On the Difference between Cultural and Religious Identities: A Case Study of Christianity and Islam in Some African and Asian Countries

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Abstract—Culture and religion are two of the most significant markers of an individual or group`s identity. Religion finds its expression in a given culture and culture is the costume in which a religion is dressed. In other words, there is a crucial relationship between religion and culture which should not be ignored. On the one hand, religion influences the way in which a culture is consumed. A person`s consumption of a certain cultural practice is influenced by his/her religious identity. On the other hand, the cultural identity plays an important role on how a religion is practiced by its adherents. Some cultural practices become more credible when interpreted in religious terms just as religious doctrines and dogmas need cultural interpretation to be understood by a given people, in a given context. This relationship goes so deep that sometimes the boundaries between culture and religion become blurred and people end up mixing religion and culture. In some cases, the two are considered to be one and the same thing. However, despite this apparent sameness, religion and culture are two distinct aspects of identity and they should always be considered as such. One results from knowledge while the other has beliefs as its foundation. This paper explores the difference between cultural and religious identities by drawing from existing literature on this topic as a whole, before applying that knowledge to two specific case studies: Christianity among San people of Botswana, Namibia, Angola, Zambia, Lesotho, Zimbabwe, and South Africa, and Islam in Somalia, Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti and Iran.

Keywords—Belief, identity, knowledge, culture, religion.

I. INTRODUCTION

IDENTITY is a key concept in anthropology, but it is also one that has been extensively and profoundly contested in recent decades as a direct result of the fact that, in simple terms, it relates to the individual while also dealing with collective distinctions of otherness [1]. However, beyond such simplification, identity is framed by a multiplicity of intersecting factors that serve to problematize categorization and reflect awkwardly on social and cultural relations. For instance, Sokefeld points out that traditional conceptions of identity were effectively metanarratives of the identical subject [2]. Now, the concept no longer tends to pursue singularity in that it is defined by unity, but instead adopts a focus on plurality and difference [2]. As such, that difference may manifest in collective identities and mechanisms via which it is possible to define that plurality, such as culture and religion. That is not to say that cultural identities and religious identities may be defined in the same terms. Indeed, the two are very different in

both theory and practice, with anthropologists tending to focus on one or the other as opposed to constructing comparative analyses that provide definitive separation of the two.

Bearing in mind the paradigmatic shift in what constitutes identity outlined here, this paper will explore the difference between cultural and religious identities by first establishing a comprehensive theoretical framework that draws on existing literature on the topic as a whole before applying that knowledge to two specific case studies - Christianity and Islam in Africa and Asia. These two examples will reflect on how the commonality of religious identity intersects with the disparate cultural identities present on the two respective continents and form the basis of the argument that the major difference between the two is grounded in the juxtaposition of knowledge and belief. But first, a short time shall be devoted to the definitions of key terms: Religion, Culture and Identity- so as to put our discussion into perspective.

II. DEFINITION OF TERMS

A. Religion

Religion is one of the terms upon which scholars have been unable to come to a common understanding/definition. It is so broad and elusive that most definitions describe it only in part. But, given that the focus of this paper is not "religion", rather cultural and religious identities, time will not be spent on examining all the existing definitions of religion. In addition, the term "Religion" here does not refer to a particular religious tradition. Rather, it is used as a general term to indicate "an abstract category covering a wide range of human behaviors". In this sense, the term religion and its associated categorizing function analogously to "sport", "art", "language" or "economy" - other abstract terms used to broadly classify features of human behaviors [3]. This being said, we turn to the definition of religion that goes in line with the main point of this paper. Clifford defines religion as "a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" [4]. Thus understood, religion does serve a variety of purposes in human life. One such purpose is the role it plays in shaping the identity of an individual and that of a group or

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World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology
International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences
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society as it becomes one of the characteristics that distinguish an individual/group from others.

