



10-1-2014

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Recommended Citation

Botz-Bornstein, Thorsten (2014) "Thoughts on Religion, Culture, and Civilization," *Comparative Civilizations Review*: Vol. 71 : No. 71 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol71/iss71/5>

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Thoughts on Religion, Culture, and Civilization

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Abstract: I attempt to disentangle the compact knot composed of culture, religion, and civilization. Often the difference between secularists and believers is construed along the lines of a religious “culture” unable to join a more progressive civilization. The identification of culture with religion and of civilization with more general, civic phenomena summarized under the heading of civilization is widespread. I analyze different points of view, which classify “Secularism as Civilization,” “Civilization as Evil,” or “Religion as Evil.” I also consider the converse point of view, which sees religion as a sort of civilization that is opposed to culture.

Finally, I trace the term culture with the help of a few words from Matthew Arnold who delimits culture from the above idea of civilization. Arnold believes that culture “is best described by the word interesting.”

From a certain point onwards, Islam was no longer “interesting.” Values would be hermetically codified up to a point that this religion offered no intellectual challenge. At present, Islam is losing even more of its cultural appeal, offering few pleasures and entertainment that could be seen as intrinsic to Islam. Islam has submitted to the identification of concrete cultural items with general civilizational guidelines. A civilizational understanding of religion in the fundamentalist sense is more and more emphasized and the distinction between culture and religion is becoming more and more distinct.

Introduction

Many Christian and Muslim believers share the view that secular culture is sterile, purely technical, monotonous, and *culturally* poor. Christian theologian John Betz holds that “the modern world, insofar as it is a secular world (...) is mindless, heartless and gutless” (Betz: 338) and Muslim cultural critic Ziauddin Sardar is convinced that the aim of all secularists is “to dominate, isolate, alienate, decimate and finally bore all cultures to death with uniformity” (Sardar: 185). For Sardar, secularism spells the end of history in the form of monoculture while “religious worldviews recognize diversity of spiritual experiences” (185).

Curiously, secular people attack the believers’ position from the same angle. Often they perceive religion’s refusal to recognize cultural values because they are “merely cultural” as nihilistic and interpret this anti-cultural attitude as a refusal of precisely those values that are dearest to them. Even more, they find the dogmatism with which religious people often tend to define *their* values incompatible with their own ideas of how values should

be presented. In other words, though they are not strictly opposed to the idea that religion can be incorporated into culture, they find religious values, once they are spelled out in purely religious and not cultural terms, incompatible with the values of culture. In light of this paradoxical constellation, it becomes necessary to distinguish culture from another term: civilization.

In this article I analyze the relationships between religion and culture as well as between religion and civilization by using thought patterns or paradigms that I believe to be common in Christian, Muslim, and secular traditions. I show that many false ideas about both religion and secularism can be traced to misconceptions about how religion relates to culture and civilization respectively. I am operating with four paradigms: (1) secularism is civilization and therefore “good” while religion is culture and therefore “evil”; (2) secular civilization is “evil” while religion is culture and therefore “good;” (3) religion is civilization and therefore “evil” while culture is “good”; (4) religion is civilization and therefore “good” while culture is “evil.” In the end, I show that only by integrating religion into culture can religion avoid both religious and scientific dogmatism.

1. Culture, Religion, and Civilization

Often the difference between secularists and believers is construed along the lines of a religious “culture” unable to join a more progressive civilization. According to Edward Jayne, it has been assumed that “primitive people are consummate believers; in contrast, civilized people possess a residue of belief, but they are also skeptical—and the more skeptical, the more civilized” (Jayne 1993). The identification of culture with religion and of civilization with more general, civic phenomena summarized under the heading of “civilization” is indeed widespread. Often civilization is believed to be “better” because it is more universal than both culture and religion.

1.1 Culture and Civilization

Before analyzing the relationships between religion, culture, and civilization, it is necessary to define the difference between culture and civilization as precisely as possible.

The distinction between culture and civilization is not very well embedded in the English language, but has proved to be relatively meaningful in other European languages. “Culture” (from the Latin *cultura*) is the older term and corresponds to the Latin etymology both in form and content; “civilization” (from the Latin *civis*) was coined at a later stage and evolved rapidly, especially during the eighteenth century in France and subsequently in England.

