Culture and Religion
Remarks on an Indeterminate Relationship

Monique Scheer

**ABSTRACT:** Religion is often viewed as a subset of ‘culture’, that is, the two terms are often used interchangeably. At the same time, it is possible to view religion and culture as clearly distinct, perhaps even opposed to each other. This article ponders the ways in which what counts as religion in the present day is intertwined with a concept of culture. Each has an essentialist and postmodern variant, and how they are related, whether conflated or separated, carries normative claims about each. Bringing together theoretical insights on these two highly debated concepts, this piece offers an analysis of the nested indeterminacies between both and urges analytical attention toward them in the interplay of essentializing and de-essentializing practices.

**KEYWORDS:** concept of culture, culturalization of religion, heritage, religionization of culture, religious pluralism, strategies of essentialization

About eight years ago, I took a group of students on a guided tour of a large, ornate mosque in a city center in southwestern Germany. Our guide, a knowledgeable young German woman of Turkish origin, was clearly well practiced in interreligious dialogue and its style of speaking. As she led us through the various rooms, she pointed out the many similarities between Islamic and Christian spaces and beliefs. In so doing, she often addressed our (by all appearances homogeneously white, middle-class) group sweepingly as ‘Christians’. In our follow-up discussion in class, some students expressed irritation at being referred to as Christian (“How could she just assume …?”), either because they identified as non-believers or felt that their religious orientation was a private matter. A classic teachable moment. Categorizing the group as ‘German and therefore Christian’, the young woman turned the tables on us by applying the same logic with which her community is confronted every day (‘Turkish and therefore Muslim’), in schools, supermarkets, government offices, the media. Religion and nationality (or ethnicity), she seemed to be saying, are so closely linked as to be practically interchangeable. By addressing us as members of a ‘Christian culture’, she likely did not mean to suggest that we are particularly devout. My students, however, felt that being called ‘Christian’ was tantamount to being called ‘religious’. This led to a lively discussion about why it is easier for us to think of Muslims as a
cultural group than to think of Christians as such. How are religion and culture related to one another? Is ‘religion’ another way of saying ‘culture’? Is religion a subset of culture? Or is religion, in fact, clearly distinct from a more general culture that it may in fact reject or, conversely, strive to influence?

Since multicultural societies are also multi-religious societies, the question of how religion and culture are related to one another is not trivial, and the answer is not immediately obvious. Since that ‘aha’ moment years ago, the necessity to think clearly about what we mean when we say ‘religion’ seems ever more urgent, as this category gets drawn into identity politics—and the increasingly tense debates around them—and is taken up in the public discourse that emanates from powerful institutions (the law, bureaucratic apparatus, the media). In the following, I would like to offer a comparative analysis of these notoriously fraught concepts by pointing to two paradigms that both terms share, moving between everyday speech, public discourse, and scholarship with a focus in Europe. Each of these paradigms is problematic in various ways: contradictory, often essentialist, and deployed for specific projects and agendas. Considering then, that these concepts are not firm, but rather the result of strategic categorizing practices constantly in flux, the relationship of culture and religion to one another remains indeterminate. I will argue that what deserves closer attention are the practices of defining and relating, which can engender open discussions such as the one I had with my students. Who is deciding in a given situation what religion and culture are, how they are set in relation to one another, and to what end?

**Two Ways of Speaking about Culture and Religion**

As a starting point, German migration scholars Paul Mecheril and Oscar Thomas-Olalde (2011: 38–45) provided me with a useful distinction between two ways of speaking about religion in the social sciences, which also enter into public discourse: a ‘paradigm of appropriation’ and ‘religious identity as destiny’. The first paradigm builds, I would argue, on what Charles Taylor (2007: 297–419) calls the ‘nova effect’: the explosive diversification of the religions on offer in the modern era, including the possibility not to believe in God at all. In this discursive mode, religion is viewed as something that, in principle, every individual does as they please. This freedom is tied to an extensive deinstitutionalization of religion. It is not just that modernity accepts a wide array of alternatives to the major churches in the West (Eastern religions, New Age, esotericism, etc.), but also that traditional forms of belief are being combined in personalized ways with other bits and pieces, regardless of how the churches feel about it. Religion is viewed as a freely chosen stance and practice that can be switched out, modified, or completely abandoned at will. This ‘paradigm of (individual) appropriation’ treats religion as a question of personal style, aesthetic preference, and individual opinion, and it is found often in discourses dealing with ‘modern’ or ‘postmodern’ religiosity. People decide for themselves what they believe, which practices they attach to their convictions, and with what level of intensity and discipline they live them out. Religious pluralism is represented as a free market of options for believers (Stark 2006), and thus is hardly viewed as a problem or source of conflict. Research in this vein focuses on practitioners’ creativity and agency and the fluidity and hybridity of their practices. In public discourse, it is treated as how religion is ‘supposed’ to be: a private, personal matter of belief, something you freely choose and design to your own needs. This ideal type I will refer to as ‘Religion 1’.

