Social Construction and Social Critique: Haslanger, Race and the Study of Religion

The notion that religion is a socially constructed category is commonplace in contemporary religious studies. This point is argued historically (Masuzawa, 2005; Dubuisson, 2007b; Nongbri, 2013; Chidester, 2014) and theoretically (Asad, 1993; Fitzgerald, 1997, 2003, 2015; Anidjar, 2008), though the division between historical and theoretical is always blurry. Even in situations where the phrase “social construction” is not employed, the argument that religion is a culturally determined field that emerges during a specific historical period and is subsequently imposed upon or adopted by others is an argument that religion is a socially constructed category. While this work has opened up important new approaches to the study of religion, the precise nature of social construction is often underdeveloped.

Engaging with philosophical work on social construction, particularly work on gender and race, provides an opportunity to continue to develop critiques of the category religion as a social construction.[[1]](#footnote-1) Further, in considering how one should methodologically or politically respond to religion as a social construction, this philosophical work offers contributions to the debate over the analytical usefulness of the category. While Ian Hacking (1999) and Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1991) are frequently invoked in these discussions, more recent literature continues to clarify and expand upon this earlier work. I argue that the work of Sally Haslanger is particularly helpful in drawing together a wide range of work on social construction, including Hacking, Berger, and Luckmann, while also engaging with feminist philosophy and philosophies of race. Her philosophical account of the ontological status of gender and race adds to the important sociological and historical work on these topics by investigating how gender and race become real, but remain open to contestation. Though Haslanger rarely mentions religion, she provides resources for further exploring the consequences of viewing religion as a social construction. In particular, her work allows one to extrapolate the intersections between the social construction of race and religion.[[2]](#footnote-2) While sociological and historical studies demonstrate that race and religion are socially constructed, the question of what to do with these categories depends on their ontological status. Though the process of racialization varies geographically and across history, analyzing the logic of racialization itself helps to identify the ontological status of religion and the role of religion in configuring race.[[3]](#footnote-3)

This article is an initial explication of these intersecting constructions. I begin with a brief summary of social construction as it pertains to religion and highlight the ways that Kevin Schilbrack’s work echoes key themes in Haslanger. Having considered the resonances between their work, I turn to the ways that Haslanger goes beyond Schilbrack, allowing for what I call a “gradual abolitionist” approach to the category religion. After considering some of the objections that have been leveled at social constructionism more broadly and their relevance for religion specifically, I offer a more detailed account of the intersection of the social construction of race and religion. In the final section, I argue that the ongoing ideological work of “religion” means that the concept remains an analytically useful term, for now.

*Arguments for Social Construction: An Overview*

Critiques of religion as a social construction maintain that the contemporary category religion relies on conceptualizations that emerged in the course of European history. More specifically, the term religion is taken from its original Christian meaning and used to identify a discreet feature of newly encountered cultures (Asad, 1993: 37-43). Religion invents that which it purports to describe. Emerging out of philology, early comparative religion was a field composed of linguists, theologians, missionary societies, colonial authorities, and nascent social scientists (Masuzawa, 2005; Chidester, 2014). The transition from theological distinction to an increasingly secularized category does not strip the theological determinations from the category. The result is a purportedly neutral category that continues to implicitly employ norms from its Christian past. This ongoing Christian determination of religion is perhaps most evident in the continued emphasis on belief as the central feature of religion.[[4]](#footnote-4)

A number of scholars of religion argue that this Christian determination of the concept of religion renders it inadequate for analytic work (or at least the analytic work that it purports to do) (Asad, 1993, 2003; Dubuisson, 2007b; Fitzgerald, 1997, 2003; McCutcheon, 1997, 2014).[[5]](#footnote-5) For example, Daniel Dubuisson (2007b: 91) holds that the history of religions is so determined by the methodological and conceptual assumptions of “the West” that it can only have meaning within the context of Western history. The attempt to study religion scientifically has often served to justify existing cultural prejudices through “the most narrowly positivist epistemologies” (p. 91). Adopting a similar position, Timothy Fitzgerald (2003:11) argues that “the theological semantic associations that follow the term ‘religion’ from its monotheistic Christian usage—including the ideologically constructed distinction between religion and the secular, and the attempt to extend these categories crossculturally—generate intractable problems of analysis that can only be resolved by abandoning the category altogether and substituting better alternatives.” Together, Dubuisson and Fitzgerald offer a representative set of arguments against the continued use of religion.

Even those who agree that the category of religion is in some way inadequate differ on how to proceed. Dubuisson and Fitzgerald recommend different alternative frameworks. Dubuisson (2007b: 18) suggests replacing the study of religion with the study of “cosmographic formations,“ a category that encompasses various efforts to “describe the world and tell this or that group of humans, or even all of humanity, how to live in it.” Fitzgerald (2003: 121-122), on the other hand, argues that religion should be replaced with culture, with particular emphasis on ritual, politics, and soteriology.

Deciding how one should respond to these critiques of religion depends on one’s account of the nature of social construction. While the work mentioned above provides a great deal of anthropological, historical, and theoretical research, it does not offer a theory of construction itself. There are frequent references to religion as a socially constructed category and analyses of the ideological work this category does historically and in the contemporary world, but little reflection on the ontological implications of understanding religion as a social construction. Here is where more recent philosophical work is instructive. In order to understand how Haslanger adds to these discussions, it is necessary to first consider existing philosophical accounts of the social construction of religion in greater detail.

