After the terrorist attacks of 9/11, American Muslims acquired an unprecedented visibility in the United States, making clear what had already been the case for some time: demographically speaking, America could no longer be described as a Judeo-Christian country. Yet despite the emergence of new forms of religious diversity in the United States, for many Americans the Judeo-Christian tradition remained the only available way of thinking about religious unity, one that recognized a limited degree of diversity while still providing a set of faith-based principles held in common by adherents of multiple religions and denominations that could serve as a framework for national unity.

The concept of a Judeo-Christian tradition first became part of the American vocabulary during World War II as a progressive alternative to the idea that the United States was a “Christian nation”—and an implicitly white and Anglo-Protestant one. The term emerged as a recurring point of reference in the 1930s, when neo-Orthodox Protestant theologians focused on the Jewish roots of early Christianity as a source of spiritual guidance. By the end of the decade, it began to gain widespread cultural appeal as Americans identified European fascism as not only a strategic but also a moral threat to American democracy—as an assault on religion, Christianity and Judaism alike. Religious and civic leaders of all faiths, particularly Jews and liberal Christians affiliated with the mainline denominations of Protestantism, began to formulate a critique of fascism which tied its anti-democratic character both to its suppression of religious freedom and its racialist anti-Semitism.

Because pro-fascist movements in the United States had appropriated the word “Christian” as an expression of solidarity with Nazi Germany, Americans who wished to condemn fascism’s rejection of religion and
resonance grew stronger as an American faith suitable for fighting the Cold War. The idea of America as a Judeo-Christian country contrasted Soviet atheism with American religiosity and Soviet conformity with American diversity. The Judeo-Christian tradition endorsed pluralism along the lines of *E pluribus unum:* “Out of many, one,” or diversity within unity. It transcended denominational specificity, underpinning an American religious consensus while retaining enough flexibility to encompass differences in religious doctrine and practice among Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. It framed pluralism as a defining characteristic of American national identity, and integrated the previously marginalized minority religion of Judaism into American religious life as an equal partner with Protestantism and Catholicism.

After World War II, the Judeo-Christian tradition’s popular appeal and cultural resonance grew stronger as an American faith suitable for fighting the Cold War. The idea of America as a Judeo-Christian country contrasted Soviet atheism with American religiosity and Soviet conformity with American diversity. The Judeo-Christian tradition endorsed pluralism along the lines of *E pluribus unum:* “Out of many, one,” or diversity within unity. It transcended denominational specificity, underpinning an American religious consensus while retaining enough flexibility to encompass differences in religious doctrine and practice among Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. It framed pluralism as a defining characteristic of American national identity, and integrated the previously marginalized minority religion of Judaism into American religious life as an equal partner with Protestantism and Catholicism.

Over the course of the 1950s and ’60s, the Judeo-Christian approach to legitimating diversity while maintaining a conviction of underlying spiritual brotherhood was also extended to faiths outside the Western tradition. Different world religions were interpreted through their perceived commitment to what were, in fact, both Judeo-Christian and American values defined in universalist terms. The idea of the “Golden Rule,” originally associated exclusively with Christianity, proved to be an ideal medium for the extension of Judeo-Christian-style unity to other forms of religion. Norman Rockwell’s 1961 *Saturday Evening Post* cover illustration, above right, entitled “Golden Rule,” portrays members of all the world’s religions, resplendent in their diversity, united by their common devotion to the principle of “Do Unto Others As You Would Have Them Do Unto You.” At the center of the image, bathed in light, was a trinity of sorts: the Jewish patriarch, flanked by two families, Muslim and Christian, with their children. Rockwell expanded the Judeo-Christian tradition into an “Abrahamic” one that included Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.
Rockwell's inclusion of Islam as part of a diversified version of Judeo-Christianity and as a point of connection between Eastern and Western systems of religious morality was not exceptional. During the early postwar period, Islam was acknowledged as a faith worthy of equal consideration as a form of ethical monotheism, and as synecdoche for non-Western religions generally. While Cold War ideology shaped this approach to global religious diversity, as a more general cultural sensibility it served a progressive purpose: redefining faiths long dismissed as either uncivilized or merely heresies into spiritually legitimate expressions of the same values Westerners held dear. This view of Eastern religions acknowledged and affirmed diversity while maintaining a commitment to a common humanity transcending race, ethnos, and creed.

In the contemporary United States, Americans contend with ever-increasing religious diversity as the nation’s Muslim community continues to grow, and our national leaders struggle to maintain that our current state of war is a war on terror rather than on a particular religion. Accordingly, the search for a model of American religiosity that can offer spiritual unity without relying upon Judeo-Christian hegemony has a new political weight and civic urgency. In both concept and rhetoric, American Muslims use Judeo-Christianity to make a case for the inclusion of Islam in American religious life, but with a twist, by advocating alternative terms, such as “Judeo-Christian-Islamic” or “Abrahamic” as a more pluralistic framework for thinking and talking about America’s different forms of monotheism. Since 9/11, the idea of a religious consensus among the “Abrahamic” faiths has become an increasingly popular way to incorporate the common spiritual heritage of Muslims, Jews, and Christians into a single, culturally
comprehensible package—and to make a case for American religious unity through theological common ground. In “A Call to Bridge the Abrahamic Faiths,” a 2002 sermon at New York’s al Farah Mosque, Feisal Abdul Rauf explained Islam’s relationship to Christianity and Judaism as what he called a “reaffirmation” of the “Semitic religious tradition,” drawing upon the Koran to argue for the “similarity…of Judaism and Christianity with Islam,” and what he described as Islam’s “self-identification” with the other two faiths. And Bruce Feiler, author of the New York Times bestseller Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths, created a popular set of workshop materials for “Abraham salons” promoting tri-faith dialogue.

Over Independence Day weekend in 2002, a full-page ad appeared in the New York Times and other papers around the country. It was part of what was billed as the “Campaign for Freedom,” created by the Advertising Council. The tagline read: “A Priest, a Rabbi and an Imam are walking down the street. There’s no punchline.” The ad exemplified an American religious faith in which Protestant, Catholic, Jew had become Christian, Muslim, Jew—the three religions now joined in monotheistic rather than Judeo-Christian unity. Islam, in this single fusion of text and image, received a place in the denominational mainstream. But in its vision of American religious pluralism the ad went further, telling readers that “because no religion needs to feel threatened by another, we can look to the similarities that unite us, instead of focusing on the differences. Two hundred million Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus agree.” In its emphasis on common values, the ad utilized the Judeo-Christian approach to E pluribus unum. And in its overhaul of the American religious consensus of Protestant, Catholic, and Jew, it used Islam as a stand-in for other non-Judeo-Christian faiths to make a case for the incorporation of those faiths into our conception of American religiosity and, by extension, American national identity.

Historical parallels are inevitably and necessarily imprecise: the war in which we’ve found ourselves for over a decade has been fought not against a godless enemy but against an enemy largely defined by religion. In marked contrast to Judaism during World War II and the Cold War, Islam is frequently depicted as fundamentally anti-democratic and incompatible with democracy. But as the successful integration of Judaism into the mainstream of American religious life shows, culture is contingent on the ability of historical actors—everyday people—to realize that there are alternatives to Islamophobia, just as there were alternatives to anti-Semitism, and that other visions of what counts as American religion, and who counts as American, are possible.