The other discursive mode, which I will call ‘Religion 2’, understands religion as a group or institution that offers and/or assigns fellowship, community, and identity. Whereas Religion 1 can offer no clear answer to the question “What religion are you?”, Religion 2 allows for unequivocal categorization. It is the paradigm behind the survey that produces a pie chart of
the relative distribution of religions in society. Here, diversity is represented not as a market, but territorially. The size of the slices becomes important: the churches worry about their slices shrinking, while right-wing populists are preoccupied with the relative size of the Muslim slice. In this paradigm, where religions are thought of as definable units, diversity can be seen as a threat to society, a source of conflict and social disintegration. But Religion 2 is not merely an artifact of the governmental gaze; it is also very much a feeling that people can actively cultivate. Built on the assumption that we are born into a religion and remain fundamentally shaped by it for our entire lives, ‘religious identity as destiny’ is not just a personal preference. In this discursive mode, religion is the practice that a family and community shares; it is seen as heritage and a tradition that must be passed down. Unlike Religion 1, it cannot be a purely individual and private matter, as the community needs organizations and spaces for common worship and religious education for the children, creating situations of unequal treatment among religious communities by the state. Thus, Religion 2 is central to the politics of multiculture. It is useful when demanding political power, rights, and equal privileges. Talk of religious pluralism and inter-religious dialogue belongs to this paradigm, producing difference even as it pursues the peaceful co-existence of clearly defined groups that mutually recognize each other as religions (Bender and Klassen 2010). The paradigm of Religion 2, then, places emphasis on community and identity, which, as will be discussed below, makes the question of belief somewhat secondary.

There is a clear tendency in both public discourse and many sectors of the social sciences to assume that Religion 1 is the ‘proper’ religion in Europe today, while Religion 2 is what is being brought in by migrants (cf. Mecheril and Thomas-Olalde 2011). In other words, discussions on religion rely on an implicit modern/pre-modern divide in which Religion 2 is used to construct the Other and their “failure to embrace secularism and enter modernity” (Asad 2003: 10). In Germany, this discourse has a long tradition. It is the mode in which Catholicism was construed as backward and repressive during the Kulturkampf era in the late nineteenth century (e.g., Gross 2004); it is how Islam is often spoken about in Germany today.

When looking at these two modes of talking about religion, I am struck by similarities to the two understandings of culture often debated in anthropology. The holistic concept of culture, which is usually traced via Franz Boas back to Johann Gottfried Herder, has similar characteristics as Religion 2, so here I will call it ‘Culture 2’. In this way of speaking about culture, it can be thought of in the plural; one can speak of more or less clearly definable units of language and custom, ‘cultures’ that could theoretically fill a pie chart of the world. Culture 2 is behind the idea of multiculturalism, in which ‘culture’ is a synonym for ‘ethnic group’, ‘ethnicity’, sometimes ‘race’. This culture is destiny; it is no more a matter of personal choice than one’s native language(s). It belongs to you, and you belong to it. Culture is a source of identity by virtue of being one’s ‘origin’ or ‘home’, two very politically laden concepts closely tied to this way of speaking about culture. Essentialism seems built into Culture 2—the notion that there is a core, even changeless truth that defines a culture. Deeply determining how its members think and feel, it is expressed in their art, crafts, and lifeways. The Boasian school turned this notion of a cultural essence that deserves to be preserved for its own sake into an instrument of anti-colonialism and anti-racism that is still mobilized to articulate both the idea of rightful cultural property (and accordingly, the notion that it can be stolen) and a right to cultural survival. But it is also the basis for neo-racist assumptions and sentiments. A statement like “that’s their culture, it’s just how they are” could just as easily be read as an expression of respect and recognition as it could be one of othering and exclusion.

This is one of the reasons that sharp criticism of this concept of culture emerged, pointedly formulated by Lila Abu-Lughod (1991) in “Writing Against Culture.” She proposed replacing “culture” with “practice” and “discourse,” as “they were intended to enable us to analyze social life
without presuming the degree of coherence that the culture concept has come to carry” (ibid.: 147). An anti-essentialist understanding of culture, which I will call ‘Culture 1’, recognizes that people simultaneously take part in various cultures, those of classes, genders, and generations as well as ethnic groups. The socio- or ethno-cultural practices that individual actors take up depend on the concrete situation; thus, these practices, which can be switched or combined, are constantly in flux—something that happens rather than something pre-existing and static that must be passed down and cared for. Arjun Appadurai (1996: 12) proposed using the concept of culture primarily in the “adjectival form of the word, that is, cultural” precisely with the aim of recognizing and expressing that it is a dimension, not a thing. German philosophers Byung-Chul Han (2005) and Wolfgang Welsch (1999) have proposed speaking, respectively, of ‘hyperculturality’ or ‘transculturality’ as a way of loosening the moorings that tie cultural elements to a culture, making them more mobile, less the property and inheritance of a single society or ethnicity, and capable of combinations and hybrid forms. Sociologist Andreas Reckwitz (2019: 36) has drawn on this concept to emphasize how culture works for a specific “cosmopolitan middle class, which mostly gathers in urban centers of Western societies”: for them, culture is “the plurality of cultural goods that circulate in global markets and provide the individual resources for their self-realization” (my translation; emphasis in the original).

