitism is, its underlying diagnosis is the reappropriation and reconstitution of Palestine as the Jewish national home—which *undeniably* falls short of the Balfour Declaration of 1917’s stipulation that “nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine”—and we would all be doing ourselves a disservice to mistake the effect for the cause (Balfour Declaration, Encyclopedia Britannica). Henceforth, efforts to utilize the fact of Arab antisemitism to *justify the exclusion of Islam* from the fold of a Judeo-Christian tradition utterly mistaken and deeply hypocritical.

Contemporary Challenges to the Judeo-Christian Tradition From Within and Without

A tradition must be judged not only in terms of what it affirms but in terms of its impact upon human conduct, its results in actual behavior (Heler 1952: 260).

Jewish Dissent

Our thesis regarding the falsity of the Judeo-Christian claim would be incomplete without ample attention to the Jewish dissent which the proposed tradition has provoked. While at some point Jews found refuge in a term which was “popularized to oppose the anti-Semitism of another predominantly Christian nation [Germany]”; once the threat diminished, so did Jewish approval (Zubovich 2018, as cited in Smith 74). Take the writings of Rabbi Bernard Heller for instance. He published a trilogy of articles on his dissent to Paul Tillich’s claim that the hyphenated tradition was unobjectionably justified (Smith 75-77). He critiques Christianity and the proposed tradition—referring to the latter as little “more than [a] specious [slogan] and tinsel half-truth”—when he rightly asserts that “The theologian of a faith which contends that it represents the last word in God’s revelation (and therefore is in a class by itself) is ill at ease when its basic teachings are shown to be widespread” (Heller 1946: 54, 55, as cited in Smith 77). In refuting the

possibility of a lawful merger of any two religions which assert themselves as “the last word in God’s revelation” he pushes Tillich’s thesis once again when he suggests that notions of an “Assyro-Hebraic, a Judeo-Islamic, or a Judeo-Hellenic” have “equal cogency” as notions of a Judeo-Christian tradition (Heller 1946: 260 as cited in Smith 77). Further, Heller asks the debilitating question, “Can one ignore the fact that in the lands of Christendom, Jews for centuries experienced pogroms, persecution, exile, discrimination, death?” (Heller 1946: 260). To recant Heller’s words once more, “a tradition must be judged not only in terms of what it affirms but in terms of its impact upon human conduct, its results in actual behavior” (ibid).

Following Heller in dissent by about 15 years was Arthur A. Cohen who wrote a collection of essays under the title, “The Myth of the Judeo-Christian Tradition”. Seeing the tradition as a prime example of “Higher Antisemitism,” as termed by Solomon Schechter, Cohen lowly regarded it as one in which “Jewish experience” is “retained like a prehensile tail, in the larger, more sophisticated economy of Christian truth” (Cohen 1970: viii) (Smith 80). The tradition ignores and benefits from ignoring the real and significant differences between Judaism and Christianity while masquerading as a genuinely inclusive and gestalt western tradition. There is a clear deficiency of Judaic and Jewish representation within the tradition because of the normative position occupied by Christianity. Cohen goes even further to state that there “can be no Jewish reality as long as it is obliged in dialectical relation and tension with Christian history” (Cohen 1970: xix). Not only is Jewish reality constricted within the discursive context of the tradition, but also more generally. Jewish history is only understood within the narrowing frame of Christian history and is thereby stripped of its vitality. Rather than a tradition enriched by inclusion, Cohen views the Judeo-Christian tradition as a dishonest, hegemonic, and thoroughly Christian tradition which—in its

shallow recognition of the Hebraic tradition from which it derives—dilutes and diminishes Jewish realities.

A Judeo-Christo-Islamic Tradition

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 (Sadat 2009: 30).