*Philosophy and the Social Construction of Religion*

In discussions of the social construction of religion, Schilbrack’s recent intervention (2014) is particularly noteworthy. Not only does he offer a nuanced account of social construction, he does so as part of a broader argument for the relevance of philosophy to the study of religion. He cites Hacking, as does Haslanger, and he identifies the connection between the social construction of religion and the social construction of other categories such as gender or race (2014: 92).

For the purpose of comparison with Haslanger, Schilbrack makes three key points. First, while acknowledging the historical contingency of the present conception of religion, he argues that religion is real (2014: 89). That is, religion is both socially constructed and real, much like sexism, colonialism, imperialism, molecules, and magnetic fields (p. 92).

Second, Schilbrack addresses the difficulties that arise when attempting to define religion. More important than the specifics of his definition is his understanding of the purpose of definitions in general. Religion, as a concept, allows one *to do things*. His definition is “not offered as a discovery of the sole truth about religion, but as a heuristic tool that lets us see religious studies as a field that permits a plurality of interpretive, explanatory, and evaluative projects with their divergent foci and methods” (2014: 116).

Third, and in light of the first two points, he argues against calls to reject “religion.” In doing so, he contrasts the positions of abolitionists and retentionists. Abolitionists argue that the concept of religion has been externally imposed by European colonizers (2014: 92). Even if communities find it appropriate to now identify as religious, the concept of religion had to be invented in order for that particular form of identity to become meaningful in non-European cultures. Retentionists agree that the imposition of a foreign label is problematic, but argue for its continued use. In his defense of this latter position, Schilbrack emphasizes the difference between identifying and interpreting something as “religion.” The scholar of religion is methodologically obligated to identify a practice or idea using local terminology. Following identification, however, the scholar is justified in bringing in other conceptual resources in order to interpret the practice or idea (p. 93). “Religion” interprets a practice or idea, but does not “constitute the cultural pattern” itself (p. 95).[[6]](#footnote-6)

For Schilbrack, arguing for the retention of religion does not mean ignoring the problematic associations with the term arising, at least in part, from the specifics of its historical emergence. For example, the unreflexive deployment of the term religion can lead to the reification of certain cultural forms, disconnecting those aspects of culture from politics and economics (Schilbrack, 2014: 97). The response to these problematic associations is not abolition, but continuing the work of expanding the concept beyond the limitations of its Western origins. Even with this expanded understanding, however, religion is a concept that emerges out of “the West” and for which Christianity is a “prototypical example” (p. 121).

*Haslanger and the Social Construction of Religion*

These three points provide a starting point for a consideration of the connections between discussions of social constructionism within religion and Haslanger’s philosophical work on the social construction of gender and race. Haslanger offers a thorough consideration of social construction, with a particular emphasis on the importance of the nature of social construction for the development of social criticism.[[7]](#footnote-7) After an initial exploration of the resonances between Schilbrack and Haslanger, I will turn to the ways that Haslanger’s emphasis on social critique departs from Schilbrack’s position.

First, like Schilbrack, Haslanger argues that “socially constructed” and “real” are not mutually exclusive. She offers a social constructionism that is compatible with realism while aiming “to unmask the processes that cause—and structures that constitute—unacknowledged parts of our social world” (Haslanger, 2012: 184). She also locates her social constructionism in relation to materialism and naturalism arguing that for “a broad naturalism that takes the world to be a natural world that includes as part of it social and psychological events, processes, relations, and such… to be non-natural (at least within the empirical domain) is to be nonexistent” (p. 213). Invoking the work of materialist feminism, she explains that part of the force of socially constructed categories is precisely that these constructions are material (p. 212).

It is this intersection of the material, real and constructed that is central to understanding Haslanger’s contribution to discussions of the social construction of religion. As she notes in a discussion of gender roles and objectification, constructions are not only mental, but “actualized, embodied, imposed…” (2012: 65). Gender, race and religion are not “in our heads,” but inscribed in legal documents, art and buildings. Gender establishes the layout of department stores, cities are divided by race, and religion influences who is able to enter a country.[[8]](#footnote-8) Social constructions arrange a world that in turn reinforces those constructions: “our classificatory schemes, at least in social contexts, may do more than just map preexisting groups of individuals; rather our attributions have the power to both establish and reinforce groupings which may eventually come to ‘fit’ the classifications” (p. 88).

Haslanger analyses a variety of forms of social construction (and acknowledges that other schematizations are possible). For the purposes of discussing religion, the key difference is between weak and strong pragmatic constructions. Weak pragmatic constructions are partially determined by social factors, but nonetheless capture “real facts and distinctions” (2012: 91). Strong pragmatic constructions are “*in an important sense, illusions projected onto the world; their use might nevertheless track – without accurately representing – a genuine distinction*” (p. 91). Haslanger’s example of a strong pragmatic construction is “coolness.” While describing someone as cool may track particular features (dress, mannerism, taste, etc.), the description does not say anything about those features in themselves. The question, with regards to religion, is whether what is socially constructed is only terminology (which still captures a real distinction) or if religion fails to accurately represent a genuine distinction. Haslanger’s perspective allows the scholar of religion to acknowledge that “religion” tracks real differences (between Islam, Christianity and Buddhism), while arguing that conceiving of these differences as religious misconstrues those cultural forms.

