

Conflicts of identity in the decolonization of Europe?

Conference "Religious Dimensions of War and the Moral Responsibility of Religions

Markus Vogt, LMU, February 12/13, 2025

In an essay from 1993 and then in 1996 in the monograph "*The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*"¹, the American political scientist Samuel Huntington predicted that the **wars of the 21st century** would be **identity conflicts**. It is no longer the ideological opposition between communism and capitalism or the "end of history"², but conflicts over fault lines between different cultural areas that are the central starting point for the multipolar reorganization of the world.

Huntington's thesis contains important clues for the understanding of global conflicts in the 21st century. At the same time, they are based on some misconceptions which - and this is my thesis - do not make them ineffective. They describe a **suggestive interpretation of conflicts** that creates an explosive momentum of its own. It is precisely the mixture of clairvoyant and false elements that makes them so ethically and politically explosive:

- Huntington's thesis is **clairvoyant** insofar as the **search for cultural identity and demarcation does** appear to be a **decisive factor in an increasingly borderless world**.³ Both the "rage of the Arab world"⁴ and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine were **declared** to be an existential **defensive struggle against the cultural dominance of "the West"**. The enemy image of "Western imperialism" creates alliances and without them Russia would be geopolitically isolated. The signs of this **identitarian pattern of interpretation**, which were already recognizable in the 1990s, were underestimated because it seemed neither economically nor politically rational and the maxim of "change through trade", which sought to interweave cultures through mutual economic interests, was pursued.
- The theses in relation to Russia are misleading in that the main factor is not a cultural conflict, but that **Putin feels threatened by a free and economically prosperous Ukraine**, because the spark of the democratic desire for freedom could then easily jump over to Russia - according to Herfried Münkler.⁵ In essence, it is a **conflict of the system of rule**. The cultural conflict is put forward and reinterpreted as a conflict of identity through the narrative of the "Russian world" (russkij mir). Huntington

¹ Samuel P. Huntington: *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York 1996.

² Francis Fukuyama: *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York 1992.

³ cf. Francis Fukuyama: *Identity. The Demand of Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*, New York 2018.

⁴ Bernard Lewis: *Die Wut der arabischen Welt. Warum der jahrhundertelange Konflikt zwischen dem Islam und dem Westen weiter eskaliert*, Frankfurt am Main 2003.

⁵ cf. Herfried Münkler: *World in Turmoil. The Order of Powers in the 21st Century*, Berlin 2024, 88-93.

already mixes religious, cultural, national, political, and economic factors in an unclear manner. He overlooks the fact that cultures do not necessarily fight against each other, but (also in Ukraine) often flourish precisely in the encounter with the foreign. It presupposes an **ahistorical-essentialist concept of civilization and religion**.⁶

It is fatal **that the narrative of identity conflicts** and thus also that of the Russian world, whose cultural values need to be defended against the dominance of the imperial West, is by no means unsuccessful. It has long since become a **decisive factor for the acceptance of the Russian position**, both within the state and among quite a few states worldwide.

The factor of religion - which is the main focus of our conference - also plays a central role here: **religion is instrumentalized for national identity constructions**.⁷ For Patriarch Cyril, the war against Ukraine is a **holy war in defense of Orthodox values and ways of life** against the supposedly decadent and imperial West.⁸ He legitimizes the war as a "metaphysical struggle". Without this religious background, the narrative of defending the Russian world would not work. It is difficult to decide whether President Putin is merely instrumentalizing this religious narrative or whether he believes in it himself. Presumably the two are not mutually exclusive and a **historical-religious sense of mission** is becoming increasingly entrenched in him⁹. **Tangible power interests are reinterpreted as a religious-cultural conflict, thereby legitimized, believed and strategically aligned**. The targeted destruction of churches and museums in Ukraine is intended to eradicate their religious and cultural identity.¹⁰ **It is denied the right to its own identity**.

On Remembrance Day for the Victims of National Socialism on January 29, 2025, Roman **Schwarzman from Odessa** said in the German Bundestag: "Back then Hitler wanted to kill me because I'm Jewish, today Putin wants to kill me because I'm Ukrainian. He wants to destroy us as a nation." The commemoration seems disturbingly topical today. **It was and is about erasing an identity**. The conflict in the Middle East is also so irreconcilable because

6 cf. Martin Riesebrodt: Die Rückkehr der Religionen. Fundamentalismus und der „Kampf der Kulturen“, Munich 2001, 18.