Roughly put, the distinction can be established in the way that the former refers more specifically to material, technical, economic and social facts while the latter conceptualizes spiritual, intellectual, and artistic phenomena – individual or collective concrete human expressions rather than abstract systems. Especially the German usage of the word *Zivilisation* has always alluded to some utilitarian, outer aspect of human existence that is subordinated to *Kultur*, which was itself perceived as the “real” being of humans, society, and their achievements. Norbert Elias found that civilization as a concept has always had an “expansive” character and that it describes a process referring to something which is constantly in motion and is constantly moving forward (Elias 1978: 5). Culture fulfils the opposite function as it delimits; and it exists only through this delimitation. Being the expression of a people’s individuality, the term culture is conceptually powerful only as long as it excludes most phenomena from itself. Accordingly, the French began to use the word culture as a synonym for everything that can be acquired through education (manners, arts, and sciences for example); the Germans cut “culture” down to more personal and individual expressions linked to art and philosophy.

Johann Gottfried Herder (1774) opposed all generalizing forces of civilization and made the distinction between culture and civilization very explicit by equating civilization with the most alienating forms of industrialization. Around 1880, a consistent opposition of civilization and culture is firmly established in German philosophy; German Romanticism develops an idealist notion of *Kultur* while in France, the term *civilisation* adopts more and more general and supra-national connotations.

In this article I use the terms culture and civilization in the way they have been defined by Herder and Elias. I avoid E. B. Tylor’s (1958) broad definition of “culture” as a phenomenon embracing everything; Tyler’s concept of culture was meant to free culture from its elitist connotations to which it had become attached through the work of his contemporary Matthew Arnold, whose ideas will be the subject of the last section of this article.

2. Four Paradigms

The following four subsections examine the relationships between culture, religion, and civilization by crystallizing four paradigms that I believe to be firmly rooted in current discourses on culture, religion, and civilization. First it will be shown how secular civilization can be seen favorably by defining its position in opposition to religion that is believed to be “backward.” Since this secular attitude defines itself as progressive civilization, the more backward religion is seen as culture. Next I describe the contrary pattern, through which secular civilization is defined as an evil element from which religion-culture must be protected. Then I describe the paradigm which sees religion as civilization and believes that this “good civilization” needs to be used to combat “evil secular culture.” Finally, I describe the contrary version of this paradigm, which sees

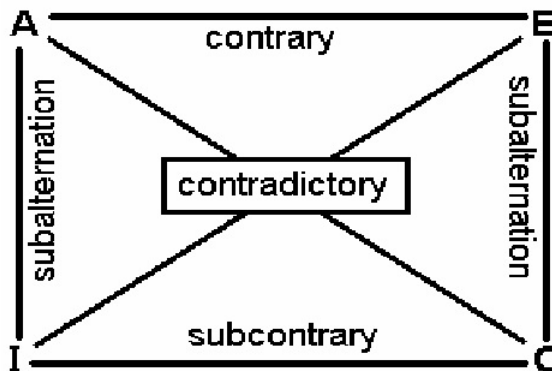
religion as civilization and declares it to be “evil” while culture is seen as “good.” The four paradigms can be listed like this:

| | | |
|--------------------------------|-----|-----------------------|
| (A) Good secular civilization | vs. | evil religion-culture |
| (E) Evil secular civilization | vs. | good religion-culture |
| (I) Good civilization-religion | vs. | evil secular culture |
| (O) Evil civilization-religion | vs. | good secular culture |

All above propositions see culture and civilization as dichotomies. Given the symmetrical character of the entire system of oppositions, the relationships between the four paradigms can be rendered with the help of the Aristotelian square of oppositions:

**Good secular civilization
vs. evil religion culture**

**Evil secular civilization
vs. good religion-culture**



**Good civilization-religion
vs. evil secular culture**

**Evil civilization-religion
vs. good secular culture**

The top axis of the diagram perceives civilization as secular and culture as possibly religious, but both propositions differ through their contrary relationship. The A-proposition sees civilization as good and religion as evil while the E-proposition inverts the good and bad values. On the bottom axis, religion is identified as civilization and culture as secular. Again, through the subcontrary relationship, the positive and negative values are distributed differently.

The propositions on the left vertical axis see civilization as “good.” The subalternative relationship leading from ‘A’ to ‘I’ lets civilization appear once again as good but for different reasons. The same is true for the right vertical axis, which sees civilization twice as evil but each time for different reasons. The contradictory relationship that traverses the square diagonally links entirely opposed mindsets.