Second, Haslanger discusses the difficulty of defining gender and race. These categories have competing definitions that are often in tension with one another. To make this tension apparent, she distinguishes between manifest and operative concepts. The manifest concept is “more explicit, public, and ‘intuitive’” while the operative is “more implicit, hidden, and yet practiced” (Haslanger, 2012: 270). The manifest and operative concepts are sometimes aligned, but not always. When the two concepts diverge, there is an opportunity to develop a social critique of the concept (p. 375). Such a divergence does not diminish the capacity for people to use the term (p. 430). Arguments that a concept is not used “well” usually mean that someone fails to provide an adequate manifest concept. This absence of a manifest concept does not necessarily impede the functioning of the operative concept.[[9]](#footnote-9) To repeat Schilbrack – “religion” can still do things. Consequently, the fact that one discusses religion without a clear definition (Dubuisson, 2007b: 174) is an indication that there is important critical work to be done, not that the concept must be jettisoned.

Finally, just as Schilbrack resists arguments for abandoning “religion,” Haslanger confronts arguments that call for the rejection of race. While Schilbrack discusses abolitionists, Haslanger (2012: 299) uses the term “eliminativists” to name those who reject race as an analytically useful concept. She contrasts eliminativists with two other positions: naturalists and constructionists. Eliminativists and naturalists agree that if race exists, it is a natural kind. That is, there are different races, constituted by different essential natures. Naturalists, in accordance with this understanding, believe races exist, while eliminativists reject race on the basis of the same understanding. Constructionists agree that if races are natural kinds than they do not exist, but argue that races are social rather than natural kinds (pp. 300-302). This conclusion reiterates the first point – races are both real and socially constructed. Understanding race as a social kind does not mean that race is a settled category. It is to hold that race is a feature of the world and, like many features of the world, it is susceptible to variation and change.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Haslanger (2012: 306) thus acknowledges that there are good reasons for eliminating “race,” but holds that doing so risks losing the ability to name important social phenomena. The question of whether or not to retain socially constructed concepts such as race or religion depends on the nature of the social construction. For Haslanger, social construction is not only a descriptive project, but one that facilitates social critique. Evaluating whether “religion” facilitates social critique requires determining whether or not it is a concept that functions in a manner similar to Haslanger’s understanding of gender and race.

*From Construction to Critique*

Drawing on Haslanger to develop an understanding of the social construction of religion moves beyond the methodological issues addressed by Schilbrack to develop a social critique of “religion.” I summarize the thesis of this social critique as follows: men are to gender what whites are to race what Christianity is to religion.[[11]](#footnote-11) Gender indexes the superiority of men, race indexes the superiority of whiteness, and religion indexes the superiority of Christianity. Thus, religion is a category orientated to the norms of Christianity.

Religion was, from the outset, a comparative term. It is a judgment. While it is etymologically linked to the Roman *religio*, this earlier term is conceptually distinct from its modern Christian usage (Dubuisson, 2007b: 14-15; Nongbri, 2013: 45; Smith, 1998: 269-270). Likewise, though “religious” was employed to mark the difference between those who took monastic vows and other modes of being Christian (Smith, 1998: 270), the term religion takes on a new meaning during the period of European colonial expansion. Christianity makes itself a religion in the process of making religions out of others, while denying or limiting these new religions’ capacity for truth (Dubuisson, 2007b: 25). Indeed, these new religions are even considered windows into Christian Europe’s own primitive past (Chidester, 2014: 11, 85).

In his discussion of the difficulty of positioning Christianity within anthropology of religion, Gil Anidjar (2009: 367-368) argues:

The concept of religion is a polemical concept. Its relation to power is not merely derivative but inherent and dynamic, the product of unequal and conflicting forces at work within and around it. The concept of religion is an essential, asymmetric, and contradictory moment in a series of acts, enactment, and motions that constitute an object – religion – carving it out of the world within which it operates… In its scholarly usages as well as in its popular currency (and perhaps especially there), the concept of religion is *performative*.

That is, the social construction of religion is performed in the invocation of religion. There is no universal or permanent definition of religion, because the category is produced by discursive processes that vary historically and geographically. It is perpetually under construction as its boundaries are negotiated with each use.

Religion was and is a way for Europe to produce its Christian identity just as race is a means of self-production for whiteness. In this sense, white is not merely another race, but that to which race relates as its norm. As Anidjar (2015: 42) asserts of religion,

we can no longer presume that religion is an accurate—and trans-historical—description of Christianity, nor that after having granted the status of religion to a convenient number of “traditions,” Christianity would be merely one religion among others. Precisely because the concept of religion is very much a part of Christian history, part of the spread and rule of Christianity, it should not be privileged as a category of understanding, much less as a descriptive instrument.

Haslanger’s understanding of social construction captures the various processes that occur in the process of constructing religion. In the construction of gender, “woman” reflects masculine ideals projected onto individual women (2012: 93). Similarly, the concept of religion reflects Christian ideals projected onto newly encountered cultural forms. Following the imposition of an ideal, “individual women then internalize the norms appropriate to the ideal and aim to conform their behavior to them” (p. 93). Likewise, newly constructed religions may conform or submit to the concept of religion.[[12]](#footnote-12) Of course, conformity is neither total nor homogenous. Some women refuse to conform to the ideal of “woman” (p. 70) and some “religions” reject that label.

This argument that “religion” is an inherently hierarchical category is the fundamental difference between Schilbrack and my application of Haslanger to debates within the study of religion. Religion is real, as Schilbrack argues, just as race and gender are real for Haslanger. That does not mean these categories *should* be real, though. While Schilbrack discusses “religion” as a heuristic tool, Haslanger’s philosophy offers a more critical view. If Schilbrack argues that these constructed concepts are tools, Haslanger (Haslanger, 2012: 223-224) asks about the work that is being done with these tools. As she explains, these concepts are one way in which social meaning is located in difference, whether that difference is socially caused, socially constituted, or “natural” (pp. 185-191).[[13]](#footnote-13) Gender, race, and religion all operate strategically, investing differences with social meaning. Schilbrack argues that “religion” is suitable for purposes of interpretation, if not for identification. Using Haslanger, it becomes imperative to ask what factors shape that interpretation and what criteria are used to select certain practices or ideas as appropriate for interpretation.

