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*“Culture” or “Religion”? The Politics of Christianity as
 “Cultural Heritage”*

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Religion, Secularism and the politics of cultural heritage

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-Johan Galtung – “deep culture” - Collectively held subconscious assumptions that that impact the way people perceive, interpret and respond to the world around them

-What are the collectively held subconscious assumptions about “religion” and “culture” at play in the classification of symbols, rituals and practices as “cultural” or “religious”?

-For example:

- Lautsi and Others v Italy
- Salazar v Buono
- Dahlab v Switzerland
- Bouchard Taylor Report and responses
- The Lord’s Prayer in Australian Parliament
- Christian Heritage and Dutch Identity (and progressive sexual moras)
- Male circumcision as “religious freedom”, female circumcision as “antequated cultural practice” (Barras and Darby, 2014, forthcoming)



Beaman – Battle over Symbols

- Classification as culture enables maintenance of majority religion in public sphere, while minority religion is excluded

Additional questions:

-What are the collectively held subconscious assumptions about “culture” and “cultural heritage” that are at play in such designations?

-What does it mean when a symbol is classified as “cultural”, particularly as “cultural heritage”, rather than “religion”?

-What does it do to the religion that is classified as culture?



Argument:

Designations of symbols, rituals and practices as “culture” and “religion” in liberal societies represent forms of Foucauldian disciplinary power, constraining both the majority and minority religions and limiting their capacity to challenge the dominant hegemonic ideologies of secularism and neoliberalism and the coercive power of the state.

As modes of disciplinary power, these designations operate in two ways:

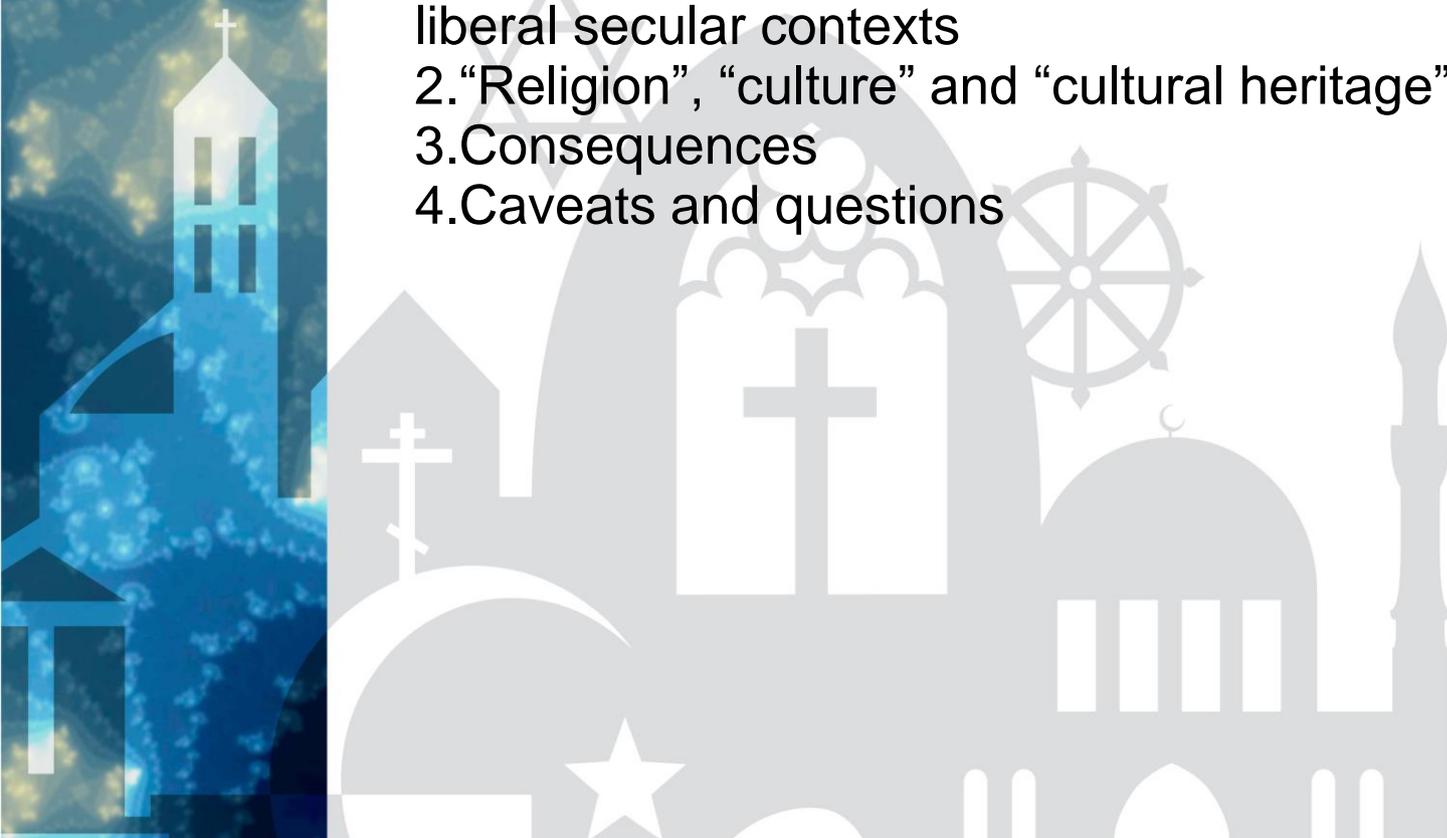
1. The designation of culture and cultural heritage performs an important task of identity formation that makes a clear delineation between “us” who might be secular now but who have a Judeo-Christian heritage, and “them”, who, no matter how secular they may become, will never be like “us”.
2. Re-positioning Christian symbols as cultural symbols “keeps religion in its place”, depoliticizing and historicizing it. It enables the maintenance of these symbols in the public sphere on terms that are acceptable to secularism, negating its capacity to act as a site of opposition and resistance to secularism, neoliberalism and the coercive power of the state