As a dimension or recombinant practice, Culture 1 is not countable; the mere use of the plural form ‘cultures’ makes proponents of this paradigm cringe. Here, identity is not destiny but something you do (cf. Brubaker and Cooper 2000), based on the assumption that the subject is the agent of this doing. Belonging is demonstrated and lived out through the taking up of particular cultural elements: home is not objectively ‘there’; rather, we create it ourselves through practices that frame a place as home and create a sense of belonging (Binder 2008). By recognizing such processes, Culture 1 places the emphasis on the actors themselves, on how they deal with their different cultural belongings and live them out in different variations and intensities.

In her piece on how Muslim practitioners in migrant communities in France, Germany, and Great Britain implement the discourse of culture, Jeanette Jouili (2019: 231) notes that they must also negotiate between two competing concepts:

My European Muslim interlocutors tried to distance themselves from an association with the all-encompassing and oppressive culture (as past and obsolete custom) concept and to lay claim instead to a more ‘humanist-inclined’ (universal, timeless, and/or future-oriented) concept in order to overcome the stigmatization and exclusion stemming from their assumed incapacity to endorse and enact the ideal of individual freedom.

Her observations grew out of fieldwork conversations about the relation of the religion of Islam to culture in Europe, specifically, and she contrasts the ‘high’ and ‘low’ definitions of culture (the arts vs. everyday life; creativity vs. custom), whereas I have chosen to highlight the overlaps of static/identitarian vs. processual/individualized understandings of ‘culture’ and ‘religion’. But we come to the same conclusion in one respect: the dichotomizing operation reproduces the structure-agency duality. In the case of Culture and Religion 2, structure is emphasized and can lead to a cultural-determinist kind of argument that tends to be applied mostly to ethnic and religious minorities. In Culture and Religion 1, the focus is on actors and their boundless agency and creativity, attributes that align with ‘European values’. It is based on this paradigm that the culturally competent, responsible subjects who optimize themselves for the market and/or integration into majority society are interpellated.

Like the actor-structure divide itself, neither paradigm is completely right or completely wrong. In fact, upon closer inspection, the binary disintegrates: Culture and Religion 1, apparently based on individualism, can be seen as a collective phenomenon and the result of a liberal
dogma that itself brings an identity into being (‘moderns’), whose ‘creativity dispositif’ (Reckwitz
2017) is their destiny. And conversely, groups of people assigned to cultures and religions are, on
the ground, far less homogeneous and static than the discourses of Culture and Religion 2 sug-
gest. Ultimately, it is important to produce ethnographic descriptions of how and where these
distinct yet labile discursive constructs can interact and even transform into each other. There is a
lot to be learned from how these seemingly dichotomous discourses are handled in everyday life,
at once upheld and parodied, deployed and undermined, as shown by Gerd Baumann’s (1996:
34) concept of “dual discursive competence” and the wealth of ethnographic work it has inspired.

Essentializing Strategies: Affective and Political Advantages

Banning the concept of culture altogether has not proved to be a very feasible proposal (Fox
and King 2002), but many scholars in the social sciences have been able to get behind a whole-
hearted rejection of Culture 2. They urge that Culture 1 be the model with which we analyze
data, thus maintaining ‘culture’ as an anti-essentialist analytical concept, understood as practice
and discourse, a perpetual process rather than a ‘thing’ that can serve racist agendas. Culture 2
would then only be found in non-scientific ways of speaking, in everyday practices, public dis-
course, the media, legal decisions, and so on, as a misnomer and wrong understanding of what
culture ‘actually’ is. Culture 1 is used to deconstruct Culture 2, just as Religion 1 can be used
to deconstruct Religion 2. But the recourse to essentialist conceptions of culture and religion
in public discourse is so ubiquitous and undying that rather than simply critique it as wrong-
headed and dangerous, it is worth asking why it retains its appeal, even and especially for those
without the intention or means to enforce it. So before I discuss the relationship of religion and
culture in the final section of this article, I will suggest why some issues may actually call for a
careful defense of Culture and Religion 2 against its ‘cultured despisers’.