In Warren Zev Harvey's article titled, "The Judeo-Christian Tradition's Five Others" he contrasts the predominant notion of a Judeo-Christian tradition with five alternatives i.e., a Christian tradition, Greco-Roman culture, modern secularism/atheism, other religions, and a Judeo-Christo-Islamic/monotheistic/Abrahamic tradition. In his section on the latter, he points to "a new polemical use of the term Judeo-Christian tradition" among conservatives, and (in his language), "Islamophobes" in response to growing Muslim populations in America and Europe (Harvey 211). While Harvey maintains that there are contexts in which it would still be appropriate to reference the Judeo-Christian tradition; he argues that when it is used to speak of a set of characteristics which are shared between the three religions, "[it] is used to exclude Islam" (Harvey 221 f.). This is a notion of the tradition which is fundamentally reactive; appeals to the Judeo-Christian tradition are made in response to a perceived threat caused by increased Muslim immigration.

Harvey also discusses the historicity and viability of a Judeo-Christo-Islamic tradition. He presents the Islamic Golden Age in the Medieval as a part of this tradition and as an essential part of the later European Renaissance in the 13th century. In so doing, he rebuts Gouguenheim's claim that "recourse to the influence of the Islamic world" is not necessary to explain the scientific renaissance (Harvey 222). Gouguenheim claims that Bonaventure could have had the impact that he did in the history of philosophy irrespective of the contributions of Islamic philosophers such

as Averroes, Al-Farabi, and Avicenna (ibid). And while Harvey concedes this point, he points out that it is Aquinas and not Bonaventure to whom the philosophical revolution that “changed the direction of all future Western philosophy” should be credited. And Aquinas’s contribution could not have been so without the influence of the Islamic philosophers. In revealing the pivotal influence of Islamic thought in western civilization, Harvey aims to demonstrate a historical account of Judeo-Christo-Islamic tradition.

At this point in our discussion it is imperative to clarify why this discussion of a Judeo-Christo-Islamic is relevant to begin with. I do not mean to suggest that we should adopt notions of a Judeo-Christo-Islamic tradition; I am merely demonstrating how such a notion is just as (if not more) justified historically as a Judeo-Christian tradition. If one were to justify the existence of a Judeo-Christian tradition separate from an Islamic tradition on the basis that the former is western and the latter eastern, we could reasonably state that the western tradition in question would not exist in its current form without the influence of the purportedly unrelated eastern one. Broadly speaking, not only are the characteristics which define the Judeo-Christian tradition also applicable to Islam, but the Judeo-Christian tradition itself owes at least some of its development to Islamic civilization.

A Political Redefining

As has been alluded to, notions of a shared tradition between Christians and Jews arose in oppositional efforts to fascist Nazi Germany. More accurately, however, the term was “brought into usage into regular discourse” in America as part of an opposition to fascism and fascist groups more generally (Silk 1984: 66). Fascist and antisemitic groups “had appropriated ‘Christian’ as an identifying mark”, examples of this included organizations such as the Christian American Syndicate, Christian Aryan Syndicate, and Christian Mobilizers as well as publications such as the

Christian Defender and Christian Free Press (Silk 66). The Judeo-Christian moniker, henceforth, became a “catchword for the other side” (ibid). Given the term’s reactive and political origin, it difficult or even counterproductive to attempt to understand it independent of politics.

The tradition is politicized in both America and Europe; however the nature of its politicization varies between the two. In America, the term can be likened to a “civil religion” whereas in Europe, the Judeo-Christian tradition is “essentially secular” (Kluvelde 241). To avoid derailing our focus, it suffices to say that appeals to a “Judeo-Christian tradition” are predominantly political in kind. Rather than expressing a particular theological occupation, the term serves two basic functions: it is the mythological basis from which liberal (in America) and humanist values (in Europe) emerge, and it “[signifies] both a culture contrasting Islam and as something that needs protection from Islam” (Kluvelde). It is a political discourse of exceptionalism which asserts the normativity of the aforementioned values which emphasizes the cultural superiority of the West. The “Judeo-Christian tradition” is therefore vacuous and merely a stand-in for “western tradition;” the former is only preferred for its invocation of mythology and inclusivity.

Conclusion

If anything, this paper presents the complexity which discussions about the Judeo-Christian tradition invite. Perhaps, the most succinct thing that may be said about the term is that it disproportionately raises more questions than it answers. The enigmatic nature of this tradition, however, reveals something different than what is purported to be. It is only within particular discursive contexts in which appeals to the tradition can be understood. Put in a vacuum, the Judeo-

Christian tradition is a misnomer, a hollow moniker which represents Christian dominion over a western culture which pays lip-service to Jewish realities.