Operation of “religion” and “culture” as forms of disciplinary power made possible as a result of the collectively held subconscious assumptions attached to these words within liberal secular societies

Talk divided into four parts:

1. Understandings of “religion”, “culture” and “cultural heritage” in liberal secular contexts
2. “Religion”, “culture” and “cultural heritage” as disciplinary power
3. Consequences
4. Caveats and questions





Understandings of religion, culture and cultural heritage in secular liberal contexts

- The ways in which religion and culture are deployed within “Western” liberal secular contexts are influenced by the embedded assumptions that these words carry with them
- These embedded assumptions have been shaped by a dualistic logic that underpins secularist ideology, leading to simplistic, essentialised understandings of both that contributes to their exclusion from politics and society and their closing off as potential spaces of opposition and resistance to dominant hegemonic ideologies
- Not suggesting any particular connection between neoliberalism and secularism at this point, though the secular emphasis on the immanent at the expense of the transcendent has arguably encouraged a greater valuing of materialism and consumerism that are so necessary to the success of the neoliberal project
- Secularism and neoliberalism are two dominant ideologies and targets of substantial critique and resistance in academia and civil society



Religion

- Institutional, individual and irrational (political science, International Relations)
- Similar connotations within law (Berger 2007)
- This limited definition is the product of secularist assumptions - Religion had to be defined in this way in order to justify and entrench its separation from the public sphere
- Assumptions within secularism connected to assumptions within liberalism and modernization theory – to be modern was/is to be secular. Religion considered pre-modern, an historical artefact to be superseded by scientific rationality





-Institutional - the legal and political arrangements for institutional separation become much easier to establish.

-Individual - ensures that it fits within liberal political ideology, that privileges the rights and freedoms of the individual but also positions it as a primarily private concern.

-Irrational (violent, chaotic) disqualifies it from participation in the public realm, which is governed by “universal” secular reason thus again ensuring its separation and exclusion from politics and public life.

