

EARS Conference 2019

Judeo-Christianity and Islam: Contested Narratives”



Discussing the theme of Judeo-Christian culture and its tradition within the European context

Astrid Hamberg

The term Judeo-Christian has been around for many years now, and has been focusing our society in certain ways with (political) aims. The focus over the years shows how religion is moving from a religious to an ideological scope. However, it is becoming more and more clear how and why this term might not be the best fit anymore, because society has been changing a lot due to for example migrants coming from non-Western countries to Europe (and the United States).

This white paper dives into the term Judeo-Christian and discusses five interesting topics, brought in by five speakers at the EARS conference in October 2019: on the history of the term in both France and the United States, on the connection between religion, language and racism, on the Muslim perspective, on contesting narratives, and on religious extremism.

Finally, EARS offers some conclusions on the heavily debated term and gives approaches how to proceed from here.



Judeo-Christian history in the United States and France

Joel Sebban

The term 'Judeo-Christian' was born in the field of Biblical exegesis. The first known use was by F.C. Bauer from the Tübinger Schule, at the beginning of the 19th century, by which a synthesis was made between the earlier existing thesis and anti-thesis of early Catholicism versus Judaism and paganism. The synthesis was seen as the opposite of the Pauline Christian tradition, which was considered to be very close to the then dominating Protestant tradition.

The term 'Judeo-Christian' implied that the Jewish tradition was already incorporated in the Christian tradition, but that it was considered to be inferior to the Protestant tradition of that time. However, not only has the term been a theological term, it also has been a political term right from the beginning. In the United States for example, all presidents have used this term ever since President Eisenhower, and it is easy to see why: they use it to distinguish themselves and the United States from the communist nations. Here, it is already visible that a certain nationality a construct is for nationalism.

At the same time, there was an emergence of opposition against the Islam in France. Especially during the Suez war in 1956, the geopolitical dimensions in Europe became very clear and, interestingly, it turned out to be the secular West who finally turned against Islam – instead of the religious United States. The West thought that Islam would be incompatible with democracy.

Now, the term JudeoChristian was not necessarily used to point out the common heritage, but rather to reject the Islam. This feeling against Islam has been around ever since the Suez war. The feeling of exclusiveness had now turned from anti-Semitism to a kind of fear of Islam. However, after the attack on September 11th 2001, Islamophobia has been enhanced quite a bit and still rings in many layers of Western society.

Nowadays, a lot of (right-wing) politicians are openly using the term 'Judeo-Christian' for identity politics, in which they tend to give a more conservative image of society, which – according to them – is clearly more Christian and Jewish than Muslim. Academics, however, are somewhat reluctant to use the term, even though it evolved from Biblical Studies, because it has been ideologically charged from the beginning, but is also used to disguise for example the guilt which came forth after the Holocaust.



Religion, language, and racism

Anya Topolski

What do religion, language, and racism have to do with each other, particularly in the context of the term Judeo-Christianity? In the 18th century, academic theology had to compete with the supposedly more secularised and scientific sciences, and as a result, theology was heavily criticised. Academics, and at a slower pace citizens, were moving away from religion and towards 'secularism.'

Categories which were earlier defined as religious categories were translated into philological categories, the latter which were viewed to be the queen of the sciences. The Semitic languages Arabic, Aramaic, and Hebrew were seen as the languages of the sons of Shem (one of Noah's sons), which was a way to justify the colonial activities of the 18th century. Ham, another son of Noah, with black skin, was seen as the slave among slaves par excellence (and had been from at least the 15th century). Here, it is very clear how language plays a great role when defining new nations, how Christianity was and still is the – however not rightly so – privileged religion through all ages, being able to write their own history and thus also wipe out parts of history, peoples (genocide) and knowledge (epistemicide) which were not beneficial for them. This is one example of how religion and race intersect, in the formation of exclusionary categories.

Around the same time and place as the discipline of philology provided Europe with the category of the Semite, another group of German scholars – theologians wishing to challenge the newfound dominance of philology – coined the term 'Judeo-Christianity'. It is in this competition that the 19th usage of the term Judeo-Christian, with its explicit antisemitism, islamophobia, and anti-Catholicism, connects to the race-religion constellation.