Prima facie, the postulation that there exists a shared tradition between Christians and Jews and that it is called the Judeo-Christian Tradition appears justified. After all, Christ himself was a Jew; the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament, is reaffirmed in its inclusion within the Bible; both religions are monotheistic; and Jews have lived in (predominantly Christian) Central Europe since the 11th century. Upon further historical investigation, however, this assumed synergy between Christianity and Judaism and/or Christians and Jews begins to fall apart. Whether if it was embedded in earliest theological analyses of Jewish Christianity in the 18th century, in the role of philology in reinventing Christianity separately from Judaism, in the alienation of Jewish diasporas from Aryan Indo-European society throughout the long nineteenth century, in widespread European antisemitism, or in the Holocaust, any semblance of a unique and shared tradition between Christians and Jews which may have existed is sure to have perished.

Through our historical investigation we may begin to reconceptualize notions of a Judeo-Christian tradition within broader realities of western invention, domination, and exclusion. In spite of the inclusive and activist spirit of the term's original adoption in American political discourse in the mid-20th century, the imagined tradition has been reappropriated to serve a purpose which is antithetical to its original usage. Contemporary western society is one where Christians, Jews, and Muslims each form an integral part. And I mention some of the participatory religions of the West to the necessary exclusion of others not to present a complete list, but to address the harmful implications which notions of an inaccurately abbreviated *Abrahamic* tradition may have caused. Neither do I intend to advocate for the widespread usage of an "Abrahamic tradition" in

place of the old to narrowly define the pluralist discourse which continues to shape contemporary western values and politics.

By revealing some of the asymmetries and false premises on which a Judeo-Christian Tradition relies, I hope to begin to redirect the energy that is vested in particularly unproductive and inflammatory engagements between Jews and Muslims in light of geo-political realities towards collaborative ends. I also hope to warn against the danger of taking at face value politicized and bastardized notions which correspond vaguely (at best) to historical and contemporary realities. I believe future scholarship on this as well as adjacent issues could benefit from increased attention to the rapidly shifting public values of Americans and westerners at large partly resulting from the increased representation of minority and marginalized groups in the political sphere.

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Leadership Experience and Extracurriculars

President, *Middle Eastern and North African Association (MENAA)* February 2023 – Present

- Rewrote organization's constitution and instituted organizational framework empowering leadership
- Interviewed and selected members to serve as Event Planner, Secretary, and Social Media Chair
- Raised \$2,000 in funding for club activities

Professional Development Chair, *Multicultural Undergraduate Law Association* May 2022 – Present

- Facilitated interactive lessons on LSAT preparation in 16-part LSAT Workshop with +45 attendees
- Helped +20 students begin LinkedIn pages and develop resume
- Secured \$10,000 in funding for club activities and expenditures

Podcast Producer, *Paterno Fellows Podcast* Feb 2021 – Jan 2023

- Hosted and edited +15 hours of podcast content regarding diverse student experiences, research, and contemporary campus issues

Work/Volunteer Experience

Mentor, *Every Futures Foundation London, U.K.* April 2023 – Present

- Remotely overseeing 3 groups of students in secondary schools across the U.K. throughout a 2-month extracurricular anti-racist educational project

LSAT Tutor, *Self-employed* Oct 2022 – Present

- Tutored 6 undergraduate students in LSAT Logical Reasoning and Analytical Reasoning

Organizer, *Un-PAC National* June 2022 – Present

- Founded Penn State chapter of national organization in Fall 2022
- Served as VP for chapter which registered +150 students to vote and obtained +700 petition signatures
- Worked with student government to pass resolution for no classes on Election Day

Crew Trainer, *McDonalds* March 2021 – Aug 2021

- Trained +10 hires in transactions, customer satisfaction, food preparation, and equipment maintenance

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- Accompanied vascular surgeon in collecting medical histories in bilingual instruction
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