-Characteristics arrived at through the essentially dualistic nature of much secular logic

-Separates the religious and the secular as binary opposites and subsequently defines them through relationships to other societal elements that are also positioned as binary opposites:

Secular, public, mind, reason, male, modern
Religion, private, body, emotion, female, primitive



Culture

The same dualistic logic that has contributed to simplistic essentialised embedded assumptions about the nature of religion has contributed to simplistic essentialised assumptions about the nature of culture, also related to secularism, modernization and liberalism

- Culture defined as primarily apolitical, non-hegemonic and particular
- Carries multiple meanings depending on context:

Raymond Williams:

- A) cultivating people, individually and collectively, in terms of “intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development”;
- B) “a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general”;
- C) “the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity”

Kroeber and Kluckhohn:

- “the characteristic mode of human existence”
- “culture as improvement”

Clifford Geertz, Kroeber and Kluckhohn, Baldwin, Faulkner and Hecht and Marshall Sahlins:

- Symbols and systems of symbols



Geertz argues that “culture refers to the 'webs of significance' that humans themselves have spun and at the same time find themselves suspended in”. Sahlins argues that “human existence is symbolically constituted” and as such understanding the systems through which humans make sense of and relate to one another – cultures – requires a focus on symbols.

Focus on the symbolic has contributed to the construction of a binary opposition between “culture” and “society” and culture as apolitical

Sahlins: within English-speaking anthropology, culture has been defined as

“the ideational content of the real stuff, the real stuff being ‘social structure’ or ‘the system of social relations’. Culture was the local customary idiom by means of which the social system was expressed and maintained.” He notes a “classic dualism of culture and society, involving also the devaluation of the former relative to the latter.”

Culture an abstraction from the “real” work and content of society and politics, thus apolitical

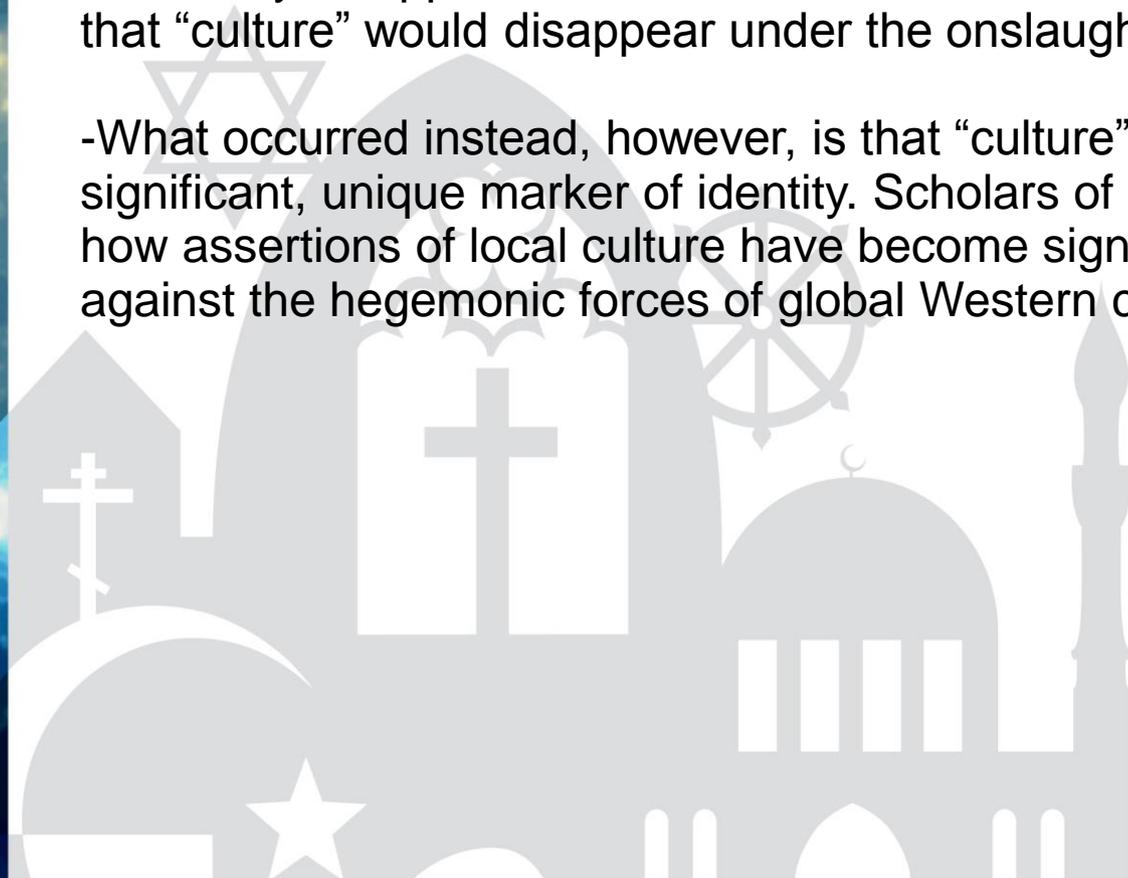


Non-hegemonic (unique, authentic, resistance, opposition)

-associated with “non-Western peoples”, something studied by anthropologists amongst isolated, remote primitive people groups, not as something that “everyone” has.