First, it is not as if Culture and Religion 1 are completely unproblematic. The tendency to
essentialism of Culture and Religion 2 has been roundly criticized, less so the problem with
concepts such as ‘hyperculture’ and the religious ‘market’, that is, their built-in modernization-
as-secularization theory. When culture and religion are characterized as constructed, hybrid,
changeable, and freely selectable, people who show themselves to be aware of or even bound
to tradition appear strangely intransigent. Not only do anti-essentialist concepts tend to over-
individualize and overemphasize agency, they can also have a normative effect, producing an
expectation of religious hybridity by scholars in the field and, ultimately, the state. The policy
conclusion might well be: “If religion everywhere is hybrid anyway, what is the problem with
asking Muslims in Denmark to make theirs a little bit more Protestant?” It is just for this rea-
son that the strong counter-discourse offered by Religion 2 is useful; it should not be met with
blanket critique without a careful examination of how the anti-essentialist option works out for
different groups. Instead of dismissing it as a backward, pre-scientific way of speaking based
on false understanding—since it proves useful for social scientists of religion, too, when we
need to construct more or less clearly definable units for the purpose of a research question (cf.
Woodhead 2011), or as heuristic concepts in conversation with other disciplines that still use
them—we should examine strategies of essentialization and what they can accomplish, without
neglecting to note where they are in danger of falling into familiar traps.

Second, hybridity and fluidity rely on the very plurality provided by clearly defined phenom-
ena. Culture 1 works by manipulating and recombining Culture and Religion 2. A hyphenated
identity such as German-Turkish is made up of two imagined cultural units that are bound
together in one person or family. Developments in one’s biography construed as cultural (“I’ve
become more and more British since moving to Durham”) or religious conversion narratives only make sense when two distinct cultures or religions are postulated. Clearly defined communities can also be the basis of conviviality in a pluralist society. In daily interactions, cultural and religious difference is named and acknowledged in order to accommodate and recognize it, as an offering of sensitivity and friendliness: colleagues offer to switch shifts with those of another religion in the spirit of helpfulness; at parties, dishes are planned in order not to compromise various religious and cultural preferences as a sign of hospitality. At the same time, such recognitions of identity can be quickly modified or abandoned. Differences are asserted and then almost immediately downplayed, perhaps to counter stereotypes, perhaps from a fear of being (or being viewed as) a bigot. Very often, people find similarities and postulate equivalencies across difference, like our tour guide in the mosque. The borders between the two ways of speaking flicker between fixedness and fluidity according to the strategy and the situation. As Baumann (1999: 93–94) elegantly puts it: “In some situations, they can speak of, or treat, their own culture or somebody else’s as if it were the tied and tagged baggage of a national, ethnic, or religious group … In other situations, however, they can speak of, and treat, their own culture or somebody else’s as if it were plastic and pliable … , something you make rather than have.” The use of Culture and Religion 2 is not always already exclusionary.

Third, essentializing practices can be emotional practices and thus provide affective satisfactions. Far more effectively than the free-floating, radically individualized Culture and Religion 1, notions of belonging can serve as vehicles of emotional effects, both serious and ironic. Serious—and to be seriously challenged—are those practices that use Culture and Religion 2 as vehicles of hate in order to exclude and even perpetrate racist, culturalist, fundamentalist violence. But people are also seriously in need of essentialist concepts for inclusionary purposes or when they want to maintain and pass down a tradition, especially when that tradition seems threatened. The feelings that are mobilized in this process—the sense of ‘we’, the pride and satisfaction at passing on something personally significant in as intact a form as possible—reward the use of a concept of community or culture as homogeneous and insular. The balancing act between strengthening one’s own identity and remaining inclusive is not easy, while judgments of identity practices as per se exclusionary are quickly made. Looking closely at how actors manage to enjoy cultural or religious pride without postulating their own superiority can help us understand the integrative work of some essentializing practices.

Not least, we are attached to essentialisms because they can be fun. Laughing together at our community’s quirks is a practice of cementing bonds. Clearly, ironic practices and humor that play with culturally or religiously coded elements are risky; enjoying that humor with someone from outside the group invokes trust (“a rabbi, a priest, and a minister walk into a bar”), and when this is done misguided or even coercively, it must be called out. But humor is important because it can also do subversive work, undoing essentialist concepts. Ironized cultural and perhaps even religious performances demonstrate the instability of Culture and Religion 2. That these performances give pleasure does not make them harmless; they can quickly slip into flat and thoughtless reproductions of stereotypes and racist representations. The post hoc framing as “just for fun” is no excuse; attention must be paid to the intention behind the balancing act.

One could argue that most essentializing practices—not just the intentionally humorous ones—are balancing acts, oscillating between emotional seriousness and a distancing irony. Tourists seek to experience the ‘authentic culture’ of another country while knowing that their activity is vaguely exoticizing. People participate in religious rituals or traditional customs for the pleasure of it (see the undying enthusiasm for the ‘white wedding’), knowing at the same time that they are antiquated and likely misogynist and racist. Finding a way to open up the space within that wavering into a deeper conversation about the effects of essentializing practices
might change people’s tastes and pleasures. But I would suggest that it is unlikely that Culture and Religion 2 will ever disappear because affective ties to essences—ranging from the playful and pleasurable to the serious and respectful—grant them significance. The playful, ironic mode promotes self-conscious uses of essences and awareness of their inventedness, and the serious, respectful mode can take place within a framework of inwardly directed identity constitution without making claims to rightful hegemonic status in society. Identifying where the line is crossed and difference is enforced, discrimination promoted—that is the daily challenge of living with essentializing practices.