This same point can be made using the distinction between weak/strong pragmatic construction outlined above. Schilbrack’s position that religion is a tool for interpreting a pre-existing cultural practice is an example of weak pragmatic construction. The terminology or conceptual schemas used to interpret that practice are shaped by social factors, but they still capture real facts and distinctions. Following Dubuisson and Fitzgerald, I am arguing that religion is a strong pragmatic construction. It may track real differences, but by grouping those differences together under the term “religion,” those practices are distorted in a manner that privileges a Christian perspective. To designate something as a religion is more interpellation than interpretation. As this imposed ideal is internalized and adopted as a norm by those traditions that have become religions, the concept takes on the aura of a natural distinction. Religion becomes real, but that does not mean that it is necessary or natural.

For Haslanger, the genealogical work that leads to social constructionist conclusions requires adopting a normative position. Haslanger is working towards a race-less and gender-less society. Working towards these goals does not mean that she wants to rid the world of color and sex; her goal is to undo the social meanings of color and sex (2012: 252). Her position is therefore different than the others considered thus far. Translating Haslanger into Schilbrack’s typology, I describe her work, applied to religion, as a “gradual abolitionism.” Using Haslanger in this way, alongside Dubuisson and Fitzgerald, I argue that religion is an oppressive category.[[14]](#footnote-14) It is ideological, real and open to contestation. Thus, while there are clear resonances between the work of Schilbrack and Haslanger, applying the latter’s work on social construction to religion means adopting a different goal than the former.

*Objections to Social Construction*

In moving beyond Schilbrack to this more critical position, it is helpful to work through some of the criticisms lodged against Haslanger’s development of social constructionism. I track her response to arguments for eliminating the language of gender or race in order to then apply her reasoning to the topic of religion.

Of the critiques Haslanger (2012: 252) considers, the most intuitive is that while gender and race are categories with histories of oppression, they still might be redeemed. It is not that vocabularies of gender or race are problematic, but that they have been misused. Haslanger’s response amounts to “it’s a feature not a bug.” It is not that race is a category used to describe people, sometimes for the purpose of establishing racial hierarchies, but that race is in and of itself a hierarchical concept. Races are constituted by differences that are taken to be socially significant. The differences selected establish a hierarchal relationship between the superior normative position and the racialized group (pp. 185-186). In terms of race, the superior normative position takes the form of “white” as a raceless identity (p. 284). Races are defined in relation to this norm. Put another way, it is a strong rather than weak pragmatic construction.

Dubuisson, Fitzgerald and Anidjar all echo this sentiment with regard to religion. Religion never operates purely descriptively or in the service of innocent interpretation; it is a comparative judgment (Dubuisson, 2007b: 25). “Religion is not only the central concept of Western civilization, it *is* the West itself in the process of thinking the world dominated by it, by its categories of thought” (p. 93). The religions the West “discovers” in its colonial encounters are “rough drafts, archaic or primitive forms” (p. 115) of Western religion. These religions serve to locate “new” cultures in the process of development culminating in the enlightened, modern societies of Europe. The primitive status of these other religions then legitimates the subordination of non-Western cultures (Fitzgerald, 2003: 20). The role of religion in the differentiation of the Western and non-Western is at the heart of Anidjar’s claim that religion is a polemical concept. The discursive function of the category, regardless of individual intentions, is the formation and preservation of hierarchies. As with race, the study of religion is the study of the production of social difference.

Similar to these calls to redeem gender or racial categories is the suggestion that these categories could be employed to arrive at a position of neutrality. For Haslanger (2012:47) a truly gender-neutral society is a genderless society.

Insofar as allegedly gender-free accounts of knowledge, morality, and personhood offer ideals defined by their contrast with femininity, patriarchy turns one of its neatest tricks. The reification of the masculine ideals as human ideals ensure that one’s efforts to be feminine will consistently undermine one’s effort to realize the ideal for persons (and similarly the ideals for morality and knowledge). Women face an impossible choice that carries censure either way: be a good person but fail as a woman or be a good woman and fail as a person.

Likewise, it is not possible to establish equality of “religion” because the category itself emerged and continues to function for the purposes of maintaining hierarchies. Gender-free or gender-neutral knowledge of masculine norms is not feminist. It merely reinscribes masculine norms while eliminating overt patriarchal practices. Similarly, secularism claims a neutral position with regard to religion, but continues to impose the norms of Christianity.[[15]](#footnote-15) Applying Haslanger’s (2012: 187) reasoning, the use of the concept religion to draw the distinction between one set of cultural practices and another remains socially motivated.

