

# RELIGION IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE CULTURAL 'SELF' AND 'OTHER'

*Alar Kilp*

PhD Candidate in Political Science, Lecturer in Comparative Politics at the Institute of Government and Politics, University of Tartu, Estonia, alar.kilp@ut.ee

**ABSTRACT.** From the social constructionist perspective, cultural differences are neither good nor bad, unless effectively constructed as such. The article sketches a pattern of the process of the construction of clashing cultural identities, which helps the understanding of the empirical paradox, why the apparently 'most religious' conflicts are usually the ones which are accompanied by the greatest economic, political and social fears, grievances and vulnerabilities.

The process of construction of a cultural 'Other' is initiated by subjective feelings of insecurity, chaos and vulnerability. As a rule, the negative subjective feelings are caused by social, economical and political concerns, the ensuing conflict, however, is constructed based on cultural identities. It is made meaningful by a reliance on religious or ideological values, beliefs, myths and narratives, and is framed with general moral binaries (such as 'good' and 'evil').

From the functional perspective, the representation of the negative cultural 'Other' fosters social integration, helps to avoid a sense of chaos and maintains the positive feeling of national identity. In general, religion and ideology fulfill the same cultural and political function and offer a similar variety of types (moderate and radical) of functions. Religion is more efficient than ideology in extraordinary and long-lasting crises.

In Western societies, the role of religion as belief has lost its cultural relevancy, but religion as a cultural symbol of identity has remained functional both in construction of 'Self' and 'Other'.

**Key words:** *social construction of reality, cultural representation of 'Self' and 'Other', social commonsense, social belief system, 'scapegoating', religious symbols in cultural identity.*

At some point of time, we probably have asked ourselves, or have heard our co-patriots ask: "Who are we?" This question is not about an identity of a particular group or about a geometric mean from the total sum of individuals. 'We' refers symbolically – certainly imaginarily and artificially, if not mythically and fictitiously – to 'Us' as a culture. At times, we also hear debates over ideas and values, acts and behaviors, which undermine our cultural values and threaten our cultural self-identity either internally or externally.

In order to analyze religion in the construction of the cultural ‘Us’ (“who we are”) and ‘Other’ (those who define ‘Us’ by being “who we are not”), it is proper to start with a theoretical outline of the processes of the social construction of reality.

### **Social Construction of ‘Us’ and ‘Other’**

We are social beings irrespective of the intensity of our belief in individualism. We live in an era of an expressive individualism. In affluent societies, more individuals follow individualist, secular and post-materialist ‘self-expression’ values. Since the Enlightenment, we have believed in the moral autonomy of a rational Enlightened individual. Today we believe in an authenticity of the individual personality and in moral trueness of the subjective experience both as individuals and as groups. Yet, as humans, we are all social beings.

It is highly likely that for most of us individual freedom – at least when it means an individual responsibility for choices that influence and mold our individual existence – is rather an emotional burden than an occasion for psychological liberation.<sup>1</sup>

Presumably, a majority of us are by nature inclined to imitate and follow the norms and values of a group and a community rather than to be the ones who exert an autonomous influence on the latter. Even those of us who are by nature autonomous individuals can be reasonably considered as social beings. What do I mean?

Like animals, humans have an inbuilt desire for sex and food. Unlike animals, however, humans always construct the norms and values that culturally define and regulate the morally accepted sexual behavior and that of the consumption of food. The resulting cultural knowledge is a ‘common-sense knowledge’ and a ‘reality’ for members of society<sup>2</sup> irrespective of whether they are cognizant of the respective ideas and values, whether they agree or disagree, whether their behavior is in accordance or in discord with it.

---

<sup>1</sup> Individuals may perceive freedom as both a blessing and a curse. Eric Hoffer argues that as the circumstances of the freedom of an individual make an individual himself responsible for his choices, and puts the whole blame of failure on his shoulders, freedom unavoidably multiplies frustration unless “a man has the talents to make something of himself”. Apparently, the majority of individuals do not crave for freedom as self-expression and self-realization, but for freedom “from the intolerable burden of an autonomous existence”. **Eric Hoffer**. *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements*. New York: Harper & Row, 2010 (first print 1951), pp. 31, 142.

<sup>2</sup> In this article, the general conceptualization of the nature and processes of social construction of reality follows closely the theoretical observations of **Peter L. Berger, Thomas Luckmann**. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. London: Penguin Books, 1991 (first print 1966), here pp. 26–27.