Finally, essences also offer a source of power and thus political advantages. For emancipatory movements and the politics of anti-discrimination, the highly individualized way of speaking used in Culture and Religion 1 is counterproductive because it weakens any claims to recognition of a group as a group, robbing them of their clout. Religion and Culture 1 are the paradigms of the privileged, ‘modern’ ways of engaging with belief and lifestyles framed as self-determined and private matters, so that labeling specific groups (as Religion and Culture 2 do) is viewed as a discriminatory practice, akin to racialization. But as we know, color blindness does not guarantee equity, and self-ascription of religion-as-destiny can provide advantages. In daily life, essentializations grant bargaining power, not least because Culture 2 emerged from an agenda of respect for all cultures, and Religion 2 can draw on notions of religious freedom. Identity politics builds on “I was born this way” precisely because this essentializing discourse latches onto the veracity of the ‘natural’, precluding any possibility of free choice or negotiation. Paradoxically, this claim is an empowering strategy; it is also risky. “The strategic use of an essence as a mobilizing slogan or masterword like woman or worker or the name of a nation is, ideally, self-conscious for all mobilized,” Spivak (1993: 3) notes, but she worries: “Can there be such a thing?” (ibid.: 4). In order that essentializations not become traps, in order that we not to succumb to their “fetish-character,” their constructedness, historicity, and social embeddedness must be kept uppermost in the minds of strategists, “even when it seems that to remind oneself of it is counterproductive” (ibid.). Spivak sees this kind of self-consciously strategic use of essentialism at work in the mobilization of developing nations post-1989, in which “ethnicity and religion are negotiable signifiers in these fast-moving articulations” (ibid.: 15), but do important work.

To sum up, there is quite a lot at stake when one considers discrediting Culture and Religion 2 as paradigms, and Culture and Religion 1 are not completely blameless when it comes to politics. The interesting research question, then, is not which discourse is correct, but instead how actors implement either or both paradigms and to what end.

**Culture and Religion in Relation**

Having recapitulated that what counts as religion and how we conceive of culture comes into being through strategic discursive practices of both de-essentialization and essentialization, we can now think about how their relationship to each other is constituted. Distinctions between culture and religion and the nature of their relationship are neither ‘simply there’, nor have they arisen on their own from supposedly autonomous processes of differentiation and modernization; they are also made in strategic discursive practices and serve various purposes, institutional and personal. Who divides culture from religion? Who joins them together, and why? What rhetorical or political advantage, what emotional-aesthetic attachment stands to be gained in doing so?

The sphere of legal discourse shows very clearly how dividing religion from culture can have strategic advantages. In the debates in Europe over the headscarf or male circumcision, those
who wish to forbid such practices find it advantageous to connote them as cultural, for if they are religious, they could be protected under the premise of religious freedom. This happened in 2012, when a court in Cologne ruled against allowing male children to be circumcised (a ruling later overturned). In the public debate that ensued, the ‘true meaning’ of circumcision was aired from a variety of perspectives, with different outcomes for Muslims and Jews. Some participants in this debate used the strategy of division to assign religious significance to one practice, brit milah, and cultural origins and purposes to the other, símnet or khitan, meaning that only the first should be protected by law and the latter could be forbidden.6

In the realm of scholarship, a marked distinction between a theological and a social science approach to the relationship between religion and culture emerged over the course of the twentieth century. In the founding era of the social sciences, they were close: religion was treated as a foundational element of culture and society. While Emile Durkheim’s theory tended to conflate religion and society, Max Weber’s lifework of studying the economic conduct supported by various religions was based on a notion of religion as a factor distinct from economy and society, to allow it the status of a more or less independent variable. He agreed with the theologian Ernst Troeltsch, with whom he shared an intense intellectual conversation, that a sound knowledge of religious history was indispensable to the understanding of a society’s broader historical trajectory. This was not only in line with Christian conceptions of religion being a moral foundation for the culture at large, but also with Weber’s methodological individualism, which viewed ideas (including religious ideas) as the driving force in history, since they motivated human action and shaped ethical conduct.

However, following Weber’s concept of increasing rationalization, modernization theory in the social sciences prophesied the retreat of religion. Since then, religion has been treated as a quantité négligeable in many social science research designs—or else, in a functionalist sense, it is merged with the notion of a ‘value system’. Working closely with sociologists, Clifford Geertz (1973) participated in this sort of merging when he formulated his influential definition of religion as a cultural system. Like culture, religion provides meaning, orientation, and above all the power to bind people together, all of these functions being regularly actualized in rituals (ibid.).7 Thus, the concepts become interchangeable: whatever entity ‘primordial loyalties’ (Geertz 1994) are able to attach themselves to—ethnicity, nation, or religion—they all serve the same purpose. Samuel Huntington’s (1996) sketch of a global cultural conflict quite illustratively reproduces this assumption, with spatial, ethnic, and religious designations for ‘culture areas’ standing beside each other as more or less functionally equivalent: the West, the Islamic world, Orthodoxy, Japan, India, Latin America, Africa.