*The Intersecting Constructions of Race and Religion*

Beyond these general objections to Haslanger’s philosophy there is a particular issue with applying her work on gender and race to the category religion. The applicability of her work to religion depends on religion functioning analogously to gender or race. It is not clear, however, that they are analogous. If nothing else, it would seem that religion does not have the same purported connection to biology as either gender or race. In this section, I will focus on the relationship between race and religion in order to explain the complex relationship between these categories. I argue that these two social constructions are not merely analogous, but deeply entwined. Understanding how the social construction of race relates to the social construction of religion, and the ongoing ways in which religion is racialized, will clarify this point. As the racialization of religion is currently most apparent with regards to Islam and the Muslim community, this context will provide concrete examples of social construction.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Haslanger (2012: 237-238) argues that race connects appearance to geography and derives conclusions about the characteristics of a group of people based on that connection. While physical appearance is clearly important to the discussion of race, it is not appearance as such that is constitutive of race. Appearance serves as a means of differentiating groups of people and race is the social significance ascribed to those differences (p. 186). That does not mean that these physical differences themselves are socially constituted, only that their selection as socially significant is socially motivated (p. 187). As Haslanger (p. 236) summarizes, “race is the social meaning of the geographically marked body, familiar markers being skin color, hair type, eye shape, physique.” The role of geography is key: “Blacks, Whites, Asians, Native Americans, are currently racialized in the U.S. insofar as these are all groups defined in terms of physical features associated with places of origin, and insofar as membership in the group functions socially as a basis for evaluation” (p. 238). Appearance indicates origin and an essentialized notion of that origin is seen to override other aspects of identity (such as nationality).

As Haslanger herself indicates, race is not *just* about these bodily features. She illustrates this point with a discussion of Jews:

… at certain times and places, Jews have been racialized. The specifics of the racialization process vary, but on one scenario Jews are imagined to have some physical feature inherited from populations originating in what is now the Middle East. In some cases, however, it is recognized that there is no reliably observable physical feature that distinguishes Jews from non-Jews, so other devices have been introduced to make sure that their race is identifiable in casual encounters, for example, yellow stars. So even if geneticists can find ways of dividing humans into groups based on genetic features that are assumed to be inherited from populations originating in a particular region, as I see it, those groups are racialized in a context only if in that context it is thought that there are observable markers, either anatomical or artificial, that – at least in paradigm cases – distinguish members of the group. Such observable marking is important to the process of racialization, for a key factor in racializing a group is the invocation of social norms that differentiate “appropriate” behavior towards the members of the group (normally) before any interaction is possible (2012: 258).

Haslanger is here describing the extension of race beyond its standard phenotypical conception. This broader notion of race is often referred to as cultural racism (see Goldberg, 1993: 70-73, for a brief introduction). While this understanding continues to be debated, Saher Selod and David Embrick argue that the primary objections to this understanding of racism tend to rely upon outdated biological understandings of race (2013: 648).[[17]](#footnote-17) However, rejecting this biological understanding of race and expanding race beyond skin color does not mean abandoning the connection between bodies and geography. “Though differences clearly exist in how ‘race’ is understood in each case – whether as biological inheritance or as cultural genealogy and belonging – it is important to note that bodily difference plays a role in both forms of racism… This racism naturalises cultural difference to visible features of the body, including clothing” (Al-Saji, 2010: 889).

Haslanger’s example of the racialization of Jewish identity has clear parallels to the contemporary treatment of Muslims. While discussing the treatment of Muslims in terms of racism is controversial, it is clear that there are artificial observable markers, as well as some anatomical features, which are used to distinguish Muslims from other groups. Consulting the pages of *Charlie Hebdo*, for example, reveals a number of stereotypical “Muslim” features. Yet, critiques of anti-Muslim sentiment as racist are frequently dismissed. To take one highly publicized example, Richard Dawkins (2013) has responded to charges of racism by arguing that “Islam is not a race.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Dawkins is correct – Islam is not a race. That position, however, is compatible with “Muslim” being a racialized identity.[[19]](#footnote-19) Further Dawkins ignores that while Islam is not a race, it also was not always a religion (Anidjar, 2007: 57-58). A cultural practice is not born a religion—it becomes one, just as heresies become religions, religions become nations or races, and people are moved from one race to another.

One can find the fluid boundaries within and between racial and religious identities in both historical and contemporary events. In early modern Spanish writings on the threat of Islam, for example, there are instances in which religion and race are conflated. “Moor” was both an ethnic and religious category (Soyer, 2013: 403). In the period of European expansion, race and religion mix with other categories including national identities (for example, see Wheeler, 2000). The resulting divisions of the non-Christian world into the Christian, non-Christian, and godless were mixed with biological determinism and served to justify enslavement and elimination (Selod and Embrick, 2013: 646).[[20]](#footnote-20) More recently, Moustafa Bayoumi (2006: 269), in his analysis of US court cases between 1909 and 1944, shows how religion was used to help determine race when evaluating applications for permanent residency. In these cases, Arabs were not white because of the dominance of Islam in Arab countries. On the other hand, Armenians eventually became white based on Christianity (p. 282). In cases where physical appearance is insufficient for determining racial classifications, cultural markers like religion are racialized in order to determine who belongs and who is excluded (Rana, 2007: 154).

Selod (2015) complements Bayoumi’s work in her work analyzing the experiences of American Muslims before and after 9/11. In the United States, the census currently classifies people of Arab and South Asian descent as white.[[21]](#footnote-21) Selod’s (p. 80) work shows the variety of ways in which those Arab and South Asian Americans who can pass as white are denied that whiteness upon the discovery of their Muslim identity. Juliette Galonnier shows this same process in reverse. Her study of white French and US converts to Islam reveals their surprise at the racial animus they encounter, despite the fact that some converts view their conversion as a rejection of whiteness (2015: 577). Galonnier (p. 576) tells the story of a white woman wearing a headscarf being called a “sand nigger.” This kind of slur potently captures the process of racialization. Religion, especially in the particularly racialized forms of Judaism and Islam, continues to circulate notions of race in both covert and overt forms (Anidjar, 2007: 20).