2.1. Good Secular Civilization vs. Evil Religion-Culture (A)

From a Western perspective, the ‘religion equals culture’ equation has frequently appeared in unison with another equation: that of ‘secularism equals civilization’. When Muslim countries were colonized by Europeans, the aim was to bring civilization to uncivilized Muslims and democracy to those living under autocratic regimes. For the French who invaded Northern Africa, “Islam was not to be evaluated as a theology, but as a culture, in the sense employed by Herder, Kant, or Schiller” (Massad 2007: 13). Of course, this culture was supposed to be an inferior culture; but as “culture” it could be opposed to civilization that would stand for modernization. In the end, even religious people began to believe in this paradigm: Saba Mahmood mentions those Egyptians who still today “consider such quotidian attention to religious practice to be passé, or uncivilized” (Mahmood 2005: 44).

In this context, Muslim religion with its fundamentalist outgrowths could come to represent the contrary of civilization. Martin Jacques finds that “the dominance of the West for the last two centuries has served to couch the debate about values overwhelmingly in terms of those that are civilized, a synonym for Western values, against those that are backward (Muslim)” (Jacques: 397). The paradigm surfaces regularly in everyday politics. In 2011, U.S. First Lady Laura Bush declared in a radio address that “civilized people throughout the world are speaking out in horror—not only because our hearts break for the women and children of Afghanistan” (Ahmed 2011: 195). Her husband had expressed the same idea earlier and more graphically – in the form of a false dichotomy – declaring that there is “no neutral ground in the fight between civilization and terror (...) because there is no neutral ground between good and evil, freedom and slavery, and life and death” (Stevenson 2004). Though religion is not explicitly mentioned, it is clear that the non-civilized item is fundamentalist religion.

In all those cases, religious fundamentalism represents non-civilization par excellence. Consequently, Thomas Friedman uses the above pattern, announcing that he has detected the “real problem” of terrorism, which is a clash of backwardness with civilization. He quotes the Arab-American psychiatrist Wafa Sultan in his New York Times editorial:

The clash we are witnessing (...) is not a clash of religions, or a clash of civilizations. (...) It is a clash between a mentality that belongs to the Middle Ages and another mentality that belongs to the 21st century. It is a clash between civilization and backwardness, between the civilized and the primitive, between barbarity and rationality. (...) It is a clash between human rights, on the one hand, and the violation of these rights, on the other hand. It is a clash between those who treat women like beasts, and those who treat them like human beings. (Friedman 2006)

This is a simplification, because fundamentalist “backwardness” tends to see itself *as civilization*, which means that it is not against civilization but wants *another kind of*

civilization. Fundamentalism tends to opt not for the A-proposition but for the I-proposition (“good civilization-religion vs. evil secular culture”) as will be shown below, and thus interprets religion as civilization. Second, also the “other side” (here simply called “civilization”) is more complex than the civilization-backwardness dichotomy suggests. “Western civilization” is composed of everything the left axis of the square has to offer, that is, it is composed of secularists as well as of religious people whose ideas about “religion and culture” or “religion and civilization” are not necessarily identical.

Terry Eagleton confirms the A-proposition. By writing that religious fundamentalism is opposed to “all values dear to civilization,” he establishes the religious view as a “merely cultural” view undermined by relativism to which he opposes the secular, “civilizational” view based on firm enlightenment principles. For Eagleton, “the line runs between *civilization* (in the sense of universality, autonomy, individuality, rational speculation, etc.) and *culture* if we understand by this all those unreflected loyalties and spontaneous convictions” (Eagleton 2008: 46, my italics).

2.2. The Contrary: Evil Secular Civilization vs. Good Religion-Culture (E)

Others agree that civilization is secular and that religion is culture, but they see civilization as the “evil” element from which religion-culture must be protected. While in the above cases culture (and religion, with which it was equated) has been criticized as being incompatible with modern standards of civilization, culture (with all its relativism) can also be used in order to express one’s opposition towards civilizational progressivism. However, this is a complex approach. Many will think, when hearing of “religion vs. civilization” confrontations, of fundamentalism and religious terrorism that seems to be so much against all values dear to civilized people. However, contrary to what is often assumed, playing out religion against civilization is not the typical fundamentalist strategy. It will be shown below that fundamentalists tend to see their religion rather *as* civilization and lean more towards the I-proposition.