-In the same way that sociologists of religion assumed that religion would eventually disappear as a result of secularization, anthropologists assumed that “culture” would disappear under the onslaught of global capitalism.

-What occurred instead, however, is that “culture” re-emerged as a significant, unique marker of identity. Scholars of globalization have noted how assertions of local culture have become significant foci for resistance against the hegemonic forces of global Western capitalism.





“All of a sudden everyone got ‘culture’. Australian aboriginals, Inuit, Easter Islanders, Chambri, Ainu, Bushmen, Kayapo, Tibetans, Ojibway: even peoples whose ways of life were left for dead or dying a few decades ago now demand an indigenous space in a modernizing world under the banner of their ‘culture’. They use that very word, or some near local equivalent. They back their claims with references to distinctive traditions and customs that typically involve invidious contrast to the money-love and other character defects of their erstwhile colonial masters. ‘If we didn’t have kastom,” the New Guinean said to his anthropologist, ‘we would be just like White Men.’ Anthropologists, along with the rest of the so-called developed world, have been taken completely by surprise. They thought New Guineans and their kind would become something like White Men – or some other such misfortune” (Sahlins 1999: 401).



Cultural Heritage

Janet Blake (2000) - emergence of cultural heritage to the looting and damage that occurred during World War Two, but that it rapidly extended to other “cultural artefacts”.

David Lowenthal (1999) - cultural heritage’s popularity has increased exponentially in recent years, despite, or perhaps because of, the lack of clarity over what cultural heritage actually is, particularly in relation to ideas of “intangible cultural heritage”.

Described as being about preserving historical artefacts important for humanity, David Lowenthal has argued that cultural heritage is more about creating an identity for the purposes of current generations than about preserving the past. “Heritage is the sovereign core of collective identity. Only a past that is truly ours is worth protecting.”

The classification of heritage implies something that is past, weak, under threat and in need of protection

This is a particularly significant insight for understanding the politics operating when discourses of cultural heritage are deployed to justify the preservation of Christian symbols in the public sphere.



Religion's deculturation

Anthropology and sociology of religion recognise the entanglement of religion and culture, religion is part of culture

In IR and political science and public discourse, an attempt has been made to separate the two out from one another

Part of the consequences of religion's "deculturation", as Olivier Roy (2010) terms it, is that both religious believers and their critics view religion as something that makes sense and can be understood outside of its cultural context.

Contributes to an essentialization of both religion and culture and their separation from one another

Critical to the governing logic of liberal secularism, maintaining the separation of politics from religion and culture from society and enabling both to operate as tools for discipline and exclusion.



Foucault, power and discipline

Power – a procedure, a set of mechanisms existing within all political, economic and social relationships:

“Power is not founded on itself or generated by itself ... there are not first of all relations of production and then, in addition, alongside or on top of these relations, mechanisms of power that modify or disturb them, or make them more consistent, coherent, or stable. There are not family type relationships and then, over and above them, mechanisms of power; there are not sexual relationships with, in addition, mechanisms of power alongside or above them. Mechanisms of power are an intrinsic part of all these relations and, in a circular way, are both their effect and cause. What’s more, in the different mechanisms of power intrinsic to relations of production, family relations, and sexual relations, it is possible, of course, to find lateral co-ordinations, hierarchical subordinations, isomorphic correspondences, technical identities or analogies, and chain effects.”

Mechanisms of power are constitutive of the relationships across religion and politics, and culture and society



Discipline

-Isolates space

-“Circumscribe a space in which its power and the mechanisms of its power will function fully and without limit”

-Designations of “religion” and “culture” circumscribe specific limited space in which both can operate:

- Religion – private sphere
- Culture – public sphere, but separated from politics and civil society, as background or history

-Fits with Foucault’s description of discipline:

- “Discipline works in a sphere that is, as it were complementary to reality. Within the disciplinary space a complementary sphere of prescriptions and obligations is constituted that is all the more artificial and constraining as the nature of reality is tenacious and difficult to overcome.”