The norms regulating both sexual relationships and diet vary through space and time. These norms are dynamical and changing, but for every efficiently functioning (i.e. cohesive, integrated, stable and ordered) society, these norms delineate the boundaries within which the specified behaviors and practices are legitimate. We know that the pattern of traditional marriage as the sole legitimate framework for sexual relations has recently extended to include pre- and extramarital affairs as legitimate forms of sexual relationship. In some cultures, the partnership of homosexual couples has been elevated to the status equal to traditional marriage. In the latter, the marriage of homosexuals is an accepted and established description of 'social reality' as in other societies the non-existence of homosexual marriages.

As individuals, we may have different attitudes regarding the beliefs and values established in our social culture, but we all participate in the 'social stock of knowledge', which makes us aware of our social status, about our situation in society, its possibilities and limits. We also know that other members of society, who participate in the same 'social stock of knowledge', are able to locate us as individuals socially and are inclined to 'handle' us accordingly.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, when I perceive myself to belong to the middle class, I identify my social opportunities with others who belong to the same level of affluence. At the same time, I am aware of the social classes above and below the social stratum in which I belong. This 'stock of knowledge' is relevant only within the local society. If I were hypothetically to emigrate to foreign societies unfamiliar to me, let us say to Tanzania or Vietnam, at first, I would be ignorant of the local 'social stock of knowledge', and of my own social situation and its limits.<sup>4</sup>

The 'social stock of knowledge' regulates the socially accepted moral good. This, again, is a major difference from the animal world, where 'good', 'bad' and 'evil' are not consciously defined and constructed. Western societies do not tolerate cannibalism, do not usually accept the eating of the flesh of cats and dogs, and may consider the eating of horses a legitimate alternative for cultural minorities. Slavery, intra-communal violence and torture are illegitimate everywhere. Society-specific norms regulate prostitution, gender equality, the wearing of religious clothes in public institutions, homosexual marriages, and socioeconomic justice. Correspondingly, in every society certain phenomena are not tolerated. For the latter 'let us agree to disagree' does

---

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>4</sup> In a real encounter with Tanzanian or Vietnamese culture, I do have some limited knowledge during and before my first experiences within the local cultural environment. For example, I have previously acquired some information regarding these cultures and I know from the start that I am a foreigner. By experience my 'social knowledge' will increase as soon as I get to know, how foreigners in these cultures are 'handled', how foreigners can communicate with the local people and the like.

not apply.<sup>5</sup> Contrariwise, *within* the limits of what is generally accepted, the members of society are expected to ‘agree to disagree’.

Thus, a kind of ‘working consensus’ over the values and norms regulates the inter-personal conduct and social relations within a given society. In order for a society to function effectively, these norms and values need to be *objectivated*, i.e. members of society need to perceive these norms as objective, self-evident and a generally valid truth about ‘reality’.<sup>6</sup> Deviating intellectuals and groups would sometimes wish to extend or restrict the boundaries of the legitimately tolerated and accepted values. Because these boundaries are *functionally* real, any questioning of the established social values involves strong emotions and convictions, and tends to result in passionate confrontations.<sup>7</sup> The social belief system is ‘objective’ for members of society, is ‘relativist’ historically and cross-culturally, and ‘relational’ to a specific agency, time and place (‘here and now’).<sup>8</sup>

This ‘social commonsense’ is an important base for political government. In order to rule effectively, every government, in addition to the instruments of coercion also needs “a social basis for control, with clear ideological supports”<sup>9</sup>. The essentially hegemonic social consensus, which in the Gramscian perspective is exerted by the hegemonic classes and organized by intellectuals, helps to produce and maintain ‘social conformism’.<sup>10</sup> Here, ‘intellectuals’ refers to religious, political, economic, and educational elites that dominate ideationally over the rest of the society through ‘moral and intellectual leadership’. These hegemonic social groups have what Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann have called a ‘power in society’, which “includes the power to determine the decisive socialization processes and, therefore, the power to *produce* reality”<sup>11</sup>. Accordingly, these groups, who are able to influence and control the socialization processes are the ones who control and define the hegemonic consensus.

<sup>5</sup> **Peter L. Berger.** Introduction: Between Relativism and Fundamentalism. – Between Relativism and Fundamentalism: religious resources for a middle position. Peter L. Berger (ed.) Cambridge: William Eerdmans, 2010, pp. 11, 12.

<sup>6</sup> **Berger, Luckmann** 1991, p. 83.

<sup>7</sup> **Jeffrey Stout.** The Contested Sacred: The Place of Passion in Politics. – Commonweal, November 5/2010, pp. 15–18.

<sup>8</sup> Relationism and perspectivism conceptualize knowledge neither as objective nor as relativist. Knowledge is always a knowledge from a specific perspective or from a certain position. **Berger, Luckmann** 1991, p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> **Carlos Alberto Torres.** The Church, Society, and Hegemony: A Critical Sociology of Religion in Latin America. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1992, p. 42.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>11</sup> **Berger, Luckmann** 1991, p. 137.

