

Challenging Organisations and Society

reflective hybrids*

Different Cultures, Different Rhythms

Karin Lackner

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Ulrich Krainz

The Sacred and the Secular Notes on a Neglected Dimension of a Cultural Difference

Abstract

Today the management of diversity is seen as a key competence to meet the complexity of pluralistic environments, inside and outside of organizations. What is systematically left aside in this context or is not evaluated to its full extent is the topic of religion. Not only do modern pluralistic societies admit the existence of different religions, but we also find the simultaneous existence of religious and secular 'mindsets' both to be a source for potential conflict. In order to understand social change, the impact of societal transformations on organizations and the conditions and processes within, the issue of religious pluralism in a secular context deserves more attention. The article discusses the idea that a reflective stance on this subject is an important but so far neglected dimension of intercultural competence.

Keywords: Cultural Anthropology, Religion, Secularism, Intercultural Competence

1. Introduction

There is an urgent need for intercultural competence at every workplace level right up to the top management, not only in commercial life, but also in education, health, welfare and social services. Today, this area of competence is seen as pivotal for modern and constantly changing pluralistic societies, although it often remains unclear exactly what being interculturally competent can or should mean in practice. Even the relevant literature often appears fuzzy and ambiguous and does not always give the necessary clarity in this respect (for a critical discussion see Dreyer & Hößler, 2011).

Taking a closer look at the current discourses on intercultural competence it becomes apparent that the topic of religion is virtually neglected. Certainly, religion is mentioned and it is emphasized that religious beliefs and convictions play an important role with respect to culture, mentality and identity formation. However, these discussions often remain on a superficial level and come up with patent remedies. Practical and behavior oriented on-the-job training and 'do and don't lists' about how to adequately behave in particular cultural environments prevail (critically commented by Slunecko, 2002). For example, one might learn that contact with the other sex is not allowed for conservative and devout Muslims, wherefore it seems advisable to renounce shaking hands during business meetings. What is commonly hoped for is that an interculturally competent person is able to avoid stumbling into unwanted cultural and religious sand traps or taboos, in order to achieve or maintain a problem-free communication and collaboration. Even though such recommendations might be helpful to some extent, they are – overall – not very 'intellectually satisfying'; nor do they do justice to the complexity of the intercultural in general. They are primarily pragmatic approaches in order to provide 'survival strategies' for intercultural situations, but they are not at all aimed at a deeper understanding of or reflection on the encountered, so far unknown culture, let alone one's own culture, the deeper understanding of which is often an unexpected but nevertheless interesting side effect. In the worst case, they can even increase oversimplifications and reinforce stereotypes.

Stimulated by the observation that religion is almost left aside in this context, I address this issue in more detail. In doing so, however, I do not discuss specific characteristics and attributes of different religions. Instead of focusing on differences between religions, I rather address religion itself as a main object of investigation. I develop the idea that a reflective stance on religion and/or religious diversity in a secular context is an important, nevertheless underestimated dimension of intercultural competence and I do this based on four reflections.

- Firstly, I follow a cultural anthropological consideration, understanding religion itself as a cultural system.

- In a second step, I turn to the political dimension of all religions, with special regard to monotheism.
- Thirdly, I focus on current social developments with regard to public religious life, raising awareness for the potential variability and transformations of religious orientations in a secular context.
- In a fourth and last step, I give a conclusion and discuss implications for the concept of intercultural competence.

2. Religion as a Cultural System

The headline of this chapter is borrowed from an influential essay by Geertz, first published in the year 1966. Referring to classical theories on religion (coming from Durkheim, Weber, Freud and Malinowski), he develops his own anthropological interpretation of religion. Without abandoning the central insights and contributions of the established traditions of social anthropology in this field, he tries to widen them and to put them in a much broader context of contemporary thought.