-Both religion and culture are outside of politics because they are not part of the reality. They operate in a sphere that is complementary to, but outside of, the reality, culture because it is designated as an abstraction from the real, religion because it is designated as institutional, individual, irrational, frequently invoking violence and chaos.



Discipline divides everything according to a code of the permitted and the forbidden and then defines precisely what is forbidden and what is permitted, all with the purpose of establishing order.

Dualism evident again here

Religion is the forbidden, culture is permitted.

Religion forbidden because it is positioned in opposition to secularism, rival for universal claims, associated with violence, chaos and irrationality, antithetical to discipline, whose primary purpose is order

Culture permitted because it is benign and apolitical. Culture by its nature (within the liberal secular frame) is particular and relative, symbolic, abstract, unable to affect the real world of politics and economics. When it criticizes or intervenes in politics and civil society, it is no longer culture

Designations of “religion” and “culture” may be understood as disciplinary power of secular state to enforce binary oppositions between religion and politics and culture and society



Consequences

1. The designation of culture and cultural heritage performs an important task of identity formation that makes a clear delineation between “us” who might be secular now but who have a Judeo-Christian heritage, and “them”, who, no matter how secular they may become, will never be like “us”.

THAT the National Assembly reiterate its desire to promote the language, history, culture and values of the Québec nation, foster the integration of each person into our nation in a spirit of openness and reciprocity, and express its attachment to our religious and historic heritage represented particularly by the crucifix in our Blue Room and our coat of arms adorning our institutions.

(Jean Charest, “Réitérer la volonté de l'Assemblée de promouvoir la langue, l'histoire, la culture et les valeurs de la nation québécoise, de favoriser l'intégration de chacun et de témoigner de son attachement au patrimoine religieux et historique.” In Quebec. Assemblée nationale. Journal des débats (Hansard) of the National Assembly. 38th legislature, 1st sess. (May 22 2008).)



2. Re-positioning Christian symbols as cultural symbols rather religious symbols is a mode of disciplinary power to “keep religion in its place”.

Enables the maintenance of these symbols in the public sphere but on terms that are acceptable to the secular state. This positioning gives the courts and government the capacity to delineate what “Christianity” is, so that it fits more neatly with secular values. The ECHR decision in the Lautsi case is the prime example here:

In Christianity even the faith in an omniscient god is secondary in relation to charity, meaning respect for one’s fellow human beings. It follows that the rejection of a non-Christian by a Christian implies a radical negation of Christianity itself, a substantive abjuration; but that is not true of other religious faiths, for which such an attitude amounts at most to the infringement of an important precept.