7 cf. Markus Vogt: Nationalistische, religiöse und moralische Identitätskonstruktionen als Legitimation im Ukrainekrieg, in: MThZ 73 (2022), 198-207; English: The Dangerous Construction of National, Religious and Moral Identities in The Ukrainian War, in: Proceedings of the European Academy of Sciences & Arts 1 (2022), 15-20; <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7185003>.

8 This was declared by the 25th World Council of the Russian People. The World Council of Churches did not accept this formulation; see WCC: Declaration of the World Council of the Russian People, which describes the Ukraine conflict as a "holy war", "incompatible", 18.04.2024: <https://www.oikoumene.org/de/news/wcc-cannot-reconcile-world-russian-peoples-council-decree-describing-ukraine-conflict-as-holy-war>.

9 cf. Martin Schulze-Wessel: Im Krieg gegen die Zivilisation des Westens, in: forschung. Das Magazin der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft 4/2024, 24-29.

10 cf. Brytsyn, Mykhailo/Vasin, Maksym: Faith Under Russian Terror: Analysis of the Religious Situation in Ukraine, Kyiv 2025; <https://www.osvnews.com/report-russia-weaponizes-orthodoxy-to-persecute-kill-christians-in-ukraine/>.

Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran are committed to the goal of eradicating Israel's existence, while the current government policy under Netanyahu, under the strong influence of Orthodox Jews, does not recognize Palestine's right to exist and its identity.¹¹

Identity conflicts are usually underpinned by religion. However, religions are usually not the primary cause of war and violence, but **a factor of escalation**: They are secondary to conflicts of power and interest, serving to reinterpret them as conflicts of identity and thus subjecting them to a different grammar: Religious-cultural conflicts, unlike conflicts of interest, are only **negotiable to a limited extent**.¹² The same pattern is also evident in the Middle East: By reinterpreting the manifold conflicts of power and interests into a religious-identity conflict and superimposing it over the conflict, **negotiations seem impossible**. In the Russian-Ukrainian war, it is unclear what can be negotiated effectively if Ukraine's cultural right to exist is denied. The religious-cultural reinterpretation of the conflict becomes a *self-fulfilling prophecy*: It is an interpretation that fails to recognize the possibilities of peaceful and fruitful coexistence and thus becomes the cause of irreconcilable conflicts.

According to Pope Francis' guiding thesis in his 2020 peace encyclical "**Fratelli tutti**", religions are partly to blame if they do not resolutely resist being misused to legitimize war. They have the task of actively striving for cross-cultural, cross-religious, and cross-confessional **dialog as a "craft of peace"**. Pope Francis has primarily the dialog with Islam in mind. With regard to the dialogue between Catholicism and Orthodoxy, he is - as Regina Elsner in particular points out - **one-sidedly fixated on the Russian Orthodox Church**.¹³ It is an arduous learning process to adequately perceive how diverse the Orthodox, partly autocephalous churches are.

A power struggle is currently raging between the ROC and the other Orthodox churches, which recognize Patriarch Bartholomew of Istanbul as the traditional "first among equals". It is also expressed in the **emerging Orthodox social doctrine**, which has so far published **three key documents** that characteristically differ in their assessment of human rights, democracy, and modern society: The documents for which Patriarch Cyril was responsible in 2000 and 2008 evaluate these negatively (exacerbated in its increasingly anti-Western profiled interpretation), while the document for which Bartholomew is responsible from 2020

¹¹ cf. Mosche Zimmermann: Niemals Frieden? Israel am Scheideweg, Berlin 2024.

¹² On the differentiation between conflicts of conviction and conflicts of interest, see Wilhelm Korff: Die Energiefrage. Entdeckung ihrer ethischen Dimension, Trier 1992, 232-235.

¹³ cf. Regina Elsner: Ukraine-Krieg. „Diplomatie des Vatikans ist Moskau-zentriert“, Deutschlandfunk 15. Oktober 2024, 09:37 Uhr; <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/ukraine-krieg-diplomatie-des-vatikans-ist-moskau-zentriert-regina-elsner-dlf-e02d4c91-100.html>.

evaluates these positively in essence. This difference is decisive for whether the European model of culture, civilization, and society is seen as a threat or an opportunity.