B. Culture

Like religion, culture is a largely contested term among scholars. There are in fact over 150 definitions of the term. However, what all these definitions reveal is that culture is a complex concept that encompasses the whole of human reality. It is in fact the foundation of every human interaction. One cannot imagine a human society without culture. That is why Malinowski conceived it as consisting of "norms obeyed and material apparatus manipulated by human beings in order to attend to their needs while "leaving an impression on the environment" [5]. Therefore, care must be taken to ensure that it does not get reduced to just a few of its aspects. As a result, there are numerous definitions of culture. For the discussion of this paper, only two definitions have been chosen:

Edward B. Tylor`s Definition

The British anthropologist defines culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" [6]. In this definition, Tylor clearly and rightly points out that culture is *acquired by man a member of the society"*. Through interaction with other members of the society, a person acquires that society`s culture of which she/he becomes a member. Society is therefore the environment in which culture grows and is learned. Society influences culture just as much as culture shapes a society as a whole, but also the individual members of that society. In other words, the individual, the society and culture interact and each one contributes to the shape of the others.

Marvin Harris` Definition

He defines culture as "that which has been acquired through learning and social interaction such as worldviews, life-style, moral code, belonging to a particular people or society. It is made up of traits/characteristics that establish the differences among groups of people" [7]. A culture is therefore a way of life of a given people.

C. Identity

Identity consists of traits, characteristics that make an individual or group different in comparison to others; but also consists of what joins a group of people together: their "sameness".

Identity is defined in Dictionary.com as the "condition or character as to who a person or what a thing is; the qualities, beliefs, etc., that distinguish or identify a person or thing" [8]. From this definition, one understands that identity refers not just to an individual person, but to a group of people or society as well in comparison to other individuals or groups. This is where the use of terms such as *Personal Identity* and *Collective Identity comes in.* The group affects the development of individual identity as much as individuals play a significant role in their group`s identity. The group in fact is where people acquire the "concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others" [9].

An individual`s identity is formed in two stages, Golubović argues. The first stage is that of *adoption,* and the second involves *free choice*. "In the formation of a person, the first step is to adopt a group identity, so as to satisfy his/her need for belonging somewhere as a member of a community (of a family, or a larger community, to the given society/state, to a generation, etc.). A person recognizes oneself through the adaptation to the concept of "we" as a primary form of understanding where one belongs. In this phase a person accepts the norms, beliefs, and experiences of his/her group as a "proper place of living" because in a collective security one escapes from loneliness and from the threat of the unknown world, he/she is unable to cope with upon birth" [10]. In such an environment, one aims to identify him/herself with the group to which he/she belongs. Hence the need to adopt the rules and guidelines of the group results in the person being accepted by the other group members. In other words, the environment with its norms and beliefs plays a significant role in the formation of individual identities. However, a person acquires self-identity by breaking free from the established *norms* and deciding to freely choose from what has been proposed by society. But for this to happen, the person must have gone through the process of understanding the make-up of his/her society, its *norms,* and their underlying *principles*. This allows the subject to grow as a unique and distinct person [11].

III. CULTURAL IDENTITY

Cultural Identity applies both to individuals as well as to groups. It manifests in social identities relating to specific cultural traits that identify and unite groups of people. Those repetitive ways of thinking frame an identity in relation to issues like race, class, ethnicity, locality, heritage and nationality, amongst other elements, but it may also incorporate religious beliefs and worldviews.

Hall defines cultural identity in terms of "solidarity and allegiance as much as signifying practices that are built on difference" [12]. This is an appropriate way of exploring cultural identity as a result of its multifaceted nature but does not actually pin down any specific definition that takes disparate areas of culture into account. As such, it remains a somewhat broad way of exploring identity as a whole. However, Hall clarifies his thought process about cultural identity by noting "the presence of common historic experiences and shared cultural codes that provide continuous frames of reference and help to construct meanings when stability is required" [12], citing the postcolonial era as an example. In other words, cultural identity is born as a way of survival in response to a particular historical context and location. For example, the cultural identity of a people that lives in areas where natural disasters such as volcanoes, tsunamis and earthquakes occur is adapted to such phenomena because in part, that cultural identity was formed in response to those phenomena. This certainly sets cultural identity apart from religious identity as the shared historic experiences are linked to national, cultural and social contexts even where there is an element of religious concern.