Sardar formulates an E-proposition because for him,

On one side is militant, dogmatic secularism, which claims the realm of literature as its new religion, an absolute where unlimited freedom should be exercised by the high priests of modern culture, the artists. On the other, there is the religious worldview wherein freedom of thought and expression arises from the existence of the sacred and the ideas of respect for sanctity, tolerance for others and responsibility in the exercise of freedom. (Sardar 2003: 231)

It is also possible to encounter the E-proposition (“evil secular civilization vs. good religion-culture”) in the form of an internal social critique, for example when Muslims reflect upon the relationship between religion and their society. Here universal social structures (which are, because of their universal character, easily identifiable

civilizational structures) can be declared evil while the individual religion-culture will be declared good. For example, Islam (as a religion) can be identified as ‘feminist’ while Muslim *society* can be seen as ‘misogynistic’ (cf. Massad 2007: 155). This means that Islam as religion-culture has a positive potential but, so far, its values could not be implemented within the general and civilizational structures of Arab society because such structures are not receptive of those values. In any case, this scheme reinstates the belief that religion should be seen in opposition to civilization, but this time holding that (Arab) civilization is bad and that their religion-culture is good.

2.3. Good Civilization-Religion vs. Evil Secular Culture (I)

From a Muslim perspective, religion can very well be understood as coming closer to civilization, be it only because of the intimate connection that exists between the concept of *din* (religion) and the idea of *medina* (city). The prophet Muhammad migrated from Mecca to Yathrib whose name would then be changed to Medina, which means city. *Din* developed thus very early from a community of believers into a civic society representing not only faith, but also civilization; and fundamentalist equations of Islam with the state merely confirm the ‘religion is civilization’ equation.

However, to see religion as civilization is not a uniquely Islamic characteristic but the pattern occurs in America where religious fundamentalists once declared that “Christianity was the only basis for a healthy civilization” (Marsden: 12). Here, religion was supposed to be civilization and not culture. Reinhold Niebuhr explains that “we had a religious version of our national destiny which interpreted the meaning of our nationhood as God’s effort to make a new beginning in the history of mankind” (Niebuhr 1952: 4). In general, Protestantism has been interpreted in America as a civil religion, because in America, just like in Islamic countries, religious and political values were, as Alexis de Tocqueville observed in the 1830s, “so intertwined as to be inseparable” (from Boyers 1992: 227).

Very often evangelical Christians present their “Intelligent Design” theories in a *scientifically* sophisticated fashion, which implies that they want to appear – at least temporarily – as not merely religious. When talking about creationism or bioethical imperatives, they most often do not base their arguments on an aspect of Christian law, but rather on a natural law (see Vattimo 2007: 93). If it is not science, it is “common sense” that will be used as an extra-religious basis. This is particularly true for the U.S. where the frequent appeal to “common sense” in evangelical discourses denotes the curious ambition to define religion and science on an equal ground provided by Enlightenment. Marsden writes that

In a nation born during the Enlightenment, the reverence for science as the way to understand all aspects of reality was nearly unbounded. Evangelical Christians and liberal Enlightenment figures alike assumed that the universe was governed by a

rational system of laws guaranteed by an all-wise and benevolent creator. The function of science was to discover such laws, something like Newton's laws of physics, which were assumed to exist in all areas. (Marsden 2006: 15)

The attempt to redesign religion as a form of civilization is repeated in a very explicit fashion by Muslim reformist and puritan movements such as Wahhabism. This is what distinguishes Wahhabism from other forms of Islam, which have traditionally permitted more of a fusion of religion and culture, even in the sense of an integration of religion into culture. Ahmed writes that prior to the 1960s, “religious piety and practice across the Muslim world were rooted in Muslim traditions of learning and practice and at the same time they were rooted to some extent in local traditions and practices” (Ahmed 2011: 96). One of the most important changes since the 1960s is that Wahhabism, with its clear distinction between civilizational religion and relativist (secular) culture became more influential all over the Muslim world.

Religious people pertaining to the paradigm of the I-proposition tend to perceive the lack of anything absolute within the secular model as a moral deficiency that will sooner or later turn this “culture” into a technocratic civilization because it contains no real values. However, contrary to the proponents of the E-proposition, they do not suggest to replace secular culture with religious culture but to replace secular culture with religious civilization. The recent spectacular rise of fundamentalism, which follows a strict “religion as religion” line, aims to exclude culture from religion and must therefore be identified as an I-proposition paradigm, seeing religion as civilization.