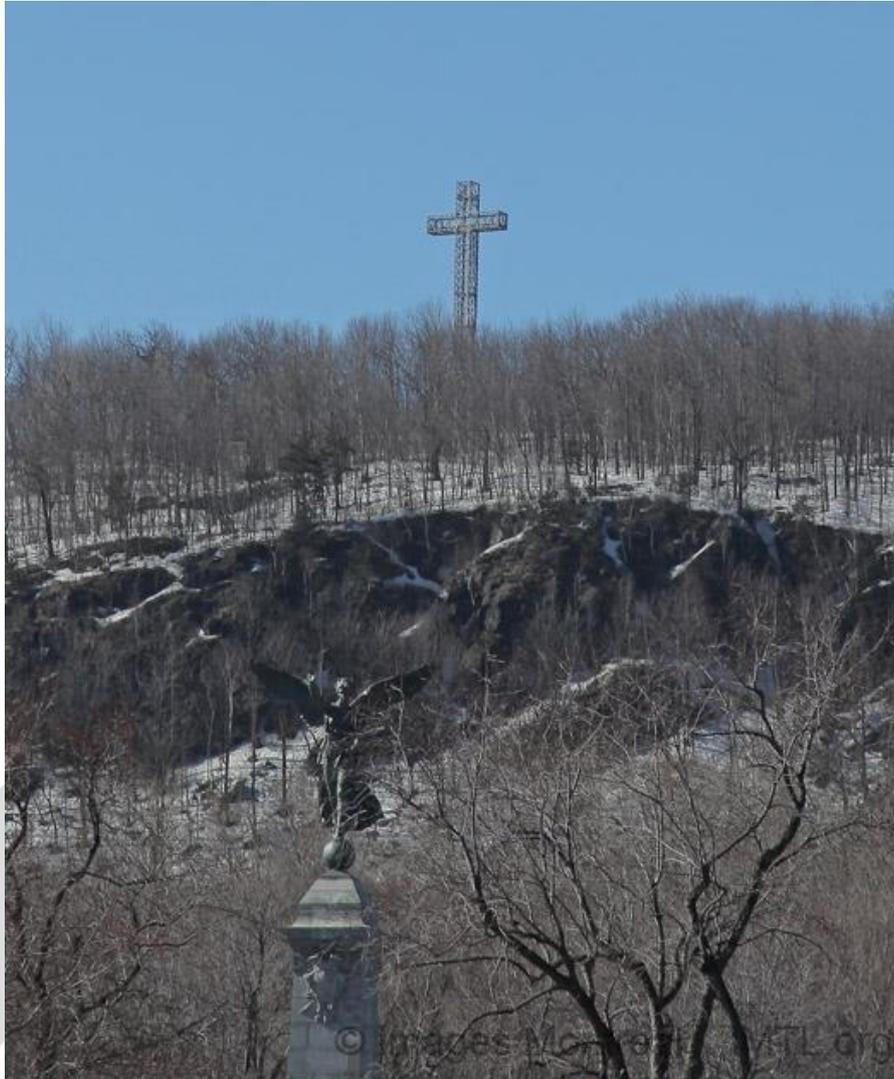
Referring to the Salazar v Buono case, Gedicks and Annichino (2013) have described this as a “reacculturation” of Christianity that is a “shallow trivialization and stereotyping of formerly powerful religious narratives.”

“These symbols,” they argue “continue to fit, if at all, only as something *other than the confessional symbols they are* – hence the redefinition of such symbols as secular *even, and especially* by the religions that use them and with which they have traditionally been associated.” They argue that this reclassification will actually accelerate and entrench secularization rather than create space for religious contributions to the public sphere.





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Certain practices or symbols may originate in the religion of the majority without necessarily genuinely restricting those who are not part of this majority. This is true of practices and symbols that have heritage value rather than playing a regulatory role. For example, the cross on Mount Royal does not signify that Montréal identifies with Catholicism and does not demand of non-Catholics that they act against their conscience. It is a symbol that reflects a chapter of our past. A religious symbol is thus compatible with secularism when it is a historic reminder rather than a sign of religious identification by a public institution. (Bouchard Taylor report)



Different reactions to prayer in the public sphere in Australia:

The Lord's Prayer in Australian Parliament:

Senator Richard di Natale:

"We have a very clear separation between church and state in this country and the fact that we say the Lord's Prayer in the Australian Parliament, it is an anachronism," "modern Australia is made up of people who have different ideas about religion. We are here to represent everybody. We're here to represent people of all faiths. People who don't have a strong religious faith".

Government Senate leader Eric Abetz:

"the Lord's Prayer is a very rich part of our cultural tradition [and] a humble acknowledgement by the Parliament collectively of its responsibilities".

"The latest Green attack is part of their ongoing attempt to rewrite our history and deny our heritage,"

"Our nation's freedoms and wealth have been built on our religious underpinnings making us the envy of the world. The Greens' refusal to acknowledge their country's own heritage and rich traditions and beliefs is as sad as it is divisive."