Even for those willing to accept an expanded sense of “race” that includes an appreciation of the racialization of culture, there is still the question of conversion. At first glance, it seems that one difference between whiteness or blackness and one’s identity as Muslim is that one can convert to Islam while one cannot convert to whiteness or blackness (Bayoumi 2014: 75). However, the ability to truly convert remains open to challenge. Take the example of Jews and Muslims in medieval Spain. While they could convert to Christianity, that conversion was viewed with persistent suspicion (Modood, 2005: 9-10; Anidjar, 2014: 58-78). These converts exemplify the complex interplay between biology, religious identity, and race, with biology contributing to the racialization of religion through discourse about blood (Anidjar, 2014: 41). Jews and Muslims were unable to surpass the biological determinations of their raced religious identities. Conversion may not be possible for the racialized religious other, leaving expulsion or elimination the preferable option (Bayoumi, 2014: 276; Soyer 2013).

Considering more recent situations, Mayanthi Fernando argues that this racialization continues even in instances of “real” conversion. Discussing Muslim French women who have converted to *läicité*, she observes that in the praising of these women, it is as if they become praiseworthy because overcoming their Muslim identity is uniquely challenging (2014: 217).[[22]](#footnote-22) Even then, much like the *moriscos* in early modern Spain, conversion is accompanied by a qualification. These converts are not secular, but Secular Muslims (p. 219).[[23]](#footnote-23)

Finally, the problem of conversion assumes the voluntary adoption of religious identity. This point is not raised consistently in discussions of race and religion, but is primarily leveled at Muslim complaints of racism. In the UK, legal protections of Sikhs and Jews have utilized racial categories, even while the same protections have been denied to Muslims (Meer, 2008: 69-70). There is thus inconsistency in the understanding of the connections between race and religion. Further, as Nasar Meer and Tariq Modood (2009: 345) argue in their analysis of the resistance to using racial discrimination laws to protect Muslims, “people do not choose to be or not to be born into a Muslim family. Similarly, no one chooses to be born into a society in which to look like a Muslim or to be a Muslim creates suspicion, hostility or failure to get the job they applied for.” An individual has little say in her own racialization. In summary, some people sometimes have the ability to decide whether to adopt “Muslim” as a religious identity (2008: 67). Other people, particularly since 9/11 and 7/7, are racialized as Muslim, irrespective of their religious beliefs.

While this engagement with historical, sociological and anthropological work on race and Islam may seem out of place in a philosophical discussion of social construction, these examples present opportunities to understand the nature of social construction as it actually functions. As Haslanger (2012: 346) points out, sociology is philosophically significant. This analysis of the construction of race and religion with relation to Islam shows how the operative concept of race in North American and European discourse reveals a wider sphere of racialization than that allowed by a manifest concept limited to a binary, biological racism. It is not that the Enlightenment’s scientific method modernized cultural concepts of race, making race a biological category, and now faces the reintroduction of culture. Rather, race emerged as part of a logic that finds social meaning in a variety of differences, including both the biological and the cultural. The Enlightenment emphasized biological aspects of this concept of race, though the influence of pseudoscientific theories of racial difference persists. All the while, race continues to find social meaning in a set of differences, including cultural features taken to be biological.

The issues presented by the intersection of religion and race are contentious and complex. The material presented in this section only begins to touch on this intersection, but hopefully this brief summary is sufficient to show the fluidity of these categories. Race has played a role in the construction of religion, while religion has also played a role in the construction of race. Understanding the function of either in contemporary society requires at least some engagement with the other. The history of race and the history of religion are closely related. Not only does this provide support for applying Haslanger’s approach to religion, but it also demonstrates the need for the critique of “religion” to be part of a larger project of social critique.

*Debating the Fate of “Religion”*

What, then, is to be done with religion? Dubuisson and Fitzgerald both argue that exposing religion as socially constructed means that the category religion should be abandoned. They argue that the category is not only inconsistent and flawed, but plays a problematic role in the history of the “West” and its relationship to the rest of the world. This response is not new; attempts to reject the notion of religion go back to the latter part of the nineteenth century (Chidester, 2014: 12-13). The most strident calls to abandon “religion” are rooted in the term’s generation from, and ongoing role in, certain ideological perspectives. Fitzgerald puts forward a particularly strong version of this argument. For him, religion is “too deeply embedded in a legitimation process within western societies, in the dominant relation of those societies with non-western societies, or with ethnic minorities living within western societies” to be analytically useful (2003: 19). Further, religion “is at the heart of modern western capitalist ideology… playing a crucial role in the construction of the secular,” individualizing and interiorizing values and meaning (p. 20). The preceding sections have laid out a case for regarding “religion” as ideologically problematic as Dubuisson and Fitzgerald claim. Does this require the abandonment of “religion”?

Continuing to draw on Haslanger’s treatment of race, I argue that abolishing the term religion would not only fail to address the complex issues around the concept, but would also impede one’s ability to articulate the means by which hierarchies continue to be established and maintained. Here, there is a parallel between her argument for preserving race and Chidester’s (2014: 312) discussion of religion. Haslanger’s philosophical framework supports his position, but also goes further by orienting analytical work towards the normative end of the gradual abolition of the concept of religion. Religion should be preserved, but only for now. The abolition of religion is not an easy or short project. Just because a category is social constructed does not mean that it is not real. This point holds even when the category is ideological (Schilbrack, 2014: 91-92). Without thinking of “religion” as settled or stable, I argue that it is crucial to consider that problematic terminology can mark a temporary “space for the collective negotiations of our social identities” (Haslanger, 2012: 242). This position does not argue for the rehabilitation of such terminology, only that it is key to the task of deconstructing not only theoretical frameworks, but also material relations (p. 252). The goal is not a terminological shift, but to critique the concept of religion in order to change material relations so that the concept of religion is no longer useful.