Following a “semiotic” concept of culture, Geertz understands individuals, groups and communities always to be woven into and entangled in different “webs of significance” created by themselves (Geertz, 1973b, p. 5). In this sense, different cultural systems can be identified, e.g. art, philosophy, science, ideology and of course religion. In this concept, religion is one cultural system next to others. The analysis of it – in search of meaning – should be an interpretative one, a so-called “thick description” (Geertz, 1973b). Understanding culture as a historically transmitted system of meaning that originates from social interactions, he comes to formulate his definition of religion. For him a religion is:

“(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions

with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.” (Geertz, 1973a, p. 90)

This definition gives a good insight into the life-shaping force and power a religion can – or better said – has to unfold for a believing individual and a religious community. As a system of symbols, any religion becomes a cultural pattern for an empirical reality in a twofold respect. It is a “model of reality” as well as a “model for reality” (Geertz, 1973a, p. 93) at the same time. Looking at it that way, any religion gives meaning to the nature of a social and psychological reality as well as orientations and schemes for how things should be performed. It contains specific perceptions of what reality is, what life is about and how action patterns are structured accordingly. Following this anthropological perspective it becomes obvious that the importance of religion lies in its capacity to serve as a source of general, but distinctive conception of the world for a believing individual as well as a social group.

In contemporary discussions of religion in the social sciences there seems to be an undisputed consensus that the primal effect of early religious cult systems was to form a social group, a collective of people, welded together by shared narratives, norms and rituals (Sloterdijk, 2013). Any religion refers to shared beliefs and moral attitudes, which further operate as a unifying force. From that perspective the original core element of religion is bound to its functions of social coding and group synthesis (see also Mühlmann, 1996; Giesen, 1999). As in any other group development this leads to clear demarcations, feelings of affiliation and non-membership, in- and out-group phenomena.

Understanding religion as its own cultural system is an important starting point for our discussion. It underlines the necessity of a deeper reflection on religion as a driving force for conceptions, worldviews, feelings and patterns of action, and in this sense, as an important subject for intercultural competence. Following a religious mindset is not just about behaving in a certain way. Mainly it is about a distinct conception of reality, a way of seeing things. Speaking of organizations this has relevant consequences. Organizations are

not only places where people adhering to different religious beliefs meet, so that the ‘cultural diversity’ in cooperative units within organizations very often is more precisely formulated a ‘religious diversity’. Generally speaking, organizations have their own ‘culture’ and require and demand a particular ‘organizational behavior’ that as well has normative effects on individuals. Any believing individual entering a specific organization is likely to be confronted with a standard conflict, a conflict between what religion dictates (the compliance and accordance with religious rules) and what is allowed or made possible by this organization. In any case, resolutions for such conflict situations have to be found. If a certain amount of friction can be expected, the organization is likely to adapt, compromises and concessions have to be made and – if possible – institutionalized. (For a detailed discussion of such an organizational adaptation within the military system see Krainz, 2012)

3. On the Political Dimension of Religion

These considerations have to be discussed with regard to their political relevance. Europe in particular has a long historical tradition (e.g. philosophies and ethical perspectives of humanism, enlightenment and secularization, etc.) in criticism of religion. In this sense, the political dimension of religions and influences on society coming from religious associations are often viewed with some mistrust. The age of enlightenment, or as the German philosopher Kant pointed it out as the “emergence from self-imposed immaturity” (Kant, 1784/2001, p. 53) was a historical and cultural movement that sought to mobilize the power of reason – with unavoidable consequences for the (re-)forming of society. It especially turned itself against religious orientations and regulations.

Looking on religion as a “model of” as well as a “model for reality” it becomes apparent that there is always normativity involved. In its original nature every religion provides a monopoly of world interpretation. Offering a specific conception of the world it clearly prescribes how to live and to deal with others. Whereas this life-shaping or life-regulating force is true for all religious

systems, the political dimension further intensifies in monotheistic religions. In this context, current discourses of cultural science highlight an important fact, giving a better explanation on the contentious issue of religious conflicts all over the world. Focusing on the three monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) Assmann speaks about the “mosaic distinction” (Assmann, 2003). This distinction is a revolutionary innovation and essential characteristic of monotheism that does not exist in polytheistic religions (e.g. in Asia, Africa, South America). It is defined as a fundamental true-and-false-scheme concerning the area of religiosity, a distinction between the one true religion and the other false religions or the distinction between the one true God and the other false gods.

