



**Lori Beaman:** *The Transition of Religion to Culture in Law and Public Discourse*. London: Routledge, 2020.

Around the (Christian/Western) world there are numerous cases in which religious symbols in public spaces are contested. Not only are there numerous debates on the hijab, or whether the burka can be banned, there are also debates on the presence of Christian majority religious symbols. A research trend in the study of contemporary religion in general and the sociology of religion in particular is the culturalization of religion. This topic can be approached in different ways, and in her new book Lori Beaman takes those cases of public religious symbols that not only cause debate but actually end up in the legal system as her point of departure.

Beaman explores the legal battles in different Western countries where various actors defend the public presence of symbols from the Christian majority religion. She seeks to examine the transformation of Christian *religious* symbols to symbols of the *cultural heritage* in the West through three case studies from Canada, France, and the United States. She also mentions several other cases that include religious symbols from other traditions like Hinduism and Islam to show that the transformation of religion to culture in many cases depends on which religion we are discussing. One aim of the book is to show how ‘past preserving narratives’ easily become a hindrance for what

she calls a ‘future forming vision’ of living well together.

The case that sparked her interest in exploring these transformation processes in more detail was the famous Italian case – the Lautsi case – in which an atheist parent objected to the presence of a crucifix in public school classrooms. The case was brought before the European Court of Human Rights, which decided that the presence of crucifixes violated religious freedom. Using a cultural heritage argument, the Italian government appealed the decision to the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights. It decided that crucifixes were passive symbols that did not violate religious freedom. Indeed, some of the judges argued that it was not a religious symbol at all, but a symbol of Italy’s culture and heritage. Beaman seeks to examine the various arguments used in similar cases from different countries.

Beaman has chosen to focus on a case from what we might call multicultural Canada, one from secularist France, and one from the Judaeo-Christian United States (these blunt descriptors do not do justice to her more detailed accounts of the countries). However, Beaman does not really argue for the choice of countries; nor does she show that these cases can be found in most Western countries. Nevertheless, they are probably chosen deliberately, as the choice of such different contexts fits a very different systems design logic. What can explain a common outcome in three different

cases? In other words, Beaman seeks to examine how a similar approach to the Christian majority religion and its shift from religion to culture is chosen in three societies that differ with regard to how diversity and religion in the public sphere is approached. Canada, France, and the United States could easily be expected to differ in their management of religion and diversity. It is therefore very relevant to examine why they are so similar in their approach to their religious history and the transformation of Christianity from religion to culture. In the background of this comparative logic it is possible that any similarity across these three contexts also applies to other Western countries.

The Canadian case consists of two related cases similar to the Lautsi case: the presence of crucifixes. In a Catholic hospital, a patient complained about the presence of a crucifix, which resulted in its removal, because the hospital board argued that patients had diverse religious backgrounds and were not at the hospital voluntarily. The other case is about the prayer and presence of a crucifix at meetings in the city hall in the town of Saguenay. The French case deals with the display of nativity scenes in a city hall in a French town. Again, it was a non-religious individual who complained about the public presence of religious symbols, and again, it was originally taken down because of a decision not to violate the state neutrality of the French constitution. Nevertheless, the decision was later

overturned, as it was argued that it was not of a religious nature and did not violate state neutrality. The third case is the use of prayer in town board meetings in the American town of Greece, where an atheist and a Jewish board member complained about the religious nature of the prayer. Again, various courts reached different decisions before the Supreme Court found that it did not violate state neutrality and the establishment clause.

Beaman quotes extensively from the various court meetings and shows the many readings in play when it comes to the numerous ways in which these symbols can be understood (cultural, artistic, festive, religious). She convincingly shows how the symbols are often 'rendered religiously meaningless', only to reappear as culturally meaningful. Defending the symbols has to do with preserving the past, and although she documents both the past preserving narratives and the future forming alternatives that can also be found in the material, she not only documents, but also passes judgement on them. In the conclusion she writes that the 'combination of the regulation and erasure of minority religious symbols from the public sphere with the preservation of a Christian symbol as "heritage" is toxic to democracy' (132). It should probably be noted that this review is written at a time when migration studies (and other disciplines in the humanities) is hotly debated in Denmark for being activist (and that the minister of higher education and

research in France has just accused French universities of being Islamogauchiste). While I recommend Beaman's book to all who find the topic interesting, I also think readers should realize that this is a book that seeks to form the future in a specific way. Some readers will undoubtedly find this book too activist.

To summarize, I would like to highlight the things I found interesting. The first is related to Beaman's notion of past preserving narratives. In several cases she shows that the practices (prayers) and artefacts (crucifixes and nativity scenes) that are defended do not have long histories. The crucifix in the city hall in Canada was placed in the chamber in the 1980s, the nativity scene in the town hall in France was first displayed in 1989, and the prayer in the town of Greece started in 1999. Beaman explicitly states that it is more fruitful to examine the implications of these practices now and for the future than discussing how old they are. This has to do with her main goal of highlighting the problems of past preserving narratives when future forming visions are more necessary to the development of a tolerant, liberal, and equal democracy. Beaman is open to the consequences of the Christian religion, but it is beyond the scope of the book to delve more deeply into this. From a history of religion perspective it is noteworthy that the preservation of the cultural heritage paradoxically entails the erosion of its religious dimension. Even though it is not her ambition, the temporal aspects of

the transformation could be further elaborated in another project, and the book helps formulate several questions – for example, what does a culturalization of time look like? What are the consequences of a culturalization of time where religious time is placed within this world, and transcendent time is abandoned, leaving creation/cosmology and salvation/eschatology behind?

The second point I would like to highlight is the lack of an explanation – or rather, the lack of an explanation of the explanation. Beaman argues that religion transforms itself into culture and heritage as a defensive reaction to two kinds of threat: the Muslim threat and the atheist threat. It would have been interesting to know more about why the defence takes on this particular form: why does religion appeal to culture? Beaman successfully examines how religion is transformed into culture, but I think it would have been relevant to examine why culture needs religion to protect itself as well.

**Henrik Reintoft Christensen**  
Aarhus University

HENRIK REINTOFT CHRISTENSEN is Director of the Centre for Contemporary Religion and Associate Professor at the Department of the Study of Religion at Aarhus University. E-mail: hc@cas.au.dk