World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology
International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences
Vol:17, No:3, 2023

IV. Religious Identity

Taken as a standalone entity, religious identity actively refers to how an individual or community develops a sense of faith and religious beliefs over time, influencing how they live their lives in terms of ritual, behaviors in respect of religious institutions and personal practice, moral sensibilities and denominational doctrine [13]. In effect, there is no fixity of religious identity but one that demonstrates fluidity as the application of the beliefs system to which the individual subscribes shifts over time but the faith itself remains stable. Like cultural identity, this is a very broad definition and one that encompasses a range of elements and ideas without developing a stability of identity beyond how religion, like culture, impacts on the individual's sense of Self. At first glance, then, religious identity may be differentiated from cultural identity as a result of the specificity of the beliefs system that an individual or community follows, particularly where religious institutions becoming guiding frameworks that people may follow. This point becomes particularly important where religious identity is established in childhood, reinforced in adulthood and becomes entwined with other facets of identity, such as national and social identities, thus blurring the boundaries between the components that comprise the whole [14]. Indeed, here again there is a blurring of the boundaries between cultural and religious identities but it is possible to distinguish the two as a result of the factors that underpin them and whether they are built on belief or knowledge.

The existing literature concerning both religious and cultural identity varies widely in terms of scope, focus and purpose, with various academics seeking to define their own boundaries to separate and distinguish the two. For instance, Bonney argues that cultural identity is self-conscious, a causal agent that is uniquely human in scope and presents as a device for asserting control in some respects [15]. He also notes that religious identity begins with a process of revelation that taps into the messages that are proliferated by specific texts and institutions and evolve within the parameters established by them [15]. Although he fails to define critical distance between the two, there is a sense of cultural identity having greater scope to expand within the human sense of who we are as opposed to the fairly narrow religious parameters that are defined by religion. Of course, this fails to take into account the range of doctrinal interpretations that appear within a single religion let alone the human propensity to push the boundaries of knowing to suit agendas, ideologies and purposes.

Abdulla explores culture and religion in terms of freedoms instead of explicitly in terms of identity, but she notes not only where the two intersect but also the complexity that underpins their convergence: "... the reality is that in many cases, culture and religion are not so distinct, with cultural practices becoming 'religionized' and religious ideas becoming part of the culture" [16]. Therein lies the crux of any question or statement that poses the notion that the two are mutually exclusive. There are clear contextual factors that drive the manifestation of religious practices in any given cultural setting and facilitate the differentiation of various identities despite broad umbrella categorization. The convergence of cultural and religious identities where the two are inextricably linked in terms of societal practices and traditions therefore also begs the question of whether definitive differences between the two may be identified and fully explained. Like the other scholars discussed here, Abdulla holds that culture and religion are separate categories and therefore the identities associated with both should also be considered separate [16], but the reality is far more problematic. As such, it is necessity to explore the application of both religious and cultural identities in real world examples in order to determine how it is possible to separate the two and establish the key difference in the belief/knowledge dichotomy.

V. Cultural and Religious Identities in Christianity

Cultural and religious identities in Christian communities can be framed by specific historical contexts that impinge on how both identities are established within society. In some African countries, for example, the postcolonial period provides a context in which to explore the difference between cultural and religious identity, tapping into the problematic relationship between Christianity and cultural tradition as a result of the fact that Western missionaries introduced the religion to the region [17]. Indeed, Bigger notes that elements of spirituality were maintained in a cultural capacity by the San peoples of Botswana, Namibia, Angola, Zambia, Lesotho, Zimbabwe and South Africa [18], thus suggesting that the Christian religious identity is formed on the basis of belief whereas ritual, tradition and knowledge of practices and heritage formed the basis of the ongoing cultural unity of the indigenous tribes. Although this perhaps over-simplifies the impact of Christianity on local cultures [19], it demonstrates the malleability of culture and its ability to evolve to embrace knowledge of cultural heritage, whereas religious belief drives the stability of the Christian identity.