All religions have specific views about different social roles their adherents should fulfill (e.g. gender roles, marriage patterns, attitudes towards social change, mixing with others, doing business etc.), involving particular orientations that impose commandments and prohibitions. On these points, there are no differences between mono- and polytheistic religions. The new and revolutionary element of monotheism, however, is the introduction of an exclusive religious concept. Before the emergence of monotheism, deities were described as ‘translatable’ in principle. Conflicts and disputes were predominantly oriented on the principle of political domination and not religious in its nature. It was about power, not about truth or the question of God. In this sense, monotheism has not brought everything bad and violent into a previously peaceful and non-violent world. Rather a new qualitative difference has emerged. With the monotheistic turn and for the first time in religious history issues like truth, justice, law and freedom were declared as a single matter of God. The essential core of monotheism is therefore described as a mere political theology.

This theory is strongly discussed in the current academic (Sloterdijk, 2007; Beck, 2010) as well as public discourse. Especially in theological and religious milieus, however, the claimed intolerance of monotheistic religions is (not surprisingly) the subject of ongoing criticism and controversial discussions. In this context, the social dedication and help of religious institutions

and communities are often mentioned to prove the opposite. It is true that a variety of social services are mainly done by religious institutions (e.g. charities, care for homeless, asylum and immigration services, etc.). However, this commitment does not deny the inherent potential for conflict Assmann is talking about. Inevitably, the claims of monotheistic religions to exclusively possess the truth lead to a clear differentiation of right and wrong.

Only recently, Sloterdijk (2013) has taken this discussion in another direction. Not denying the main insights of Assmann's theory, he again refers to cultural anthropological considerations focusing on the social structure of membership in a religious community. The main advantage of this reflection is the possibility to incorporate historical and current religious conflicts of non-monotheistic environments, e.g. coming from Buddhist or Hindu groups. In this sense, the main and crucial difference is not so much about the singularity or the plurality of conceptions of God. Rather it is about the conceded intensity and authority of collectivization and a prescribed religious norm-system for its members. In this respect, normative and unquestioned conceptions of a general order of existence that are closed to debate and seen as givens comprise a high potential for conflict and even violence. It can lead to metaphysically justified self-aggrandizements characterized by cultural narcissism (Mühlmann, 1996), which further allows negative and aggressive actions against others. Sloterdijk therefore compares religions (even though not specifically quoting it) with "total institutions" (Goffman, 1961). This term describes a generic type of organization characterized by a hierarchical centralization, a clear social order, a ritualization of collective action, always characterized by an omnipresent and all-seeing authority. With that in mind, he speaks of "total membership" (Sloterdijk, 2013) in a religious community, a special type of social belonging to a religious group, covering all aspects of human life. Even though this totality is typical for traditional and 'pre-modern' systems of thought, this fact is described as excessively stressed in all three monotheistic religions.

It becomes apparent that religion cannot just be understood as solely religious. In terms of its social structure, its normativity and authority involved,

religion is always inherently political. Referring to the area of intercultural competence it is therefore important to reflect on consequences of a religious norm-system for a believing individual and the challenges and conflicts involved in a multicultural and multireligious context. In work contexts this especially demands proactive awareness and an incorporation of such considerations into management practices, e.g. work organization, feedback and designs for staff, work and project meetings. At first sight it might seem easier or even 'more secure' to avoid such discussions, however, considering pluralistic cooperative units it is important to create conditions in which such issues can be approached and dealt with reflectively.