The hegemonic consensus does not manifest itself necessarily in the dominance of an explicitly outlined idea or theory, the truthfulness whereof is constantly rationally tested. Contrariwise, usually the abstract, symbolical and implicit myths, beliefs and narratives guide the everyday behavior and reasoning of the members of the society. Social rather than empirical or scientific-rational support validates the commonsense knowledge of social reality.<sup>12</sup> Ideas become socially persuasive less by persuasion and rational proofs than by social confirmation, imitation and conformity. Social ideas are convincing not because of their rationally logical and valid content, but to the extent that other individuals and groups follow these ideas and take them for granted (i.e. when the social structure supports the plausibility of ideas). Accordingly, the ideas are most persuasive when followed by all and questioned by none. To put it differently, *conformity* produces *consensus*, not the other way round.

At times, some individuals, classes and groups do not agree with the socially dominant ideas. Any dissenting individual, however, needs to find a group of other individuals to assist him in maintaining his deviant definition of reality. A single individual may interrupt the world for the moment, yet in order to have an impact he needs to have the capability to win and hold the utmost loyalty of small group of devoted and able men.<sup>13</sup> Any deviating or revolutionary ideology needs a backing by a certain sub-society, sub-culture, which maintains the plausibility of the alternative definition of reality. As Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann observed:

“... no conspiracy can succeed without organization ... sub-universes require sub-societies as their objectivating base, and counter-definitions of reality require counter-societies.”<sup>14</sup>

Within the general social ‘plausibility structure’, the dissenting, deviating or revolutionary intellectual feels himself, when being alone, “to be ridiculous whenever doubts about the reality concerned arise subjectively”<sup>15</sup>. The followers of the established social belief system may also deliberately *ridicule* the dissenting and deviating group or intellectual. Similarly, in the recent Danish cartoon controversy, where the authoritative religious symbols of Islam were ridiculed, those, who defended the Danish (secular-liberal) social belief system, felt a *need* for *ridiculing* Mohammad by cartoons. This is one way how societies ‘handle’ deviations from the established social beliefs.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>13</sup> Eric Hoffer uses Hitler as an example. **Hoffer** 2010, p. 114. In order to have a lasting influence on social culture, the deviant or revolutionary intellectuals, philosophers and prophets have nearly always relied on an inner-circle of devoted disciples, apostles, followers, and students.

<sup>14</sup> **Berger, Luckmann** 1991, p. 144.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

When new groups and ideas emerge, they are either included into the social mainstream and belief system by extended and more inclusive redefinition of 'Us' or are excluded as negative 'Others' – as heretics, infidels, rebels, enemies of nation or enemies of class.

In between the full members of society and the excluded are usually those who are second-rate members of society *culturally*, even when politically they are equal citizens. Beyond formal political equality – equality before laws and equal citizen rights to vote in elections, run for parliament and the like – other, more extended visions of equality are (utopian) ideals to which real societies and cultures can only approximate. Thus, the ideal of religious freedom envisions equality of religious alternatives (perhaps also equality of religious and non-religious alternatives), versions of multiculturalism represent equal worth of all cultures, liberal democratic ideal cherishes the equality of the ideological choices of citizens, and civic nationalism equalizes the rights of various ethnic communities. In reality, however, cultures, religions, ethnic identities and linguistic groups are never culturally equal. Therefore, it is not a disaster, when certain groups and individuals are culturally second-rate in any given society.

A cultural Muslim may assimilate to Danish culture and become a Danish citizen, but to the extent that he retains his Muslim religious identity, he will culturally not be equal to those Danish citizens who belong to the cultural mainstream.

The Estonian constitution does not name any specific religious tradition. It stipulates religious freedom and non-existence of a state church. As Estonians have traditionally been Lutherans, Estonian culture has a lot more to do with Christianity and Lutheranism than with Islam or Buddhism. Irrespective of the constitutional protection of religious freedom, an Estonian, who converts to Islam or Buddhism, self-ostracizes himself to a significant extent from the mainstream culture. The cultural cost of these conversions is significantly higher than the price for conversion from Lutheranism to Methodism.