2.4. Evil Civilization-Religion vs. Good Secular Culture (O)

A critique of the above I-proposition can be formulated with the help of the O-proposition paradigm. Like the I-proposition, the adherents of the O-proposition assume that religion is civilization, but they intend to combat this religion-civilization with the help of secular culture. Secular people who base their decisions on culture and not on a god often find that any search for truths more absolute than those provided by culture, can easily “kill culture” because a religious culture based on absolute truths will turn culture into a rigid model of civilization. They find that civilizational rigidity often adopts a form of both stubborn scientific progressivism and religious dogmatism. Those secular people believe that critically evaluated standards of sincerity are sufficient for the construction of a culture. In other words, their secularism is cultural: it is not opposed to religion per se, but only to any religion that pretends to be civilization.

2.5. How some Scholars Disregard the Square

The square becomes dysfunctional when culture and civilization are not correctly identified, which happens very often. Often the analysts’ vocabulary shifts randomly between culture and civilization. For example, anything religious can superficially be

classified as belonging to culture, even when it displays many traits of civilization. Historian Bassam Tibi, for example, calls values like democracy and human rights “products of *cultural* modernity” (Tibi 1998: 24, *my italics*) and does not consider the possibility of classifying them as civilization.

The most flagrant problem is that reality is often forced into either the top or the bottom axis while all vertical movements are ignored. In other words, critiques of certain positions are most often formulated by adopting the contrary position (thus by moving horizontally on the square), but rarely by applying subalternative or contradictory inferences. Eagleton, for example, lumps all “religion” together in the form of an E-proposition and does not consider the existence of the I-proposition. As a result, he presents religious fundamentalism as an attitude opposed to civilization (moving from his own A-proposition to an E-proposition), which is just as hasty as equating religion with culture. Many people will actually find that Eagleton is right with regard to religion: is religion not able to contradict scientific *civilization* by declaring, for example, that evolution does not exist? However, religion questions evolution not on the basis of a relativist *culture*, but on the basis of a religion that claims to be more absolute than science. This position *should* be identified as an I-proposition, which opposes civilization-religion to secular culture. Such vertical interferences are rarely undertaken.

Wahhabism makes the same mistake. For Wahhabism, absolute values defined by a puritan ideology represent the basis of everything -- just like for Eagleton values such as universality, autonomy, individuality, and rational speculation represent the basis of (secular) civilization. Paradoxically, Wahhabism speaks out against precisely those “cultural” values that many secular people cherish as values of civilization: democracy, political structures of pluralism, human rights, and liberal tolerance, because for them, those values are merely cultural. The reason is that it does not consider the existence of the square’s top axis.

2.6. Overcoming the Square

The preceding section has shown that the square is too often used in a limited fashion. Another problem is that the four positions and five logical connections indicated by the square do not necessarily reflect existing conditions. The problem with the square is indeed that it is too rigid: sometimes social reality is forced into the square, most probably because its logical coherence is so tempting. Similar to Tibi, Leila Ahmed amalgamates culture and civilization when writing that “the Western meaning of the veil [is] a sign of the inferiority of Islam as religion, culture, and civilization” (Ahmed 2011: 45). In principle, Ahmed attributes to “Westerners” the A-proposition (“Good secular civilization against evil religion culture”) though it is obvious that this is reductive.

With regard to the veil it can be said that many Western people are likely to accept this item as a *cultural* symbol and are only disturbed by its *religious* connotations; and then

again, they are not disturbed by those connotations because they find this particular religion inferior or opposed to their own religion or civilization, but rather because they find the dogmatic way in which the religion is practiced incompatible with the standards of their culture. In other words, they are disturbed by the fact that this practice, which *should* be called ‘cultural’ in every sense of the word, emphasizes its universal value by advertising itself as a civilizational religion.

This means that they do *not* lean towards the A-proposition to which Ahmed attempts to pin them down, but rather towards an O-proposition because they are opposed to “civilization-religion.” At the same time, they do not oppose “civilization-religion” by building around them a bulwark of “secular culture” (as the O-proposition would indicate), but rather by adopting an attitude that does not exclude “religion-culture” either. In other words, what is lacking on the square is a combination of the E- and the O-proposition. This new proposition would be named “Evil civilization-religion vs. good religion culture.”

Thinking outside the square does not seem to be on the mind of many people writing about religion. Sometimes this leads to absurd constellations. It has been show above how Betz (who is a representative of the E-proposition) depicts those who are secular as prototypical enlightenment people who see reason as the only foundation of culture. For Betz, the fact of looking back at tradition (something that enlightenment so often spurns) automatically implies a looking back at those items that he sees as the essence of culture: religion and faith. Curiously, Eagleton, though coming from the contrary end of the square (A-proposition), offers very similar assumptions. His argument, as it appears in the quotation in which he identifies culture as “all those unreflected loyalties and spontaneous convictions” (Eagleton 2008: 46), is that secular enlightenment people *can* only be against religion because religion is merely cultural.

