



Who is 'Us': Our Culture, our Values, our Heritage and the Reconfiguration of Religion

Workshop at the Centre for Advanced Studies

"Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities", Leipzig University,
in collaboration with the "Nonreligion in a Complex Future" Project, University of Ottawa

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Building on previous discussions of culturalization by the Multiple Secularities research group, this workshop focuses on the transubstantiation of religion to culture in countries characterized by an historical Christian majority (in some cases a consequence of colonialism) and a contemporary decline in religious affiliation. These countries are in the midst of rapid social change in relation to their religious makeup: the number of people who self identify as 'nonreligious' is rapidly increasing. This disaffiliation, which expresses itself in multiple ways, including atheism, agnosticism, humanism, and indifference, is prompting a re-grouping of Christianity in the form of what some have described as culturalization. In this process a symbol or a practice which might traditionally been understood to be religious is now reconstituted as 'our culture and heritage'. The most visible place in which these debates take place is in law, often when nonreligious people, usually atheists, challenge the symbol or practice under human rights protections. But the reconstitution of practices and symbols takes place in everyday life as well, crafting discursive frameworks that shape the understanding of who belongs to the 'us' whose culture and heritage is to be preserved. In this workshop we are not so much concerned with 'heritage sites', but with practices and symbols one encounters in the course of day-to-day life: symbols such as crosses and crucifixes in social institutions, prayers in public spaces and even extended claims to culture which are compatible with majoritarian Christianity (eating pork as part of who 'we' are, for example). Finally, the rise of the culture and heritage narrative coincides with, in some cases, a reconstituted nationalism. It plays a central role in populist movements which link the ideas of traditional culture – often associated with religious symbols – being under threat with a turn against "foreign" influences, may it be Islam or groups promoting sexual liberties.

If we take secularity to be a concern with the social construction of boundaries then the religion to culture reconfiguration falls squarely within the research purview of the core aim of the Multiple Secularities programme. Of particular interest is the shape of power in these processes of boundary construction, and the impact of the global circulation of ideas and bodies. Thus while the decline in Christianity is a major driver in this turn to culture, we see reference to the 'religious other', especially Muslims, in public debates about 'our culture and heritage' as well as narratives of an 'us' under threat.