Furthermore, this connection is not accidental as is clear from the term's problematic history, which is further entangled by orientalism and defined in opposition to the soon to be Aryanised (White) Pauline Church.



The Muslim perspective

Idris Nassery

The historical outline of the term Judeo-Christian shows that this concept is almost always approached from a Christian point of view. Therefore, it is helpful to see what the Muslim perspective is and what today can be done to diminish the dichotomy that is implied by the term Judeo-Christian.

Ever since the 7th century AD, Muslims and Islam were seen as a political and theological threat. The literature of that time only gives us a biblical perspective, in which Muslims are levelled with Ishmaelites and Hagarians: people who were disliked by God. This narrative gave people a theological reason not to like Muslims. Since the 16th century, theological arguments were supplemented by cultural and ethnical arguments against the Islamic culture.

Today's argument, however, mostly relies on Western achievements and values, and not so much on the theological aspect anymore. Idris Nassery argues that society is in need of a Judeo-Islamic narrative, because Islam can actually live in more harmony with Judaism. Because of the more comparable context of Muslims, Jews were able to have their own theology and philosophy, which they could not match with the context of the Christians. Their perspectives on for example religious laws correspond more with one another than with the Christian perspective. In this sense, Islam is already embedded in Judaism.

Next to this, Islam has a huge rich tradition to give, but has lost its confidence to show this tradition. Writing a different narrative could help regaining their confidence. Maybe even a Judeo-Islamic-Christian narrative can be created, so that all religions are part of the cultural feeling of society.

As stated before, the term Judeo-Christian has a very long history. The time has come to evaluate our narratives and start searching for ways to differ them from what they always have been. One way to change our existing narratives is to add other religions to them, another is to create totally new ones.



Contesting Narratives

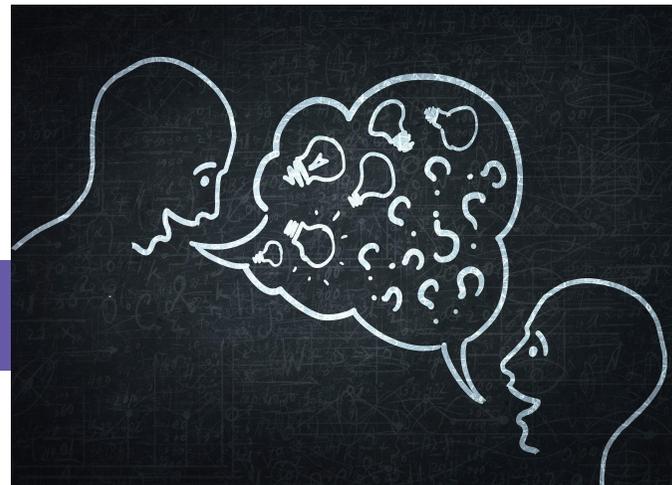
Graham Ward

Graham Ward from Oxford University argues that we are in need of new and better models for understanding not only the substance of a religious tradition, but also the very multifaceted, organic and dynamic interrelationships of society, culture, and history. New models for a better understanding can help us construct narratives about our traditions. However, traditions are not monolithic, but rather all have different experiences and practices, and this leads to multiple narratives that are contesting. Even so, contesting narratives are a good thing: a dialogue only focuses on the verbal and the written, whereas there are so many more ways in which people communicate. An important example of this other kind of communication is 'attuning': discerning and in that way understanding and acknowledging the integrity of the other.

How does one construct different narratives? First and foremost, one needs to let their own narrative be interrupted. People need to listen to each other and need to let other people listen as well, instead of formulating their answers for them. Different traditions are important, for in approaching a tradition that contests one's own, one can experience moments of wonder 'at the level of lived mystery', as Ward calls it.

And last but not least, it should be kept in mind that within our rapidly changing societies, it is not only people (migrants) that we need to integrate in the existing society, but also their religion and culture, in order to create a narrative that is more fitting to our current society.

It has become very clear that the term Judeo-Christian has been presented from the overall dominant Christian point of view – even not really taking into account the Jewish perspective on the term or thinking about how people who did not affiliate with the term felt about it. Therefore, it is important to include other religions, cultures, and the realisation that our society is turning more and more into a secular society, instead of a religious one.