Eagleton’s position must be understood as a direct reaction to a post-secular pattern relying very much on the fusion of religion and culture. In the context of this argument, Eagleton decides to refuse the influence of tradition because he prefers universal values and reason. In the end, however, his argument plays into the hands of adherents of the E-proposition, such as Betz and Sardar. Like them, Eagleton equates culture with religion and condemns both because of their relativism. The above new proposition (“Evil civilization-religion vs. good religion culture”) would solve this conundrum. We need to look at this new paradigm more closely.

3. Overcoming the Square through “Sweetness and Light”

The first purpose of the above exercise has been to disentangle the paradox of culture (as part of religion and at the same time as a quality that can be seen as opposed to religion) by distinguishing culture from civilization. It has been shown that the four paradigms attributed to the square of oppositions are solid but that they can also be reductive. The

second purpose has been to show that the square is too rigid and unable to reflect all cases. It can function as a useful tool of conceptualization, but at the same time, it prevents the appropriate conceptualization of the “religion-culture” option. The “thinking inside the square” reacts to a dogmatic concept of religion as civilization in an equally dogmatic fashion. An extension of the logical model is required in order to show that cultural forms of religion represent the most efficient means able to deconstruct civilizational forms of religion.

In order to provide such an extension, I want to trace the term culture with the help of a formula coined by Victorian critic and poet Matthew Arnold. Also, Arnold most clearly delimits culture from the above idea of civilization. For Arnold, culture is a state of civilization containing both truth and beauty as well as another quality that he names “sweetness and light” (Arnold 1869: 19). This concept of culture is interesting in the present context because it insists on “aesthetic” components on the one hand, but also remains linked to a certain quality of enlightenment. Arnold’s insistence on culture’s aesthetic quality (beauty) in combination with “light” is unusual. Though “light” is clearly connected to enlightenment, Arnold’s notion of “light” does not reduce culture to civilization; on the contrary, the “light” metaphor can even suggest a religious dimension of culture. In Arnold’s model of culture, the enlightenment heritage is not rejected but confirmed; on the other hand, culture becomes “sweetness and light” not through the blunt adherence to enlightenment’s scientific, universal, and rational principles, but rather through subtle reflections on the self and the other, which can produce “sweet” qualities such as tolerance.

Arnold is not the only person to describe culture in this stylistic-existentialist way. Almost a hundred years later, the English art critic Clive Bell does the same, though he chooses to name the quality in question not culture but civilization: “tolerance, receptivity, magnanimity, unshockableness, and taste for, and sympathy with pleasure, are prime characters of civilization” (Bell 1973: 168). Bell also refers to a certain kind of aesthetic sensitivity and insists that “the civilized man will be highly perceptible to aesthetic impressions, and to aesthetic impressions not of one sort only” (124).

Apart from that, at least partially, Arnold’s and Bell’s *use* of the term culture is not very different from how some religious people use the term religion today: culture is “the great help out of our present difficulties” (Arnold 1869: viii), and it is able to oppose the sort of materialism emergent “in a Britain that holds that coal and iron constitute the greatness of England” (19). This culture is opposed to a civilization based on universality and rational speculation.

At the same time, it is opposed to *fundamentalist* notions of religion because it is not dependent on absolute qualities, truths or essences. Bell singles out “puritans” as the enemies of culture because “for all their good intentions, [they] are the enemies of good,

because they make it more difficult than it need to be for themselves and everyone else to enjoy good states of mind” (Bell 1973: 177).

3.1 Culture Must be “Interesting”

It is relatively easy to define culture negatively as the opposite of scientism and puritanism, and it has been shown that the square of oppositions encourages such one-dimensional definitions.

However, what are the positive qualities of culture?

There is a term to which Arnold attributes much importance in his writings on culture: culture “is best described by the word *interesting*” (170). Culture is “interesting” because it provides subtle reflections on the world and on ourselves. Interesting are those phenomena that we can submit to critical examination – after which we will perhaps not even agree with them – but which we will still perceive as being beneficial for the development of our cultural or intellectual environment. This is why “interesting” things are often precisely those things that are subtle. “Subtle” comes from the French “souple,” which means soft, flexible, and open -- that is, the contrary of rigid. A good portion of relativism is enclosed to the project of “being subtle” by definition; but blunt relativism is the contrary of subtle.

