Defenders of the culture war idea contend that despite the moderation embraced by the American population, the “deep culture” that frames our understanding of social reality is divided into orthodox and progressive camps. This public culture, enunciated by elites, must be studied separately from public opinion. Examination of this culture will reveal that it does not allow for anything other than the binary choice: one either believes in absolute morality, or one does not.

After analyzing two decades of public discussion of culture war issues, I do not find such clarity. These complex debates reveal numerous convergences across the culture war divide and multiple internal divisions. They also manifest a distinctly American cast, since all participants subscribe to the enduring cultural ideas that frame the specific issues under dispute.

While the language of culture wars emerged only in the late twentieth century, cultural politics are decidedly not new in the United States. Battles about religion and morality and whether the individual or the community is primary have been present virtually from the outset. Nor are such cultural dilemmas likely to be resolved, since they are constantly revisited as new situations arise.

Economic, technological, and demographic changes constantly bring
new challenges to cultural understandings. To take but one example, before
the increase in both secular and non-Christian populations, the “one cul-
ture” of American pluralism was essentially Christian (or “Judeo-Chris-
tian”) and European. Demographic and religious changes have thus
brought renewed political struggles about both the role of religion and the
nature of American pluralism.

But a lack of clarity prevails about the very nature of recent changes.
Despite the enduring strength of religious belief in the United States, many
believers now neither participate in religious practice nor have knowledge
about the beliefs to which they subscribe. Does this indicate a weakening
of religion or the continuation of remarkably strong adherence to nonsec-
ular beliefs? Likewise, are ethnic and racial subcultures stronger or weaker
than they have previously been? On the one hand, these subcultures so
central to American cultural pluralism have weakened over time. On the
other hand, they have gained new importance as many individuals now
seek attachment to such groups. Has individualism become stronger as
Americans withdraw their trust and participation from groups and institu-
tions, as alleged by those who see a decrease in social capital? Or has indi-
vidualism become more muted as Americans increasingly come to define
their very selves in terms of the groups and subcultures to which they
choose to belong? In light of our greater self-consciousness about matters
cultural, have cultural elites gained or lost power?

There is no evidence of change in either the moralism or the moder-
tion of the population. Yet moderation may have become at once more
difficult and seemingly more necessary in the face of media that operate
twenty-four hours per day and tend toward hyperbole and the magnifica-
tion of small differences.

The culture wars are fueled by images—of “tenured radicals” in acad-
eme, of “secular humanists” and “Christian fundamentalists,” of the sway
of “modernity” or “postmodernity” and the vanquishing of the “tradi-
tional.” Awareness of the role of such symbols leads interest groups and
scholars alike to try to disentangle “reality” from imagery. Yet the reality of
even such concepts as American exceptionalism remains a matter of dis-
pute. Is the United States exceptional because of its treasured individualism
and voluntarism or because of its enduring adherence to traditional moral-
ity? Does its exceptionalism reside in its minimal class-consciousness or its
higher-than-usual devotion to religion?
If the culture wars are more muted now than when they were first named in the early 1990s, it may be because of some convergence in attitudes about sexual behavior and family life, feminism and gay rights, and even perhaps abortion. The polarization that culture war theorists imagine has not developed. Though unanimity on cultural issues is unlikely ever to occur, compromises appear to be possible and are now being discussed. Combining American morality and pragmatism is seen as a way of ending the culture wars (Saletan 2009). Federal protection of same-sex marriage could be combined with exemptions for religious groups, for example (Blankenhornd and Rauch 2009).

But whatever the progress of the culture wars, neither the culture that is its subject nor the very idea of culture is likely to remain constant. Conceptions of culture are likely to continue to change even as new battles for hegemony emerge.