Fanon's assessment on cultural practices and identities within postcolonial societies notes that Colonization is detrimental to a people not just because it makes tabula rasa of the colonized people`s cultural content, but also by re-interpreting the said people`s past in such a way that makes them feel terrible bad about themselves. [20]. In reference to the political project that encompasses African countries in their post-independence phases, this draws attention to the need to establish the cultural identities present in countries that seek to move beyond oppression towards freedom. This is particularly interesting where Christianity is the dominant religion as a result of the influence of colonialism and remains in place while the population attempts to institute cultural practices that recall their pre-colonialism past while retaining some elements introduced by colonizers, as per Bhabha's concept of hybridity [21]. Indeed, Bhabha uses the example of Algerian Christian communities who "destroy the continuities and constancies of the nationalist tradition which provided a safeguard against colonial cultural imposition. They are now free to negotiate and translate their cultural identities in a discontinuous intertextual temporality of cultural difference" [22]. Here, religious identity remains in place because beliefs systems do not change and

World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology
International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences
Vol:17, No:3, 2023

institutions remain constant as a result of the reaffirmation of faith. But people adapt themselves to the new context and become the *principle of dialectical reorganization* as they re-construct their culture and live it in renewed expressions [22]. As such, knowledge determines cultural identity in those Algerian communities where faith-based belief remains constant.

VI. Cultural and Religious Identities in Islam

Cultural and religious identities in Islam have a broadly different historical background to those of Christianity, although it is also possible to identify and select various issues to discuss the difference that exists between the two. For instance, female genital mutilation, henceforth FGM, provides a means of exploring the convergence of and disparities between religious identity and cultural identity. It is a topic that Abdulla is concerned with in her analysis as a result of the growth in the practice in Islamic African countries that is widely justified on religious grounds [23]. However, Abdulla contends that it is a cultural practice rather than a religious one [17]. This is reinforced by studies that focus on the Somali ethnic community in Somalia, Kenya, Djibouti and Ethiopia who justify the practice based on Somali tradition, the enforcement of the cultural value of female sexual purity and that it is an Islamic requirement [17]. The given reasons here distinguish between religious identity, which is based on the interpretation of doctrine, and the cultural identity of the community that continues traditions and gendered norms. The fact that FGM is not an Islamic requirement is reinforced by the fact that it predates the Qur'an and is not practiced in Asian nations that are majority Muslim [24]. The status of the debate is of no interest here, but it does shed light on the distinction made between religious identity and cultural identity, and also how the former begins to merge into the latter where there are debates over institutional and societal practices.

The dynamic between religious and cultural identities works both ways though, with religion also using culture as a means of displaying a given identity via the showcasing of elements of the Islamic belief system in order to reinforce both identification and conviction. For instance, there is a use of cultural expression as a manifestation of worship where Iranian mosques utilize complex geometric designs to reflect the religious legacy of the cultural heritage that underpins society [24]. Here, the belief of religion harnesses the knowledge of culture to establish a physical reminder of religious identity that sits at the heart of the community. The example of Iranian mosques is particularly pertinent here because they have remained constant through political and social upheaval. This is indicative of what poststructuralist theorists like Foucault advocated when positioning the individual in relation to networks of discourse and power, thus challenging the conception of what constitutes identity [25]. Religious identity in Asian Islamic countries may therefore respond to or be positioned in networks of discourse and power where belief differentiates it from the knowledge of the cultural.

VII. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper sought to explore the difference between cultural and religious identities, drawing upon the examples of Christianity and Islam on the continents of Africa and Asia. The accumulation of cultural knowledge effectively constructs an identity with which to make sense of the world, whereas a belief system frames the religious doctrine an individual may follow and share. The examples used to discuss cultural and religious identity in relation to Islam and Christianity in Africa and Asia illustrate the problem of distinguishing the two forms of identity, but also tap into the fact that religion is actually a part of individuals' cultural identity and therefore major differences must be identified on the basis of categorization and the development of a sense of Self in terms of belief and the particular sense of the social, political, traditional, ritual and nationalist conceptualization of who individuals are. In short, the major difference between cultural and religious identities is firmly grounded in the juxtaposition of knowledge and belief, with cultural knowledge being accumulated by communities based on a range of factors like traditions, behaviors and relationship to places; and religious belief being taught within institutions dedicated to a particular faith. Although this is simplifying the difference to a degree, the multifaceted and highly complex interaction between religion and culture demonstrates that recognition of key differences can explain why faith-based practices may influence an individual or collective identity in vastly different ways depending on cultural input where the two intersect.

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