It is not far-fetched to link Arnold’s ideas from 1869 to our contemporary “postmodern culture” that is so often the red cloth of all believers. Like postmodern culture, Arnold’s “interesting” culture is suspicious of all forms of prophetic revelations as well as of transcendental purity and immediate truths or unmediated self-certainties. Still, its aspect of “sweetness and light” is the contrary of the dark and nihilistic scenario that (E-proposition) believers often attribute to the secular or – in particular – to the postmodern situation that they identify with the A-proposition. The source of Arnold’s light is neither rational Enlightenment nor God, but culture itself, which manages to be interesting just because it is culture.

5. Can Religion be Interesting?

When religion turns out to be interesting for both cultural and civilizational reason, the rigid logic of the square has been overcome. A priori, religion can be interesting for all the reasons pointed out in the preceding section, which is why in the history of humanity, religion has often attracted the world’s brightest minds. And when it fell into decline, it often was because the features displayed by religion were too dogmatic. Then values or “the good” would be hermetically codified up to a point that religion was no longer interesting because it offered no intellectual challenge.

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In other words, religion was civilization, and secular culture was opposed to it (I-proposition). This happened, for example, to Islam. While Islam employed for several centuries the best philosophers and scientists available for its development, in the tenth century, it ceased being subtle and went along a path that made it unable, in the words of Malek Chebel, to “equip itself with a critical history” or to maintain a critical approach towards its sources of tradition (*usul al-fiqh*) (Chebel 2006: 31).

Instead of thinking critically, it began to focus on immediate (often “natural”) truths as well as on small theological details; and whenever “details begin to dominate the spirit of a religion one can conclude that it is obsolete” (32). Muslim lawyers would now codify the Islamic law and reduce Islam to a ‘cult of *fiqh*’, or jurisprudence. Worse, “religious scholars feared that the proliferation of written texts would undermine their authority and control, and prevented the emergence of printing in the Muslim world for over three hundred years. This stopped creative thought, and centralized authority in a few hands” (Inayatullah & Boxwell 2003: 18).

In the end, Islam gained a lot of questionable “truths” but lost anything that could be called “interesting.” In a climate of orthodoxy and formalism, one “no longer thinks as serenely as in the past, and every invention is considered as treason” (Chebel: 34). Long lists of things forbidden do not lead to light but to obscurantism. When Chebel concludes that “the ninth century appears as the grave of free thought” (70), he could as well say that it appears as the grave of *culture* if we understand culture as a movement nourished by the ambition to create interesting and subtle thoughts as well as expressions of sweetness and light. However, in spite of the excessive preoccupation with concrete details, Islam will also be afflicted by the opposite ailment: *as a civilization* it becomes too abstract, and its teachings can no longer be linked to concrete regional or *cultural* ideas: “too vast, too large and without spinal column, the Islamic community becomes a generous idea that is often thought of but which translates nothing in geostrategic terms” (34).

Islam’s particular problem is that it has always been torn between the extremes of universal civilization and individual culture, between a supra-national “way of life” based on unconditional truth on the one hand and communitarian identity politics on the other. Can one and the same institution fulfill both promises? Can one and the same institution be both culture and civilization?

It seems that at present Islam is losing even more of its *cultural* appeal, offering few pleasures and entertainment that could be seen as intrinsic to Islam; what it offers are mainly universal instructions about cultural activities that are forbidden. Bell’s qualities like “tolerance, receptivity, magnanimity, unshockableness, and taste for, and sympathy with pleasure” (Bell: 168) have moved to the background. Nor is there present Islam “perceptible to aesthetic impressions, and to aesthetic impressions not of one sort only” (124).

As a result, subjects will most likely be tempted by ways of life and entertainments offered by other cultures and keep Islam only as a form of civilization. This civilization can then most comfortably be expressed as an anti-Western, anti-imperialistic ideology or provide detailed instructions about how to behave or represent the sharia. To call this a “civilization” might appear paradoxical given the concreteness of those Islamic prescriptions about cultural details. The problem is that those details do not create a culture but rather a paranoiac identification of concrete cultural items with general civilizational guidelines. In any case, the outcome will probably not be what Arnold has described as sweetness and light.