Recently scholars and public opinion leaders have raised concerns about Islam's increasing demographical presence and cultural relevance in Europe that tends to reduce in the coming future the non-Muslims to a status of second-class citizens.<sup>16</sup> Two comments are due in this regard. First, the increase of demographic presence does not automatically change the secular-liberal hegemony in European cultures. Muslim minorities in Europe, whose social presence has increased during last half a century, have their 'ethno-religious capital' confined to their respective minorities, and are therefore at a disadvantage in comparison both with the traditional cultural religions connected to 'ethnic *and* political' identities of core populations and with the secular-

---

<sup>16</sup> **Philip Jenkins.** Demographics, Religion, and the Future of Europe. – *Orbis: A Journal of World Affairs*, 3/2006, p. 522.

liberal social belief systems in European societies.<sup>17</sup> Secondly, if the present hegemonic status of the secular-liberal culture should some day end – which I do not believe will happen any time soon –, the resulting situation will not be that of cultural equality, but an establishment of a new cultural hegemony with an extended cultural mainstream (which most likely will include *also* some form of secularism and liberalism).

In the social construction of cultural identity, moral categories are instrumental in defining 'Us' and 'Other'. The actual cultural differences are essentially neither good nor bad, neither static nor unchangeable, the related moral evaluations result from the processes of construction.<sup>18</sup>

In real life, individuals and groups differ from each other in multiple ways – by gender, income, wealth, ethnic, religious, sexual and regional identities – but none of these differences is morally perceived unless socially constructed as such. Correspondingly, the existing cultural differences will not cause oppositions, unless the related differences are morally constructed as essentialist and objective.

As we construct our social reality, we attach moral meaning to some of the existing or perceived differences, which we feel to be important for our self-esteem, social identity, economic status or political security. Therefore, we attach moral meanings to the differences in wealth and race more often than to differences in hair-color or in the levels of education.

We tend to feel vulnerable for social, economic and political reasons, but we rationalize our concerns by relying on religion, ideology and identity. Concomitantly, the control of economic resources and of power (means of force and coercion) is usually legitimized – i.e. transformed from *might* to *right* – by (religious, ethical or ideological) moral representations of social order and the behavior of the subjugated and marginalized as well as the dominant and hegemonic social groups.

In themselves, groups, cultures and individuals are neither good nor bad. Any good vs bad/evil relationship results from the social construction of reality. The negative construction of the 'Other' does not begin from the 'Other', but from the negative feeling of 'Self'. The 'Others' are effectively perceived as 'bad'/'evil' and morally deficient to the extent that they are perceived to be dangerous to 'Us', to our values and lifestyle.<sup>19</sup> As the moral

<sup>17</sup> 'Ethno-religious capital' describes the symbolic and authoritative religious resource in the public sphere which results from the convergence of ethnic and religious boundaries. **Jo Campling**. Religion, Ethnicity & Society. New York, NY USA: Palgrave Publishers, 1999, p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> **Kristen Renwick Monroe, Maria Luisa Martinez-Martí**. Empathy, Prejudice, and Fostering Tolerance. – Political Science & Politics, 4/2008, p. 857.

<sup>19</sup> **Gerald Schmamess, Joshua Miller**. The Discourse of Denigration and the Creation of "Other". – Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare, 3/2000, p. 49.

construction proceeds, the discourse of anger, aggression and fear increases, the vulnerable group of the ‘good’ feels increasingly justified to protect itself by using state power against the inferior, morally deviant and dangerous ‘Other’.<sup>20</sup>

A narrative about a religious, cultural or ideological, internal or external, ‘Other’ as an ‘Enemy’ characterizes every functioning society (together with a narrative about a ‘Friend’).<sup>21</sup> The narrative about an ‘Enemy’ is as necessary for any social organization as is the perception of the boundaries of exclusion. The ‘Enemy’ for the social culture is what the Devil is for traditional Christianity. The existence of the Devil is not the source of chaos and disorder. Quite the contrary, the absence of the ‘Evil’ incarnate – such representation of ‘evil’ where all that is ‘evil’ stems from only one, embodied and incarnate, source, and ‘good’ is unambiguously defined by the struggle against the ‘evil’ – may result in a serious crises for organized religion and social culture. Thus, unless a society disintegrates and ceases to exist, it has to have its demons or enemies. Obviously, the narrative about a social and cultural ‘Enemy’ should better be moderate, not radical, but its total absence is dysfunctional.

In Western social history, the cultural Enemies have at various times and places been Jews, Muslims, Catholics, Protestants, slave-owners, abolitionists, Orthodox, the Turks, Communists, Fascists, Nazis, Capitalists, Imperialists, and Blacks to name a few. Revolutionary upheavals have often transformed a former ‘Enemy’ into a ‘Friend’, or introduced a new Enemy, but the narratives about ‘Friends’ and ‘Enemies’ have remained.