Religious Extremism

Ruud Koopmans

To investigate the effect of legitimation of violence in scripture, a large survey was held among seven countries. The empirical research showed that there is indeed a connection between religiously motivated violence and religious fundamentalists: more religious knowledge increases support for violence, which is more visible in Islam than in Judaism or Christianity.

How was this researched? Part of the respondents of the survey were confronted with a religious quote when they were asked about religiously motivated violence. People who did see the quote, were more supportive of violence than people who did not. Next to this, the religious fundamentalism of the respondents was measured by eight items. Non-fundamentalists showed to be less supportive of violence than fundamentalists were. How can we do something about this?

The strategy which is often followed when encountered by these things, is that extreme organisations are told that they have the wrong interpretation of Islam; Islam would actually be peace. This, however, does not solve the problem, because it does not take away the violent texts. The basic principle needs to be contested: for example, stating openly that the main principle of taking the Qur'an literally should be discussed, so that the religious motivation of extremists can be denied.

Gaining knowledge about both one's own tradition as well as about other traditions is of high importance for multiple purposes. Only after learning and knowing something about the other tradition, one can go back to his or her own tradition in order to study that particular tradition.

Knowledge about what is going on is necessary if one wants to be able to create a new narrative, to which all parties can agree.



How to get to a real dialogue?

The contributions of this conference have shown several insights on the use of the term Judeo-Christian. It has been made clear that the term has largely been used in a negative way, opposing either 'real' Christianity to 'Judeo-Christianity' or opposing it to others than Christians, in particular Muslims. However, this confronts us once more with the need to create space for different traditions, in academia as well as in communities and politics. The question that arises, is how to get to a real dialogue? The discussion of the conference shed light on this question.

Sometimes it seems that people do want to have a dialogue, but not really seem to get to a real dialogue. It seems that they are afraid of that kind of honest dialogue, the kind that can emerge out of contesting narratives. Fear, for instance, does play an important role: people will protect themselves by nature and instinctively react to differences. There will be points of non-negotiations between traditions, but differences are important and people are capable of loving one another despite all their differences. In loving other people, one makes bigger steps in accepting them for the way they are and how they are not the same. Recognising differences creates space for integrity and honesty.

In order to overcome one's fear of real dialogue, it is important to accept your fear of losing your tradition, when going into (dialogue with) another tradition.

Precisely because of experiencing the other tradition, one can better experience his or her own tradition.

One needs to say in an honest way 'I am able to find something in that other tradition which I can live, without losing my own tradition'.

Something to keep in mind when trying to have a real dialogue, is that there might be certain rules in a tradition that prescribe how to deal with members of other traditions. Such rules will most likely lead to an asymmetric interaction, which is not useful for either side. In order to have a fruitful discussion, both sides must be willing to accommodate and compromise.

This is not easy, for religious boundaries are one of the hardest to overcome. No one wants to give up on his or her tradition. Nonetheless, traditions are able to widen up, still keeping their origins, texts, and history, but with respect towards the other tradition. In that way, space is created to have a real dialogue and to let one's own worship be enlarged by recognising the other. There can be enough space for all traditions to come together without leaving one's own frame behind. This is certainly the case in the context of our modern society characterised by pluralism and syncretism.

How to get to a real dialogue?

Without space to discuss on and with other religions, there cannot be a fruitful discussion on important topics such as freedom of religion. This is seen all over Europe: a discussion about whether Islam is compatible with liberal values in France; discussions on sexual orientation, (trans)genders, and homophobia in the United Kingdom; and discussions on legal rules made by Christians in a Christian age – but not for the current Muslim society – in Germany. In fact, traditions might be even much more pluralistic than is thought now. It is, again, language which is not able to catch the complexity of it all. Language is one way of expressing a religion and is thus a construct, but it seems that, because religion has become so complex and hybrid, we do not know anymore what it is exactly.

Conclusions

Theology should

- Engage with philosophy
- Engage with anthropology
- Engage with sociology
- Give way for plurality
- Create positive atmospheres
- Make space to ask the hard questions
- Place themes in their own social context
- Engage in day-to-day religion

People should

- Research their own tradition
- Understand different traditions
- Experience differences
- Engage in day-to-day religion
- Be open towards others
- Have a real dialogue