Put another way, objecting to the ideological function of religion is a reason to continue to use the category rather than a motivation for its abandonment. Haslanger offers an understanding of ideology rooted in the social construction described in the sections above. She defines ideology, non-pejoratively, as “the background cognitive and affective frame that gives actions and reactions meaning within a social system and contributes to its survival” (2012: 447). The affective component is key. Discussions of ideology can make it appear as if ideology is a matter of erroneously endorsing the wrong position or idea. Yet, as Haslanger (p. 448) argues, “In addition to beliefs, the ideology that undergirds social practices must include more primitive dispositions, habits, and a broader range of attitudes than just belief.” Ideologies are constructed, but that does not diminish their reality. Religion, like gender and race, is embedded in the framework and norms of law, politics, and culture. That embeddedness is intrinsic to its ideological function.

If the category “religion” is ideological, then, it is all the more reason to continue to use the framework of religion, to render visible what the term religion obscures. Mere terminological changes will be insufficient, given the deeply entrenched nature of “hegemonic ideology” (2012: 449). Anidjar provides a reminder that academics sometimes overestimate the significance of such linguistic changes. “There are numerous reasons for the persistence of names, but I would venture that among the *least* important are the so-called choices made by scholars and intellectuals” in contrast to “the by now very disciplined, sedimented, and public need to renew and maintain identifications and affiliations, to preserve existing structures by preventing confusion” (Anidjar, 2007: 17). Dubuisson (2007b: 19) makes a similar point, noting that people “literally incorporate” these notions to the point where “to some degree, they become their true mind and life.”

Not only does Haslanger’s understanding of ideology support the temporary preservation of “religion,” it is also important to note that it plays a role in facilitating critique. While the category may have been a colonial imposition, that was only one moment in a larger process. Chidester (2014: 4) describes a triple mediation that occurs in early comparative religion, providing examples of how discourse on religion can subvert the narratives that the concept religion is intended to support (for example, his discussion of Silas Modiri Molema, 2014: 240-255). As Haslanger (2012: 264) argues in relation to gender and race, members of these groups are not passive and these constructions can be sources of empowerment.[[24]](#footnote-24) Just as race transcends racism, despite the role of racism in determining contemporary understandings of race (Omi and Winant, 2015: 128), religion is not wholly determined by its imperial origins. These categories hold resources for their own dismantling. While Fitzgerald (2003: 5, 106) acknowledges that religion should continue to be studied as an ideological category, his position does not allow for this more positive function.

In considering the fate of religion as a socially constructed category, Haslanger’s work pushes the scholar of religion to question concepts, asking, “What cognitive or practical task do they (or should they) enable us to accomplish?” (2012: 224). What work does the concept of religion do? If religion aims to track a set of cultural practices and beliefs that are unified by more than the fact that they have historically been grouped together, then there is a good case that the concept fails. If one understands religion as a category whose various manifest concepts claim to track these cultural practices and beliefs, while its operative concept continues to play a role in maintaining hierarchies, then it is not clear that this disjunction is reason to abandon the category. Indeed, “religion” names, in addition to many other things, this disjunction. This point echoes Chidester’s (2014: 312) argument that

we cannot simply abandon the terms *religion* and *religions* because we are stuck with them as a result of colonial, imperial, and global legacy… they must be not objects but occasions for analysis, providing openings in a field of possibilities for exploring powerful classifications and orientations, cognitive capacities and constraints, and cultural repertoires of myth and fiction, ritual and magic, humanity and divinity.

Returning to Haslanger, just as the concept of race is useful for recognizing racialized groups (2012: 256), so too is the concept of religion helpful for understanding the ways in which society is divided, classified, and ordered. Without the category race, it is difficult to understand contemporary US politics, despite the fact that race is a social construction (p. 2012: 198). Arguing that race is a social construct does not invalidate Black Lives Matter. Likewise, it is difficult to understand global politics without making use of the category of religion. If some US and European leaders are demanding that a particular group of people be treated differently than others based on a faulty category, we cannot simply dispense with that category. Rather than arguing that “one cannot speak analytically of a form of knowledge with the vocabulary of that knowledge” (Dubuisson, 2007b: 55), Haslanger’s philosophy shows that it is not possible analyze of forms of oppression without speaking of the knowledge and vocabularies that enable that oppression. Religion may be socially constructed and ideologically deployed, but that does not mean that it cannot play a role in the analysis of the French banning of the veil or Donald Trump’s call to ban Muslim immigration. Opposition to these policies may be formulated in terms of religion (see for example the organizations discussed in Fernando, 2014) while still highlighting the problematic nature of the concept.

Transposing Haslanger’s understanding of race to religion allows us to see how religion is real without accepting it as an innate, universal feature of humanity. As seen in the examples provided, while religion is a contested category and individuals and communities negotiate notions of religion, this contestation occurs in social spaces shaped by manifest and operative concepts of religion. Not only does religion function in a manner analogous to race, the two constructions intersect historically and in contemporary discourse. Religion plays a role in shaping attitudes about race and is itself a racialized category. In exploring the intersection of these social constructions, as well as others, it is possible to understand the oppressive nature of contemporary reality and how that reality might be resisted and changed.