4. Secularization and Individualization

As important as these political reflections are, they do not yet say anything about particular social practices of those people who belong to a certain religion. Different social practices, however, are the center of attention when dealing with intercultural situations, for which reason they should be taken into account more clearly.

In most parts of the industrialized 'Western world' religious beliefs no longer play a major role in the public discourse and religion is primarily seen as an intimate private aspect of an individual. This fact cannot be taken for granted or directly compared to other parts of the world, e.g. developing or emerging countries. Thus intercultural and interreligious situations are not just characterized by the fact that people have different religious backgrounds. The main diversity rather comes from the fact that the importance and influence of religion on how people conduct their daily lives can strongly vary among different people.

How is this possible? Religion is not static and unchanging, detached and isolated from other social developments. Rather societal transformation processes – modernization, rationalization, scientific progress, globalization, secularization – have a strong influence on personal religious lives. Like any other socio-cultural phenomenon, religion is embedded in everyday practice

(in some cases the other way round). But these practices are not arbitrary. They are the result of a process of a “social construction of reality” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Certainly, an individual takes part in this constructive process. The constitution of the social world, however, takes place in interactive processes that are always embedded in and surrounded by particular social, cultural, historical, political and other circumstances and discourses (Slu-necko, 2002). In this sense, these constructions rest upon collectively shared knowledge bases that have a strong effect on an actual social reality and its practices, including religion and religious orientations.

In this context, the secularization theory deserves special attention. This theory describes a clear process of social change in modern Western societies that occurred with the end of the eighteenth century and was long considered as undisputed by many seminal thinkers on religion. First, secularism was only a judicial term that meant the dissolution and takeover of church property through the modern national state after the French Revolution. Today, secularization generally stands for a way of living and thinking that is no longer regulated by predominant religious institutions and normative orders. The spirit of secularization is turned against any form of heteronomy, where moral attitudes or values in general are legitimized through God or another divine authority. In its core argument, the secularization theory further claims a decline of religion, a loss of faith in modern industrialized societies. However, despite ‘optimistic’ beliefs in modernization predicting a decrease of religiosity in general, religions still enjoy great popularity. The often quoted “disenchantment of the world” (Weber, 1919/2002, p. 488) did not live up to what it had promised and “religion has not disappeared from the world, nor does it seem likely to do so” (Norris & Inglehart, 2004, p. 4). In fact, looking at a globalized context the opposite is correct. Today, we can find a worldwide “resurgence of religion” (Habermas, 2008, p. 34) characterized by three overlapping factors: the missionary expansion of the world’s major religions, a fundamentalist radicalization and the political instrumentalization of the potential for violence. Instead of its disappearance, we are rather confronted with a new revival of religion, which can take many different forms.

Whereas the influence of organizational and institutionalized religions is gradually eroding in a secular context, this does not mean a decrease of religiosity itself. It rather reveals a radical change in religious life that modern sociology of religion describes as “unchurching” or “de-institutionalizing” of religious beliefs (Knoblauch, 1999, p. 85; Luhmann, 2002, p. 279), i.e. a reduction of church attendance and adherence to prescribed rules and rituals. In this sense, secularization speaks of a privatization of religiosity, of individual decisions, where traditional religious beliefs are no longer conceived of as obligatory and no longer play a dominant role in public life or diverse aspects of decision-making. In modern, functionally differentiated societies religion is not vanishing. It is rather becoming a particular subsystem next to others (Luhmann, 2002). As a functional subsystem within modern society religion can no longer be seen as integrative and it loses (spelling error) its unifying force. Religion becomes set free from its function of group synthesis and is ‘reduced’ to its function of offering means for coping contingency (Luhmann, 2002; Sloterdijk, 2013). It gives meaning to unpredictable uncertainties of human life experiences (e.g. death, grief, crises, miseries etc.).