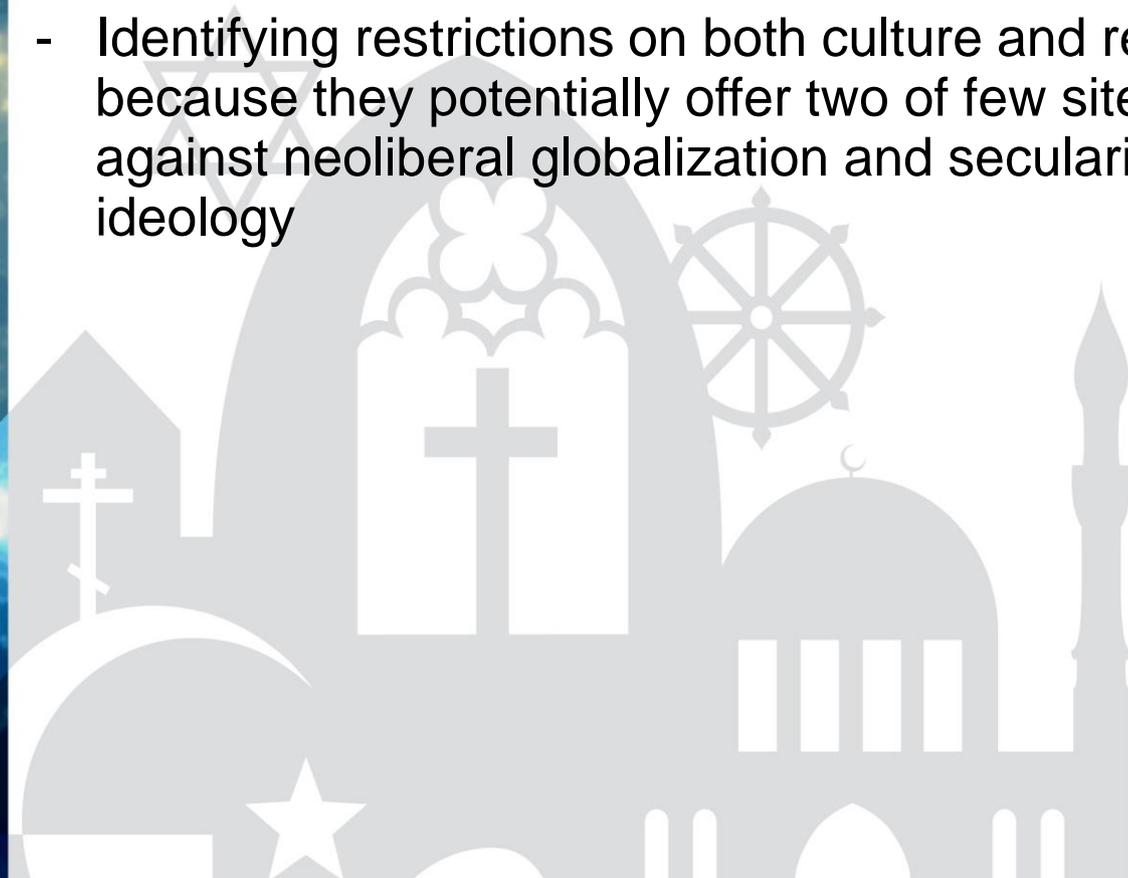
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Why does this matter?

- Highlights the inconsistency in the claim of establishing a unified secular public sphere and community identity for the future, while at the same time reinforcing a highly specific historical identity
- Identifying restrictions on both culture and religion is significant because they potentially offer two of few sites left for opposition against neoliberal globalization and secularism as a hegemonic ideology





- *“laissez-faire's success as a universally revered economic model means that, today, global capitalism's triumphal march encounters few genuine oppositional tendencies. In that regard, religion, as a repository of transcendence, has an important role to play. It prevents the denizens of the modern secular societies from being overwhelmed by the all-encompassing demands of vocational life and worldly success. It offers a much-needed dimension of otherness: The religious values of love, community, and godliness help to offset the global dominance of competitiveness, acquisitiveness, and manipulation that predominate in the vocational sphere. Religious convictions encourage people to treat each other as ends in themselves rather than as mere means”. Wolin 2005*
- This is not to say that either “religion” or “culture” offer the answers to problems facing society, merely that they bring in alternative perspectives, including an emphasis on metaphysics and recognition of the need for context, specificity and critical self-reflexivity that are much needed



Caveats/Questions

- “religion” and “culture” are rendered differently in relation to different issues – e.g. male and female circumcision
 - Still a mode of disciplinary power, but related to the type of secularist ideology at work?
 - Different ideologies of secularism at play on different issues, rather than in different countries -
- Another mode of disciplinary power? The classification of religion as culture is an attempt to reclaim cultural distinction as a site of opposition to neoliberal globalization
- Aware that I need to be clearer about secularism, neoliberalism, coercive state power
- Move away from Foucault?
- Suggestions for additional empirical examples?
- Suggestions for additional literature/fields?