A schism is emerging within Orthodoxy that could develop a dynamic comparable to the schism triggered by the Reformation in Western Christianity in the 16th century. **In my opinion, a socio-ethical dialog focusing on the relationship between religion and modernity within Orthodoxy and between Orthodoxy and the Catholic and Protestant churches would be an invaluable peace service.** The schism between the Western and Eastern churches, which has lasted for 1000 years in the history of the Church, has led to alienation, which has manifested itself in the current war between Russia and Ukraine as an inability to speak and has thus become a factor of escalation.

In a research project with the Federal Foreign Office on tolerance on Europe's borders, my team and I at the Chair of Christian Social Ethics at Ludwig Maximilian University Munich formulated the concept of "**proactive tolerance**": In contrast to passive tolerance by avoiding escalation through acquiescence and in contrast to the UN concept of active tolerance through formal rules of dispute, it opens up spaces for encounter and trust-building dialog proactively, i.e. before the conflict escalates. The fact that **LMU is one of the very few universities in the world to have all three Christian denominations is a unique opportunity to practice the concept of proactive tolerance as a path to peace.**

At present, however, the conflict with the ROK and the Russian regime has escalated and a confidence-building dialog is only possible with independent forces. **In the face of the Cyril system and the Putin system, it can only be a matter of relentless critical clarification of the lying propaganda.** The book "Putins Gift. Russlands Angriff auf Europas Freiheit" (**Putin's poison.** Russia's attack on Europe's freedom) by Gesine Dornblüth and Thomas Franke, two journalists, who lived in Moscow for a long time, opened my eyes to many connections.¹⁴ The very professional methods of disinformation, the targeted promotion of division and corruption in European countries - for example in Georgia or the Baltic states, but also in Germany - and the coherent, suggestively constructed narratives to reinterpret history and conflicts with the aim of delegitimizing the West, are a **new form of warfare as cyber war.** It is an **intellectual and media war for the sovereignty of interpretation.** The first casualty of any war is the truth.¹⁵

¹⁴ cf. Gesine Dornblüth/Thomas Franke: Putins Gift. Russlands Angriff auf Europas Freiheit, Freiburg 2024.

¹⁵ For this dictum attributed to the American Senator Hiram Johnson (1866-1945), see Stefan Hartwig: Konflikt und Kommunikation. Berichterstattung, Medienarbeit und Propaganda in internationalen Konflikten vom Krimkrieg bis zum Kosovo, Münster u.a. 1999, 4.

The starting point of the war between Russia and Ukraine is Russian neo-imperialism, which has reached a new peak in the Putin system characterized by repression and lies, but has deep historical roots in Tsarism and Stalinism. Criticizing this revisionist system of rule is not Western cultural imperialism, but a response to the **universal human need for freedom from violence, suffering and lies**. I would like to contradict the view of Herfried Münkler and Carlo Masala that **moral arguments** play only a marginal role in the struggle for a new world order,¹⁶ but with a differentiation: First of all, strategic power conflicts are in the foreground and moral arguments are not directly effective in this tough struggle. However, the approval that Putin receives in China, India, Iran, North Korea, and South Africa, and not least among his own population, is largely dependent on the narrative of the cultural conflict against the dominance of "the West" and the claim that Europe must be "decolonized" against US influence. The **"USA/West" bogeyman** currently unites completely heterogeneous powers. This narrative is certainly charged with a **moral claim**.

Every national identity is a construct. Synergies and borders have to be negotiated and are constantly shifting. Europe is a continent of diversity, of heterogeneity of languages and cultures. The war has created deep rifts of alienation between Russia and Ukraine as well as many other European countries. Trust has been destroyed for generations. Nevertheless, it is wrong to infer from this an insurmountable enmity between the peoples. **The Putin system is like a disease that has afflicted the Russian people** - comparable to the disease of National Socialism in Germany. It is not the Russian people and Russian culture that need to be fought, but the system of repression and lies. However, this is deeply rooted in the Russian mentality and social form through a long tradition of autocratic systems. It is difficult to assess whether the "medicine" of a **culture of remembering the victims of violence** as a **craft of peace** and a testimony to historical truthfulness has a chance against this.

¹⁶ cf. Herfried Münkler: World in turmoil. The Order of Powers in the 21st Century, Berlin 2024; Carlo Masala: Weltunordnung. Die globalen Krisen und die Illusion des Wesens, 8th edition Munich 2023, 18-64.