If sociology and anthropology have tended to conflate religion and culture, theologies still tend to divide religion from culture. With its echoes of the Lutheran two kingdoms doctrine, the definition of religion as independent from culture may seem to have been particularly important in Protestant theology,8 but it is also useful for other theology departments and seminaries, or any scholarly endeavors centered on religion, particularly when conceived of as a sui generis phenomenon.9 By removing religion from the cultural sphere, refusing to see it as ‘just another form of cultural expression,’ scholars of religion push back against the tendency to subsume and secularize their research object, similar to how the study of literature, art history, and musicology also became sciences of ‘culture’ once these texts, images, and sounds were removed from the religious sphere. This would appear to echo the strategies of distinction between religion and culture performed by pious believers. In an illuminating comparison of young evangelical Christians and reformist Sunni Muslims in the Netherlands, Daan Beekers (2020: 120) has shown, for example, that both groups distinguish their faith not only from the surrounding secular ‘culture’, but also from the “unreflective religious cultures they had been raised in.” They
view a religion distinct from culture as a truer faith, “personal, self-reflective, and committed” (ibid.) and oriented toward “feeling close to God” (ibid.: 121). The demarcation against ‘culture’ allows them to determine what should actually count as religion.

The strategy of division between culture and religion would appear to support Religion 2 and its essentialist tendencies. Indeed, a rejection of the ‘world’ and its impious, even sinful ‘culture’ has been a central argument of religious groups from all traditions seeking to offer their communities as alternatives. Olivier Roy (2004) views such ‘deculturation’ of religion as highly problematic, leading inevitably to radicalization. But the division of religion from culture can also been a feature of liberal reform movements whose aim is to find the essence of a given religion outside of culture so that it can adapt to the modern world, or become more easily transportable. Division can have emancipatory effects, as Jouili (2019: 208) reports about the revivalist Muslim women in France and Germany:

Among these women, I found a consistent emphasis on the necessity of separating religion from culture. The women critically conceived ‘culture’ as the locus for those passively inherited customs with which Muslim societies are often associated in public discourses. This particular distinction between culture and religion enabled them to criticize certain patriarchal practices they discerned within their communities.

Clearly, ‘deculturalization’ is not always per se reactionary. It is necessary to look closely at the actors and their goals.

By the same token, strategies of conflating religion and culture are not necessarily progressive but can also be quite the opposite. It can manifest, for example, as a religionization of culture. A typical example in European public discourse would be the subsuming of many different ethnic designations (particularly of immigrant groups such as Turkish, Bosnian, Pakistani, Syrian, etc.) into a single religious one: Muslim. People who have never set foot in a mosque are labeled Muslim because of a presumed cultural membership, often deduced from nothing more than a name and/or skin color. This strategy must be critiqued as a homogenizing practice of othering and exclusion when performed from the outside (such as when populists decry the “Islamization of European culture”), as opposed to when actors decide for themselves that it is advantageous to subsume their cultural origins under a religion, for instance, to avoid a perceived conflict between two national affiliations. The label Muslim French, British, or German can better depict an unambiguously felt national affiliation without totally effacing one’s family history, or can be used to create a distinctive artistic culture. Jouili (2019: 208) recounts how British Muslim art practitioners spoke of culture “especially in the sense of self-expression, creativity, and arts. They emphasized the intrinsic link between Islam and cultural expression,” seeking to create “an ‘authentic’ British Muslim culture.”

The converse operation, the culturalization of religion, is very often seen as a practice of identification, one that takes the ‘religious identity as destiny’ notion of Religion 2 seriously, but without necessarily engaging in the practice or avowing the beliefs. To take a complicated but obvious example, identifying as Jewish is often not ‘just religious’—despite a few examples, such as the Protestant concept of religion-as-belief, which shines through German administrative categorizations of Judaism as a ‘confession,’ or American habits of referring to ‘being Jewish’ as a person’s religion. Jewishness is arguably most frequently referred to in the sense of belonging to a specific community with a specific history and culture, to the point that active religious practice can be secondary: non-religious people who come from Jewish families still call themselves (atheistic or secular) Jews. As Stacey Gutkowski (2019) explains, the question of what makes one a ‘Jew’ is complicated: adherence to Jewish law (halakhah) is more important than any given set of beliefs. Yet even a self-declared atheist can be considered Jewish if her mother is Jewish: “One need
not behave in accordance with Jewish law, nor believe in its divine mandate, nor indeed believe in God in order to be considered a Jew by the Orthodox rabbinate” (ibid.: 126). This slippage between religious and cultural identity affords obvious advantages for the Israeli state, which builds on the religious-secular hybrid that is Zionism (ibid.: 127). There are other examples of the ways that culturized religion supports an understanding of nationhood. Jason Ananda Josephson (2012) has shown how Shinto was transformed in late-nineteenth-century Japan to make it appear more modern and at the same time embedded in what it means to be Japanese.