As seen from above, the negative representation of the cultural ‘Other’ fulfills several positive functions for the core culture. The effective functioning of the society requires a sufficient degree of normative consensus, social cohesion, national pride, loyalty and social order, lest it fall apart.<sup>22</sup> Consensual demonization of an agreed-upon Enemy helps to avoid the sense chaos and to maintain the positive feeling of national identity.<sup>23</sup> The more the ‘Other’ is demonized, the less critically the past and present actions and behaviors of Self are evaluated.

The process of the construction of the ‘Other’ starts with the sense of vulnerability, uncertainty, chaos and insecurity. Correspondingly, the cultural ‘Other’ is most likely found from amongst those who undermine the political or socio-economical sense of security, *and* whose culture is different enough in order to attach moral meaning to the perceived cultural differences. To the

<sup>20</sup> **Schmameß, Miller** 2000, p. 51.

<sup>21</sup> **Jeffrey C. Alexander.** Citizen and Enemy as Symbolic Classification: On the Polarizing Discourse of Civil Society. – Real Civil Societies: Dilemmas of Institutionalization. Jeffrey C. Alexander (ed.) London: Sage, 1998, pp. 96–114.

<sup>22</sup> **Berger** 2010, p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> **Schmameß, Miller** 2000, p. 46.

extent that the cultural confrontation is constructed, *the fears decrease*, and the sense of *security, control* and *order* is restored.

How can it be that the perception of the one, who threatens us, can calm our feelings and make our minds confident? One of the reasons, why it happens so, is that the 'Other' is actually a (defining) part of the Self. The construction of the 'Other' functions effectively only, if it is in a relationship with the 'Self' in a quite similar way that 'evil' exists in a binary relationship with the 'good', and the feeling of superior 'Self' with the feelings of the 'inferior' 'Other'.

An effective negative cultural 'Other' needs not to be actually culturally, morally or religiously deficient or corrupt. Innocent and blameless 'Other' qualifies also. The whole process starts with the negative sense of Self (with a 'bad feeling' regarding Self, low self-esteem, vulnerability and the like). René Girard's description of the psychosocial process of 'scapegoating' illustrates this process well.

The term 'scapegoating' was initially used in theology for the ancient religious rituals where the 'guilt' (sins, crimes) and 'sufferings' of the community were *symbolically* attributed to animals (in Old Testament to goats, but Hindus have also used horses, i.e. 'scapehorses'). Girard used the concept psychosocially for cases, where innocent victims of violence were punished for the 'sins' of somebody else or for the sake of various disasters, social crises, conflicts and hardships. When the guilt and suffering was transferred from one person to another like stones or potatoes changed their owner,<sup>24</sup> the perpetrator felt relieved. 'Scapegoating' resembles the social construction of the negative 'Other', because in both the aggression (either physical, emotional or ideational) towards the scapegoat/the 'Other' is justified by self-defense and is grounded on the subjective sense of insecurity and fear.

We hate, discriminate and 'scapegoat' more efficiently as a culture, group or social movement, than individually.<sup>25</sup> In the discourse of 'scapegoating', the 'Other' can be represented as 'violent', 'pessimist' (in contrast to normal persons who are satisfied with the social and political *status quo*), 'envious', 'aggressive' and the like. 'Scapegoating' results in the imagination of two kinds of individuals, social groups and cultural communities: good, decent, altruistic, tolerant, rational and moderate are contrasted with cruel, evil, emotional and violent.

<sup>24</sup> René Girard. Generative Scapegoating. – Violent Origins: Walter Burkert, Rene Girard, and Jonathan Z. Smith on Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation. Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly (ed.) Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987, pp. 73–74.

<sup>25</sup> Eric Hoffer argues that "fears, hesitations, doubts and the vague stirrings of decency" accompany an individual judgment, but these are abandoned in the corporateness of a mass movement, where we can easily find "a new freedom – freedom to hate, bully, lie, torture, murder and betray without shame and remorse". Hoffer 2010, p 100; Girard 1987, p. 77.

‘Scapegoating’ is often a subconscious activity. The perpetrators may not acknowledge that ‘scapegoating’ – the transmission of responsibility, guilt and suffering, and the misrepresentation of the social or political situation – is actually happening. The agreement, who actually is the victim, may also be lacking. In the end of 1930s, Germans were depicted to be the ‘victims’ of the Jewish race and correspondingly in need of aggressive self-defense. In the contest for the status of the victim, Nazi Germans had major advantages over the powerless Jews (it was significantly more difficult for the powerless to persuade the powerful that the weak are the victims). Besides, the powerful Nazis would never admit their guilt. As Girard stressed, we all – not only Nazis – tend to be partial in scapegoating – we easily identify those who have done it or do it, but resist in acknowledging our own participation.<sup>26</sup>

As all social groups – both the dominant and hegemonic, and the subjugated, discriminated and marginalized ones – tend to attach meaning to their social situation according to the socially constructed reality, the Jews could have had a hard time considering themselves as victims. In the concentration camps, they were suffering and dying in a culture, where the social belief system defined them as the ones guilty of the oppression of others. The dominant social culture believed that the divine providence and the fate of human race were on the side of Hitler.