*Conclusion*

In this article, I have advocated Haslanger’s work as a framework for a philosophical engagement with current anthropological, sociological, and historical work on religion as a socially constructed category. Her philosophy, I have argued, justifies a strong reading of the political implications of the construction of religion. The concept of religion functions to establish a hierarchy of cultural forms according to the norms of Christianity. Unlike some of the work reacting to this strong reading, however, I have argued against dismissing the term religion. Alternatives either replicate the problems of “religion” or risk losing the useful aspects of “religion” for thinking about marginalization and oppression. In the course of this argument, I have drawn parallels to Haslanger’s conclusions about race and gender: just as the elimination of race is the elimination of the social meaning of color, the gradual abolition of “religion” undoes the hierarchization accomplished by the term religion. Religious studies is therefore important for the same reason as gender studies and critical race theory.

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1. Throughout this essay, I am exclusively concerned with the category of religion, not those sets of cultural practices or beliefs currently understood as religion. Where this might be unclear, I have put religion in scare quotes. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In what follows, I note the parallels between the social construction of gender and race, on the one hand, and religion, on the other. There is more emphasis on race for two reasons. First, as Haslanger (2012: 255) points out, the connection between biology and social construction is different when it comes to gender and race, even though they operate according to the same fundamental logic of social construction. Haslanger (p. 185) summarizes this logic as “gender is the social meaning of sex, race is the social meaning of color.” Second, as will become clear in a later section, the social construction of race and religion overlap in important ways. Thus while there are occasional mentions of the parallels between gender and religion, the main focus will be on race and religion. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Given the variations in understanding both race and religion, this essay will limit itself to the function of these categories in European and North American contexts. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For a critical summary of this problematic emphasis as well as the construction of an alternative approach see Vásquez (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For a brief overview of these discussions see Dubuisson (2007a). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Brent Nongbri makes a similar point in terms of description and redescription, while also noting some of the issues presented by employing this distinction (2013: 21-22). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. While the present discussion does not allow for a more thorough introduction to Haslanger’s work, her essays “Ontology and Social Construction” and “Gender and Race: (What) are They? (What) Do We Want Them to Be?” lay out the core elements of her philosophical project. They are reprinted as chapters 2 and 7 respectively in Haslanger (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For more on this point see the section on the “Intersecting Constructions of Race and Gender” below. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This ability to use concepts without being able to articulate a definition is particularly important in light of Jennifer Saul’s (2007) critique of Haslanger’s work. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In this regard, Haslanger’s argument has much in common with Omi and Winant’s influential account of racial formation which she points to as an important resource for developing her understanding of the social construction of race (2015: 308n7). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. There is much debate over the capitalization of “white” and “black.” While there is important reasoning behind the different positions, I have opted to capitalize neither for the sake of consistency. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Fitzgerald explores this process in Japan, where the concept is both imposed and adopted for a variety of political motivations (both domestic and international) (2013: 164ff.). Likewise, Chidester shows the multifaceted construction of religion in South Africa, in which religion is imposed, adopted and subverted (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For Haslanger, “socially caused” and “socially constituted” are two different modes of being socially constructed (2012: 190-191). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Claiming that religion, as an index of the superiority of Christianity, is oppressive, is not to imply that individual Christians or all those who use “religion” are intentional oppressors. It is possible to talk about oppressive structures without being able to locate responsible agents (Haslanger, 2012: 317). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This imposition is particularly clear in legal decisions, with the 2011 Lautsi v. Italy decision in the European Court of Human Rights serving as a particularly stark example (Mahmood, 2016: 167-174). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Racialization varies considerably between different cultural contexts. In the following discussion, I highlight a variety of instances of the racialization of Muslims in the US, UK, and France. There are important differences between the racialization of Muslims in each of these countries and I use the examples to show different ways that racialization occurs rather than indicating a shared experience. The goal is to demonstrate, in a variety of contexts, how religion and race are both ideological constructions *and* real. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Charles Mills (2013) discusses similar lines of critique in relation to Haslanger’s book. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Dawkins (2013) argues that while sociologists may offer their own definitions of race, he prefers to work with the “dictionary definition.” [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The same logic is used to object to the term Islamophobia. Take the example of Dawkins’ fellow New Atheist Sam Harris (2013), who dismisses the possibility of the phenomenon. Interestingly, on this point there is some agreement from the opposite side of the political spectrum. Nasar Meer (2008) argues that the term concentrates on Islam as an abstraction rather than the bodies of Muslim people who suffer the discrimination enabled by the racialization of their identity. For Meer, however, it is a problem of inaccurate terminology naming a real issue, whereas Harris thinks the issue itself is a spurious invention. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. I should note, however, that the starting point of modern theories of race is a topic of much debate. While I am arguing for continuity between medieval and contemporary understandings, others maintain that the modern concept of race begins with European colonization of the Americas and is a departure from earlier theological understandings (Omi and Winant, 2015: 113; see Mills, 2013: 11-12 for more on this debate). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. For more on the problems of racial classifications in the US census see Omi and Winant (2015: 121-123). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Fernando (2014:13) uses the term Muslim French to refer to “women and men committed to practicing Islam as French citizens and to practicing French citizenship as pious Muslims.” This formulation undoes the prioritizing of religion implicit in “French Muslims.” [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. While it may seem counterintuitive to speak of secularization as a process of conversion, secularism is not the absence of religion, but an alternative configuration of the relationship between religion, society, and politics. On this point, see Asad (2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Haslanger points out that while identifying with gender or race can be empowering, even then, the constructions remain problematic, lending itself to processes of policing authentic identity that may entail other forms of hierarchy (2012: 265). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)