Perhaps this tendency explains why a growing body of literature is grappling with the ways in which religion becomes culturalized (for an overview, see Astor and Maryl 2020), particularly for majoritarian religions. In European countries, the strategy of identifying oneself with Christianity as culture rather than belief is common (in spite of what my students felt). Not long after Grace Davie (1994) described the phenomenon of ‘believing without belonging’ (an example of Religion 1), scholars noted that the reverse phenomenon, ‘belonging without believing’ (reinstalling Religion 2 in a variant without belief), was alive and well. Like the subsuming of religion under culture in the social sciences, culturalizing religion in everyday discourse ‘disenchants’ it, strips it of its mysterious or supernatural qualities and downplays its function of communicating with deities or ancestors. As N. J. Demerath (2000: 136) notes, the assumption that one is merely ‘culturally’ a member of a religious group is “a way of being religiously connected without being religiously active.” He takes this very seriously as a secularizing impulse, claiming that cultural religion is “a tribute to the religious past that offers little confidence for the religious future” and is thus the “penultimate stage of religious secularization” (ibid.). The placement of cultural religion on a secularization trajectory might be empirically difficult to substantiate, as it is quite possible for a group’s serene understanding of itself as ‘culturally religious’ to become the fertile ground for their suddenly emotionalized identification with a religion and even religious revival.

It would appear to be one of the foremost operations of secularism to claim that religion is a thing of the past and significantly so, thus transforming it into (national) cultural heritage. Christianity is frequently spoken of as ‘cultural heritage,’ valued as an ethic and/or narrative, while sidestepping its cultic dimension (Hervieu-Léger 2000). One can do without the Trinity and distance oneself from an antiquated morality, yet still identify with the historical community of a church and its culture (especially in the sense of high culture: art, music, architecture), whether out of conservationist conviction or mere habit (Engelke 2014). Religion-as-culture (or heritage) has been mobilized in legal arguments against the removal of crucifixes and prayers from public spaces. Lori Beaman (2020) shows in several detailed examples how this strategy reinstates privilege to majoritarian religions, even in a society committed to secularism. But following Talal Asad (2003), secularism is not the end point of a social trajectory away from the influence of religious institutions in society anyway. Secularity is the concept taken up by the state to enshrine the post-religious stance of the dominant culture and frame it as the religiously neutral ground of citizenship, thus producing ‘religious minorities’ who cannot be religious and citizens at one and the same time (ibid.: esp. 159–180).

Thus, although culturalizing religion may seem to be a fitting strategy for religion to find a place in a secular nation—and many churches in Europe do embrace this strategy, emphasizing their cultural importance in order to hold on to their privileges—it, too, is risky. It can “depoliticize[e] religion and tam[e] its divisive potential,” as Astor et al. (2017: 139) have argued for the Spanish case. But with the rise of right-wing populism, the culturalization of religion has been twisted into just the opposite: a weapon against what is viewed as an encroaching Islam, consciously using the word ‘Christian’ to denote a ‘way of life,’ or as a member of the German AfD party has put it, a national “feeling of life.”
Whereas the liberal argument for majoritarian hegemony mediates between religion and culture by using the language of ‘values’, that is, culturalizing religion by turning it into an ‘ethics’, the AfD phrasing goes a step further, activating emotional attachments to a religious past. For societies that trace their heritage to Christianity, the celebration of Christmas ranges high among the affective ties to religion, even without belief in its tenets (Klassen and Scheer 2019), presenting annually recurring challenges to states who view themselves as secular.14

The Consequences of Indeterminacy

Just as there is no ‘correct’ definition of culture or religion, neither can there be a correct determination of their relationship to one another, but only situated understandings, which have as much to do with the current social and political context as with common academic usages in varying disciplines and countries. Rather than trying to nail down the ‘actual’ or even ‘proper’ relationship between the two, anthropologists of religion can more fruitfully attend to the ways that these concepts are deployed—by whom and for what purpose—and how these strategies change over time and why. As we have seen, this is currently being applied in the research on the rise of ‘religion as heritage’, which also shows how important it is to take the positionality of the practitioners into consideration. When culturalizing religion works to the advantage of the majoritarian religion again and again, it helps us understand why some groups choose a different strategy. Acknowledging that both essentialist and anti-essentialist ways of speaking have their strengths and weaknesses can facilitate this work. Instead of pitting one way of talking about religion and/or culture against the other, we should look at the ways they are combined and why. When essentialism is used for exclusionary aims and to justify violence, it should be called out for that reason and denaturalized. When it is used to include and empower, particularly for the benefit of marginalized groups, it can do important political work—although this may also entail exclusionary tendencies and will therefore always remain potentially dangerous (see Kurzwelly et al. 2020).