The unjust conditions and outright oppression caused by themselves does not automatically cause the blaming of others, and those who blame others are not automatically the objective victims.

Today, it would be unrealistic to imagine that a small minority of internally split Muslim communities could dominate social majorities in Western countries. This does not mean, however, that the fears among the Europeans do not make sense. The socially perceived threat is real when subjectively perceived to be real. The efficiency of social belief systems has never been dependent on objectivity, rational persuasion and evidence. How otherwise could European societies collectively believe for more than a millennium in the virgin birth of Christ, and that the Jews threatened the Nazi state.

Is the construction of the cultural ‘Other’ then, the result of manipulation by politicians and profit-seeking media? Media and politicians would hardly succeed, if the emotions of the common people did not yearn for a cultural Enemy, especially in times of social, economic and political crises.

I used to consider the ‘discourses of fear’ based on the simple account of demographic presence of problematic minorities to be an outright populist, irrational and emotional manipulation with popular sentiments.<sup>27</sup> Now, however, I have revised my evaluation. In issues related to cultural identity,

<sup>26</sup> Girard 1987, p. 74.

<sup>27</sup> Philip Jenkins has predicted that the number of Muslims in France, Germany and the Netherlands could reach one fifth or fourth of the total population by 2030. Jenkins 2006, p. 521.

demographic numbers matter for both majorities and minorities. Why is this so? Because both cultures – their values, norms, beliefs and ways of life – are conventionally evaluated holistically ‘as if’ representing and referring to everybody and anybody belonging to the respective culture. Correspondingly, it is natural that the members of the majority culture feel threatened when they perceive that their culture – which symbolically represents them as a whole and which they represent *en bloc* – as being under attack by a minority culture, which similarly represents all of its members and is being represented by its every member as a whole. As both ‘Us’ and ‘Other’ are perceived culturally, holistically and inclusively, both cultures are defined also in abstract, vaguely and symbolically, with simple moral adjectives referring to basic human moral feelings.

Correspondingly, our positive emotional identification with our co-patriots does not require from us the personal knowledge of each of them or even a rational abstracting of our cultural characteristics. We ‘attain’ our ‘knowledge’ about cultural minorities in the same way.

Last, but not least, cultures, civilizations, events and dates (such as 9/11) are not ‘agents’ by themselves and are not the cause of the consequences often ascribed to them. The attacks of 9/11 provided a changed structure of opportunities for the political entrepreneurs, but political actors, not 9/11, constructed later the perceptions of threats and enemies, alliances and battle-lines.<sup>28</sup> Political actors attached meaning to the events of 9/11, created narratives and myths that distinguished the good from the evil, specified the contours, the character, the evil goals and inhuman nature of the ‘Enemy’. They also defined the values, which were ‘really’ being attacked when the population had actually observed the destruction of large buildings and witnessed the deaths of thousands of human beings. Cultures and civilizations may form structures of ideas, norms, beliefs and values, dates and events can become structural precedents, in addition political and ideological legacies set limits for the opportunity structures for the construction of political oppositions, yet by and of themselves, they do not act, they are not agents.

To sum it up, identities clash only when morally constructed. The process of the construction of clashing cultural identities is preceded and initiated by subjective feelings of insecurity, chaos and vulnerability. The negative subjective feelings are usually caused by social, economical and political concerns, the ensuing conflict; however, being constructed based on cultural identities and is made meaningful morally – by reliance on religious or ideological values, beliefs, myths and narratives, and is framed by simple moral binaries.

---

<sup>28</sup> **David S. Meyer.** Constructing Threats and Opportunities After 9/11. – American Behavioral Scientist, 1/2009, p. 24.

## Religion in the construction of 'Us' and 'Other'

Is it an *essential* nature of religion to be involved in the construction of the cultural identity? What *kind* of religion is involved in the construction of cultural identity? What *functions* does religion fulfill in this process? Is religion by nature a cultural phenomenon? Can secular ideologies fulfill the cultural functions of religion with the same efficiency, or are there some cultural functions, which are fulfilled more efficiently by religion?

In order to answer to these questions, I need to start with the claim that religion does not have to be involved in the construction of cultural identity at all. In contemporary pluralized societies, there are forms of religion – such as New Religious Movements, cults, New Age, religious minorities, novel religious denominations, syncretistic and privatized forms of religion – which do not have a significant positive or negative *defining* function regarding the political or minority culture.