It is true that in the case of the sharia, the status of “sharia as civilization” is sometimes difficult to recognize because the sharia is increasingly *not* used as a universal legal code but rather as an affirmation of cultural identities, which represents a paradox. Olivier Roy explains this paradox by pointing out that while “the criterion of an Islamic cultural identity is looked for in the sharia, as a legal norm it should actually be thought of outside the frame of cultural contingency” (Roy 1999: 27). In Muslim emigrant circles, for example, one likes to define the sharia “not as a legal system but as a body of cultural norms defining a way of life more than a legal status, an identitarian horizon more than a civil code” (26). At the same time, the sharia continues to regulate the life of a religious international community that exists *beyond* cultures.

Roy concludes very aptly that the strong desire for the sharia can only denote the *cultural* crisis of Islam: Islamic religion can no longer be lived *culturally* and spontaneously in a self-evident fashion. Normally, cultures can be lived spontaneously without recurring to general laws. The paradox exists in the fact that the Islamic culture project is restricted to the ambition “to ground Islamic identity on a body of norms spelled out as legal rules” (26). Strictly speaking, this codification of religion-culture kills culture by turning it into a religion-civilization unable to develop naturally and organically. And, of course, it cannot develop organically in contact with other cultures. What is supposed to be “culture” develops rather ideologically and abstractly almost as if it were a science.

The above considerations have shown that Islam has lost its “interesting” cultural appeal not once but twice: first, in the tenth century, when it gave in to a stubborn form of mysticism and cut itself off from both reason and culture; second, more recently, when it began to define itself as a “cultural civilization.” The second step is not typical for a religion, but more akin to Western Enlightenment civilizations. “Cultural civilizations” appear when a scientifically grounded civilization isolates itself from everything that cannot be positively evaluated. Critics of Enlightenment have therefore long held that a civilization exclusively based on Enlightenment principles will be well-organized and technologically advanced but disenchant¹ because it is lacking those features that could qualify it as culture: it is no longer subtle and interesting.

¹ The hypothesis about the “disenchantment of the world” through technology and intellectualization comes from Max Weber.

The case of Islam is different. When Islam entered the stage of a scientifically grounded civilization by believing that in this “civilization-culture” everything should be positively evaluated, it went directly from mysticism to positivism, thus circumventing culture twice. First it omitted the step that Enlightenment undertook when it was forcing itself to see religion in terms of culture. Second it circumvented culture when refusing to accept critical evaluations of absolute civilizational values in terms of cultural critiques.

Culture, as it is understood in post-Enlightenment western societies, is supposed to settle right in the middle, on a critical ground able to accommodate different positions and to consider both abstract and concrete manifestations of human ingenuity. This is how culture avoids both religious and scientific dogmatism. To see culture like this also means to deconstruct the oppositional logic suggested by the square of oppositions. In a word, it means to advance the “Evil civilization-religion vs. good religion-culture” proposition.

Conclusion

The preceding section has described how civilizational religion kills not only secular culture but also religious culture. Apart from that, it has been shown that any civilizational religion has difficulties to progress -- that is, it has difficulties to formulate its position in terms of progressive civilization. Only the new paradigm called “Evil civilization religion vs. good culture-religion” is able to amend this situation. The new paradigm is not merely one ready to confound everything that this article has tried to disentangle. Confusions happen when one thing is seen as the other, while I suggest a model of coexistence. Within this model, all elements remain distinct. As a result, really “interesting” constellations can appear. This happens, of course, only on the condition that all elements are allowed to play equal roles.

In our post-secular post-modernity, religions should stop seeing “absolute civilizational religion” and “relativist culture” as opposites. Then they can make religion more “interesting.” In other words, religion should be turned into culture (1) without abandoning religious elements and (2) without designating secular civilization as an “evil” element.

In the Western world – with the obvious exception of American puritan fundamentalism – secularization has brought religion very much on a “cultural level” – at least for a large part of the population.

In the Muslim world the contrary is the case. Under Wahhabist influence, a civilizational understanding of religion in the fundamentalist sense is more and more emphasized, and the distinction between culture and religion is becoming more and more distinct. Cultural versions of Islam, like the spiritual or ‘mystical’ tradition of Sufism, are suppressed. What religion lacks in those cases is a relevant combination of culture and civilization or

simply “sweetness and light.” In the end, this is the reason why it has difficulties progressing – both as a culture and as a civilization.

I suggest that Muslims embrace postmodernism in its truest form: not just as a post-secular ideology but as an attempt to integrate secularism and religion. In that way Islam could also organize a *cultural* fight against monolithic and standardized global capitalism or other political or secular phenomena by which it has always been so intrigued. The current identification of religiosity with terrorism on the one hand, and of secularism with the philosophy of technocrats on the other, does not help to amend the situation.

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