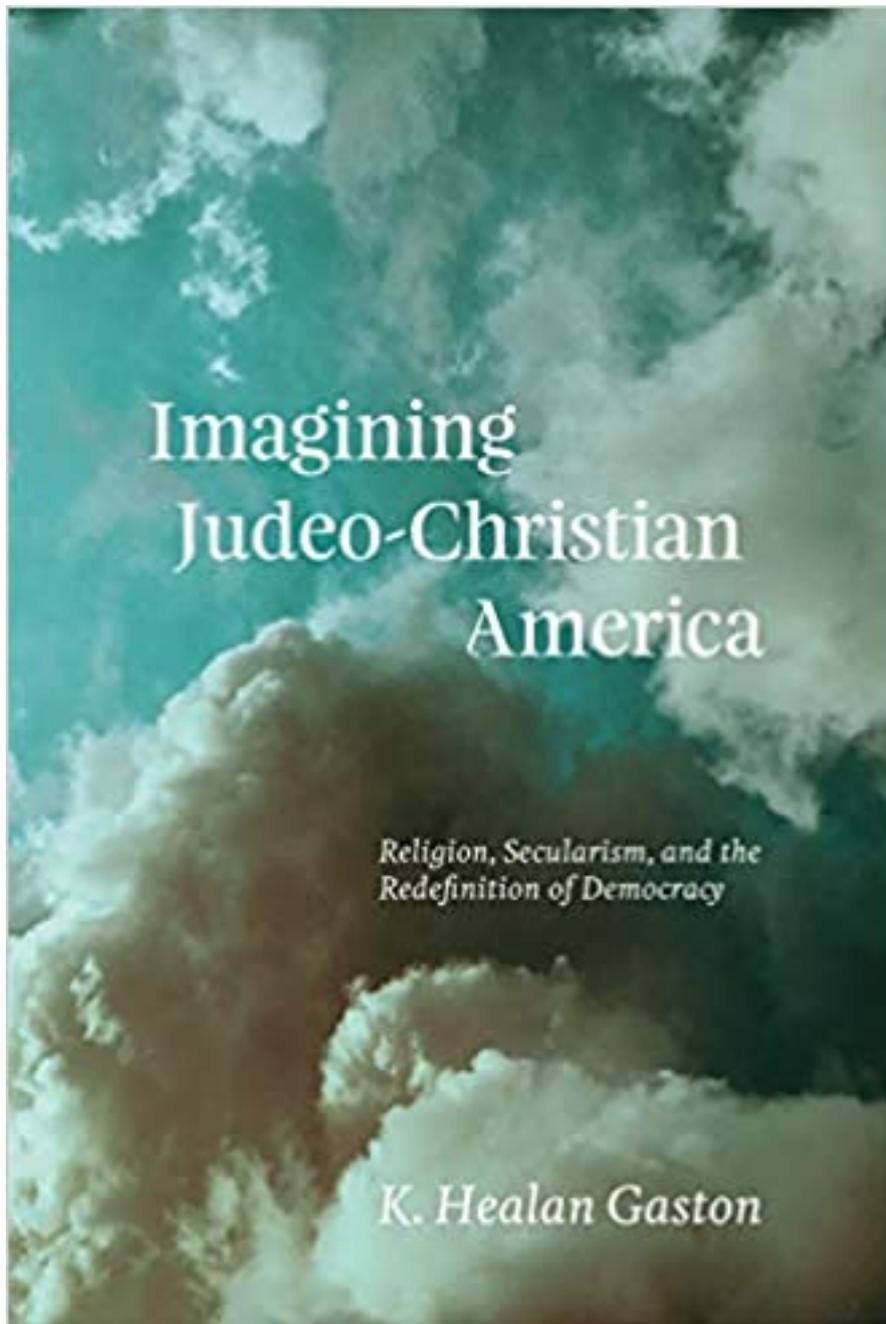




Imagining Judeo-Christian America

01.04.2021 | Martin Kavka

K. Healan Gaston: *Imagining Judeo-Christian America: Religion, Secularism, and the Redefinition of Democracy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019. 361 pp. \$34.99 (paper)



K. Healan Gaston's *Imagining Judeo-Christian America* deserves a very broad readership indeed. It will soon be canonical in a variety of fields: students interested in any aspect of religion in twentieth-century America will cite it, and many may pull on its threads for their own research projects. It introduces a vocabulary for thinking about religion and democracy in the United States

that should become standard in journalism and in scholarly literature. Its narrative is handled with such skill and grace that it possesses a rare generative power.

Imagining Judeo-Christian America tells the story of how the contest over the meaning of the United States has been mediated, since the early 1930s, through a contest over the meaning of the phrase “Judeo-Christian.” Instead of describing the sides of this contest as one between tolerant and intolerant folks, or between universalists and particularists, or between secularists and dogmatists—each of these pairs only calls attention to its own inadequacy—Gaston helpfully names the sides “pluralist” and “exceptionalist.” The former “grounded democracy in religious diversity and intellectual freedom” and used “Judeo-Christian” as a way to bring out the expansive sense of US citizenship (p. 12). The latter argued repeatedly that Judaism and Christianity were “exceptional in their ability to provide the core tenets of democracy” and so for them, “Judeo-Christian” served as a term that crystallized their distance from their enemies, whether those enemies were totalitarians or secularists (p. 287).