Historically, Christianity started to fulfill *positive* all-inclusive cultural functions only from the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Thereafter, in several non-European parts of the world, Christian communities lacked any defining (positive or negative) relationship regarding the general culture. Correspondingly, the dominant culture could exist without Christianity and *vice versa*. Thus, for the construction of holistic and inclusive cultural identity religion is neither *necessary* – the cultural identity does not need to include religion as one of the defining markers – nor *sufficient* – religion needs not be the sole cultural marker next to secular, ideological, philosophical, racial, linguistic and other markers that the identity can be based on.

In one way, it seems legitimate to speak about the 'cultural functions of religion', because *historically*, pre-industrial and early modern societies were *defined* by cultural religions. Correspondingly, in the *historical* perspective, we could speak about the particular cultural functions of a specific religion in its social environment. Thus it is valid to classify the cultural functions traditionally fulfilled by religion as the 'cultural functions of religion', which thereafter can be fulfilled (as the cultures secularize or de-Christianize) by ideologies, philosophy and science.

In the general theoretical perspective, and especially regarding the recent developments in modernized societies, it would be *analytically inefficient*<sup>29</sup> to attach the functions fulfilled by either religion or ideology to their definitions. If we assume that religion *has* cultural functions and (any) culture is of necessity based on religion, then the assumption about the inter-dependent relationship of religion and culture enforces us to consider not only National-

---

<sup>29</sup> By 'analytical inefficiency' I refer here to such conceptualization and definition of key terms, which do not contribute to better understanding and improved knowledge of the research objects.

ism, Democracy and Liberalism as religions, but to describe any ideologically plural or monist political order with a term 'religious'.<sup>30</sup>

For conceptual clarity, I argue that there are no *universal* cultural functions of religion. Unless a form of religion is a 'cult of political community' by its very origin (such as the 'civil religion' of the United States), religions are meaningful without cultural functions and cultures without religions. To illustrate the point, Catholicism in Poland and Orthodoxy in Romania are major cultural markers of identity. In the United States, Catholicism and Orthodoxy lack specific relation to cultural identification with 'Americanness'. In comparison to Catholic 'Polishness' and Orthodox 'Romanianness', cultural 'Estonianness' is weakly related to religion (Lutheranism). Yet this Lutheranism will be increasingly disentangled from its 'Estonianness', and vice versa, when an Estonian travels to a country, where Lutheranism has no relationship to dominant or minority cultures. Without the cultural support to the plausibility of the connection between 'Estonianness' and 'Lutheranism', his 'Lutheranism' and 'Estonianness' will both become private matters soon to be disentangled from each other subjectively and externally.

In cases, where the cultural identity of the political community is built on secular ideologies (for instance, Communism) and scientific theories (such as racial theory), the commitment to the values of the respective community can become holy causes and as sacred as were the commitments to Christian values and causes in a Christian society for members of that society. According to Eric Hoffer, both ideologies and religions are capable of 'religiofication' – i.e. to turn practical purposes into holy causes.<sup>31</sup> Presumably, crowd psychology does function in important respects similarly, irrespective of the religious, secular, ideological or scientific nature of the collective commitment.

These functional similarities need to be taken into account, but this does not mean that ideology and religion automatically *are the same* to the extent that they fulfill the same function. In Western history there have been two

---

<sup>30</sup> For example, Timothy Crippen defines religions as "unified systems of beliefs and rituals relative to conceptions of the sacred...", where the related beliefs and rituals "encourage individuals to subordinate their *apparent* self-interest in relation to the *collectively expressed* interest of sovereign organization". For Crippen, religion is a "universal component of human societies". Therefore, the religious nature of societies is constant. The traditional sacred symbols (for instance, a Christian cross) can be replaced by the "new gods of national identity and integrity", or new sacred symbols such as Democracy, Equality, Justice, and Liberty, which are equally sacred and inspire similar 'religious' commitments to traditional sacred symbols. **Timothy Crippen**. Further Notes on Religious Transformation. – *Social Forces*, 1/1992, pp. 221, 222. For an outline, how 'new gods' replaced the traditional ones, see **Timothy Crippen**. Old and New Gods in the Modern World: Toward a Theory of Religious Transformation. – *Social Forces*, 2/1988, pp. 316–335.