Religion is changing in its typical and traditional form. Secularization promotes new religious developments and trends on a micro level more geared towards individualized religious practices and orientations (Luckmann, 1967; Taylor, 2002; Beck, 2010). This societal change indicates a patchwork religion, a bricolage of different meaningful systems, where people start to decide for themselves what they want to believe, how and what they want to practice and what they consider as adequate and important in their lives. People are starting to create religious conceptions in their own terms that better match personal worldviews and beliefs, using their personal experiences (religious as well as secular) to construct a “God of one’s own” (Beck, 2010).

Relating these reflections to the political potential of religions described above, it seems that this tendency may further lower or defuse the potential for conflict religions inherently entail (e.g. truth claims, exclusivity, either-or-orientations, etc.). Instead of “total membership” (Sloterdijk, 2013) in and compliance with a religion, secularized religious mindsets show a more

relaxed attitude towards different ways of life and individual decisions following an as-well-as-orientation, constituting and demanding ambiguity tolerance. In terms of secularized religious orientations, membership is no longer seen as mandatory. Rather it becomes optional and plural in principle (Sloterdijk, 2013, p. 57).

5. Summary and Conclusion

The article focuses on religion as its main object of investigation and relates these considerations to the area of intercultural competence. It becomes obvious that the topic of religion does not get the attention it actually deserves in this context. This fact is more than surprising since different geopolitical developments, the encounter of different religious conceptions and orientations and the continuing existence of religious mindsets in a secular context should rather encourage tackling this issue in more detail instead of neglecting it. The situations described constitute specific intercultural encounters, all inherently prone to conflict, wherefore an increasing reflection and inquiry on a theoretical and empirical as well as on a discursive level seems indispensable.

Whereas intercultural competence is often seen as an interplay of expert knowledge, culture-specific knowledge and social skills in the literature I tried to discuss the idea that this field of competence should be extended to a mainly reflective approach. In this sense, there are several implications with regard to intercultural competence I would like to point out at the end of this article.

- First of all, it seems beneficial to dispense with stereotypical descriptions of differences between religions. To be familiar with religion-specific knowledge in intercultural situations is good and important, but this does not replace critical inquiry as a general approach.
- In this context, it seems more apt to understand religion itself as a cultural system. Following Geertz's (1973a) classical considerations, any religion comprises a specific mindset and conception of the world that overall shares

more similarities rather than differences between religious backgrounds.

- It further seems necessary to understand any religion to be inherently political in its essence. In terms of life conduct, all religions involve normativity and authority, a comprehensive doctrine and in the case of monotheism even truth claims, exclusivity and either-or-orientations. The stronger and more socially binding a religious norm-system is pronounced for a religious community, the more likely it is to be expected with conflict in intercultural encounters.
- Be willing to challenge your perception of religion. For social situations and intercultural encounters it seems advisable to differ between religions on the one hand and (personal) religious practices on the other. The main cultural difference and possible misinterpretations in social interactions do not just come from religious backgrounds per se. Rather they are the result of processes that emerge from different religious orientations, comprising different patterns of graveness and depths of religious feelings.
- In this sense, one has to think about different forms of religious subjectivity that become possible in secularized environments. An increasing individualization of religious life has to be seen as an expression and outcome of the secularization process itself, giving a better understanding for religious differences and religious movements and trends in contemporary society.
- A severe area of tension can further be found between a religious and a secular mindset. It is therefore appropriate to speak of a 'culture of the sacred' and a 'culture of the secular'. In terms of its convictions and discursive actions, etc., religious and secular orientations strongly differ from each other and corresponding ways of dealing with them still need to be found.

In modern pluralistic societies the necessity for a deeper consideration of religion can take many different forms, starting from religious accommodation in the public sphere (e.g. public institutions like schools, hospitals, the military or in the workplace, etc.), the issue of a compliance with religious rules and dress codes, right up to the simultaneous existence and encounter

of different religious as well as secular beliefs. In order to meet the complexity of contemporary societies, the conditions in and the effects on organizations, this topic cannot be left aside or just approached on a superficial level. Due to the demand of a growing diversity in a globalized context it rather calls for deeper reflection and inquiry.

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