This means that the field of “Judeo-Christian” is a variable one. How does this change how we might think of the term? As an example, take Arthur Cohen (where is the dissertation on him?), who famously wrote in 1969 that the Judeo-Christian tradition was a myth, and indeed that it was only “in our time that its mythic reality can be scrutinized.”^[1] Gaston would not, I think, disagree with Cohen that the Judeo-Christian tradition is a myth; she would, however, disagree with his implication in the phrase “its mythic reality” that it is a single myth with a stable essence. To say, as Cohen did, that “there can be no free Jewish reality as long as it is obliged in dialectical relation and tension with Christian history” was certainly a riposte to Christians’ attempts to determine Jews, both culturally and politically, in American history.^[2] But as Gaston points out in her brief treatment of Cohen, Cohen himself sought to replace that myth with a new one, centered on a “Judeo-Christian humanism” that placed him alongside other Jewish liberals in the mid-twentieth century (p. 214). As a result, Cohen’s work on the Judeo-Christian is best understood as an intervention that sought to replace one myth of the Judeo-Christian with another.

The story that Gaston tells—in the service of her overarching thesis that the history of the term suggests that “the emergence of a new, more fluid understanding of religion and public life will spawn a sustained backlash”—is fascinating and persuasive on every page (p. 273). Much of the data of *Imagining Judeo-Christian America* involves Protestant-Catholic divides or worries that Christians have about the inhospitability of the public square. Those details might not interest all readers of H-Judaic (although they should), but the story that Gaston does tell about American Judaism is one that, in my view, most insistently raises Cohen’s question about the possibility of a free Jewish reality. How much agency did Jews have in making a home for themselves in the discourse of America? How constrained were they by their Christian neighbors?

In the late nineteenth century, “Judeo-Christian” became a way for Christians and some Jews in the US to express the characteristics of the West at a time when the rise of scientific methodologies (whether in the natural sciences, the social sciences, or historicism) threatened that self-understanding. At the same time, some of these invocations of a Judeo-Christian America retained supersessionist elements—one of Gaston’s examples is the intellectual historian Arthur O. Lovejoy—and this generated the links between Judaism and naturalism (including ethical naturalism) found in Morris Jastrow’s *The Study of Religion* (1901) and the early essays of Horace Kallen from around 1910 that were later collected in *Judaism at Bay* (1932).

But this kind of resistance is not the only form that agency might take; sometimes agency expresses itself through mimetic performances of hegemonic power. In the 1930s and 1940s, Jews began to use “Judeo-Christian” more frequently as Christians were using it, namely, as a way to position America’s difference from totalitarian nation-states. The use of “Judeo-Christian” with this function began in 1931 in a *New York Times* column by P. Whitwell Wilson, a British journalist who moved to the US during World War I while working for a British newspaper. He became a regular

Sunday columnist for the *Times* in the mid-1920s, and in that column frequently wrote about religious topics. Wilson was a supersessionist (he was a supporter of messianic Judaism in the US), but after Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany in 1933, we find “Judeo-Christian” appearing in the sermons and addresses of such rabbis as Stephen S. Wise and Louis I. Newman. If “Judeo-Christian” is synonymous with “anti-Nazi,” then there was every reason for Jews to use this term: “How better to mobilize Christians against Hitler than to define Nazism as a resurgence of paganism, aimed at stamping out Judeo-Christian principles worldwide?” (p. 78). But for Gaston, the historical record suggests that they used this language for opportunistic reasons; once the US had entered the war after the attack on Pearl Harbor and US Christians were effectively mobilized, both these rabbis ceased to use the term.

During the war, the use of “Judeo-Christian” among Jewish exceptionalists grew. Gaston rightly emphasizes the work of Jewish Theological Seminary chancellor Louis Finkelstein, active in the National Conference of Christians and Jews, in organizing the Conference on Science, Philosophy, and Religion in Their Relation to the Democratic Way of Life (CSPR) in the early 1940s. But both during and after the war, the preeminent Jewish exceptionalist in the US was Will Herberg, who developed a neo-orthodox Jewish theology after having been deeply moved by reading the Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. In both of these cases, it is difficult to suss out what is motoring the relation. As Cara Rock-Singer has pointed out in an article that appeared while Gaston’s book was in press, Finkelstein “Judaicized America’s founding political philosophy” in organizing CSPR, but he also did so in response to the reality of antisemitism in the US.^[3] Herberg’s antiseccularism continued in the 1950s as Niebuhr’s ebbed, and for Gaston it is Herberg’s position as one of few Jews involved in the Foundation for Religion Action in the Social and Civil Order (FRASCO) in the mid-1950s that especially marks “his distance from the American Jewish mainstream” (p. 181).

There is less presence for Jewish data in Gaston’s final chapters and conclusion, covering the 1960s through the Donald Trump presidency. But the “absence of convergence on any shared ideals, Judeo-Christian or otherwise” that she finds in the late 1960s is also to be found at the beginning and the end of her story (p. 214). If this is as true within American Jewish circles as it is within other American circles, it is not necessarily for the same reasons. As Cohen pointed out in the introduction to *The Myth of Judeo-Christian Tradition*, “alone we [Jews] have Christianity to thank for our survival.”^[4] This point, true both in the diaspora and in Israel, raises the deepest question about the very possibility of a free Jewish reality, a question that percolates through Gaston’s excellent history of the Judeo-Christian.

[1] Arthur Cohen, *The Myth of the Judeo-Christian Tradition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), xviii.

[2] Cohen, *Myth of the Judeo-Christian Tradition*, xix–xx.

[3] Cara Rock-Singer, “A Prophetic Guide for a Perplexed World: Louis Finkelstein and the 1940 Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion,” *Religion and American Culture* 29, no. 2 (May 2019): 190, 187.

[4] Cohen, *Myth of the Judeo-Christian Tradition*, xx.

Martin Kavka is professor of religion at Florida State University.

Source: [H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews](#). May, 2020. Licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](#).