In the course of analyzing this complex relationship between religion and culture, it seems clear that being attuned to the built-in biases of the discursive modes described here, as well as how they are set in relation to one another, can generate new questions, offer new perspectives. With Religion 1 in mind, even the most conservative religious groups could not be reduced to an identity, community, or institution: the creative, hybrid, and heterogeneous religious practices of their members would also come into view. And even the most hybrid, individualized exemplars of Culture 1 build their practices on understandings of bounded units (Culture 2), which could be acknowledged as providing affective rewards, or critiqued as insufficiently reflected upon, as in the case of the white privilege that many such ‘modern’ actors enjoy. At a historical moment in which public debates over these two very issues in particular—religion and culture—are being conducted from increasingly entrenched positions, the anthropology of religion might have a role to play in nuancing the categories being deployed and the associations being drawn.
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MONIQUE SCHEER is Professor of Historical and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Tübingen, where she also serves as Co-Director of the Center for Religion, Culture, and Society (CRCS) and as Vice-Rector for International Affairs and Diversity. Her research interests include aesthetics, images, practices, and emotions in Catholic, Protestant, and secular contexts in Europe. Recent publications include Enthusiasm: Emotional Practices of Conviction in Modern Germany (2020). E-mail: monique.scheer@uni-tuebingen.de

NOTES

1. Discussions of the concepts of religion and culture abound in many areas of the study of religion and society, but this article is not intended to deliver a review of all the relevant literature. Given its nature as a ‘think piece’ I have limited my bibliographic references to the most essential.

2. Linda Woodhead (2011) presents an excellent assessment of concepts of religion in the social sciences that is slightly different from, although not entirely incompatible with, what I have sketched out here. What is missing from her analysis, in my view, is an acknowledgment of the value judgments embedded in the various concepts of religion she describes and, ultimately, their politics. Furthermore, we should keep in mind, as Brubaker and Cooper (2000: 4) point out, that ‘such concepts as ‘race’, ‘ethnicity’, or ‘nation’ are marked by close reciprocal connection and mutual influence among their practical [i.e., ‘folk’ or ‘lay’] and analytical uses.” Religion and culture are among these concepts that flow freely between everyday and scholarly usage, so it is particularly important to be aware of how each discursive context affects the other.

3. In other parts of the world, these histories and trajectories will play out differently. As one anonymous reviewer of this article pointed out, in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, both Christianity and Islam are viewed as ‘freely chosen’ religions, as opposed to traditional practices given by ‘culture’. The focus here is on Europe, with the hope that, mutatis mutandis, the insights offered will inspire work outside Europe as well.

4. See Brubaker’s (2013) comparison of language and religion and their meaning for the construction of ethnicity and nationality.

5. In this book, Reckwitz makes a distinction, which first appeared online in 2016 (https://www.soziopolis.de/zwischen-hyperkultur-und-kulturessenzialismus.html), between Hyperkultur (hyperculture) and Kulturessenzialismus (cultural essentialism) as two modes of the ‘valorization’ of the social through its ‘culturalization’ and marks them the same way I did in my 2015 lecture as ‘Culture 1’ and ‘Culture 2’. I was not yet aware of this coincidence when I prepared that lecture for publication in 2017. Reckwitz (2019) does not discuss religion but analyzes how these two modes of valorization and culturalization interact, postulating a ‘third path’ that would be less conflictual.

6. Cf., for example, a report published in Süddeutsche Zeitung at the height of the debate (Schulte von Drach 2012).
7. Talal Asad’s (1983: 238–239) equally influential critique of Geertz’s definition of religion begins with remarks on how a (problematic) definition of culture forms the basis of Geertz’s proposal for an anthropological definition of religion. Inspired by a Foucauldian approach, Asad also criticizes the melding of religion to culture in an attempt to provide a universal definition of both as systems of meaning. Instead, Asad proposes, anthropologists should investigate “social disciplines and social forces which come together at particular historical moments, to make particular religious discourses, practices and spaces possible” (ibid.: 252). He criticizes the fact that Geertz is working with a conception of Culture and Religion 2: “Universal definitions of religion hinder such investigations because and to the extent that they aim at identifying essences when we should be trying to explore concrete sets of historical relations and processes” (ibid.).

8. A classic discussion of the problem can be found in H. Richard Niebuhr (1951).

9. Of course, this is a concept heavily critiqued from within religious studies (see, e.g., McCutcheon 2003; Proudfoot 1985).

10. An implicit strategy of dividing religion from culture has also been criticized in the work on ‘everyday Islam’ (Fadil and Fernando 2015).

11. See also the concept of ‘nominalism’ in Abby Day’s (2011) Believing in Belonging, which was discussed in the Author Meets Critics section of this journal in 2016.


13. The AfD (Alternative for Germany) politician and self-declared Kulturchrist (cultural Christian), Alexander Gauland explained in an interview why the party program contains a reference to “Western and Christian culture” in spite of the party’s lack of support in the churches: “We are not defending Christianity, but rather the traditional feeling of life in Germany, the traditional feeling of home” (Löbbert and Machowecz 2016).

14. With regard to France’s position as a secular state, see Beaman’s (2020) analysis of a 2016 ruling by the French Administrative Supreme Court on the presentation of a crèche in a town hall in the Vendée department.

REFERENCES