<sup>31</sup> Religious, national and revolutionary political movements react to the same psychological orientations in their followers, they use the same psychological strategies and organizational tactics. **Hoffer** 2010, p. 6.

contrasting historical transitions – the *cultural sacralization of Christianity* starting from the 4<sup>th</sup> century, where the specific Christian *beliefs* (such as two kingdoms, hell and heaven, Trinity, salvation and final judgment) attained political and cultural functions, and the *de-Christianization of the culture* which has taken place during last decades and centuries. The latter disentangled of the cultures of modernized societies from Christian beliefs even when the cultural connection to Christian rites of passage and communal identities (implicitly or manifestly) did remain. If we try to define Christianity by the social and political functions it used to fulfill, and we define Communism and Nazism by their social and political functions, we may end up with circular reasoning where religion *is* ideology, and ideology *is* religion. When Stalin's Communism or Hitler's Nazism are conceptualized as functional equivalents of Christianity in confessional states, and therefore labeled as 'political religions'<sup>32</sup>, it should be remembered that Nazism and Communism *did not resemble* Christianity 'as such', but the kind of Christianity which started to fulfill the political and cultural functions of public religion since the 4<sup>th</sup> century. It would be sufficiently precise, then, to argue that an *all-inclusive, normative and monist ideological* social belief system resembled a situation, where *Christianity* was part of an *all-inclusive, normative and monist* social belief system. In this comparison, I do not argue for the sameness between an ideology and Christianity, but for the similarities of the social belief systems. Religion and ideology have both multiple manifestations and both can be related to any form of social belief systems. In general, both religion and ideology can fulfill the same social, cultural and political functions.

Moreover, in social and political functions, absolutist, all-inclusive, intolerant, normative, radical, fanatical and extremist religion *is similar* to absolutist, all-inclusive, intolerant, normative, radical, fanatical and extremist ideology, and moderate, tolerant, and pluralist (congregational, denominational) religion to moderate, tolerant and pluralist (democratic) ideology.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> The main theoreticians conceptualizing Communism, Nazism and Fascism as 'political religions' have been Eric Voegelin, Reinhold Niebuhr and Emilio Gentile. **Eric Voegelin**. *The Political Religions*. – Eric Voegelin, *Modernity without Restraint: The Political Religions, the New Science of Politics, and Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*. Manfred Henningsen (ed.), Columbia, Mo: University of Missouri Press, 2000, p. 68; **Reinhold Niebuhr**. *Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics: His Political Philosophy and Its Application to Our Age as Expressed in His Writings*. Harry R. Davis, Robert C. Good (eds.). New York: Scribner, 1960, pp. 10–11. **Emilio Gentile**. *Politics As Religion*. Princeton University Press, 2006.

<sup>33</sup> Eric Hoffer argues that fanatical (proselytizing or revolutionary) ideology resembles fanatical (proselytizing and revolutionary) religion, and fanatics of any religious, national or revolutionary motivation contrast to religious, national and revolutionary moderates. **Hoffer** 2010, p. 86. Tariq Modood has observed that secular moderates resemble religious moderates, and correspondingly, both contrast to religious and secular radicals. **Tariq Modood**. *Moderate Secularism, Religion as Identity and Respect for Religion*. – *The Political Quarterly*, 1/2010, pp. 4–14.

Historically, all patterns of social belief systems have been possible – democratic and undemocratic, open and closed, monist and pluralist, religious and ideological.

Ideologies and religions are similar also regarding their efficiency. As argued above, *conformity* precedes *consensus*. Correspondingly, the effective function of both religion and ideology relies more on the commitment and loyalty to the group than on the nature of their ideals, norms and goals. To put it differently, their norms and ideals – the kingdom of God, Communism, a millennial racial state or consumer's paradise – are functionally the means, which connect individuals to each other.<sup>34</sup> In this perspective, the social belief is effective when supported by collective rituals, socialization and everyday intra- and intergroup communication (i.e. when individuals and groups re-produce and re-confirm to each other the plausibility of these norms and beliefs).

In Western societies, the intensity of the religious legitimation of culture and the scope of religion as a marker of cultural identity has significantly changed during last centuries. The *scope of religious legitimation* has diminished due to political modernization and economic development. Starting from the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment, the sense of the general superiority of the Western culture<sup>35</sup> – largely irrespective of internal divisions to Catholics and Protestants, monarchists and republicans – has been defined less by religion than by civilization and modernization. The civilization in the singular (the 'West') became the criterion of the 'good' in contrast to all uncivilized others.<sup>36</sup> In cases, where the social and cultural 'good' has been still conceived religiously, religion is either a symbolical attribute of the civilization or the culture, or is understood deistically and this-worldly in contrast to theistic and supernatural religion of the traditional Christian societies.

The cultural common 'stocks of knowledge', once unified around religious doctrines, split in the middle of 20<sup>th</sup> century between Fascist, Communist and Democratic 'roads to modernity'. Thereafter, the social belief system focused on liberal values such as human rights, gender equality, equality of sexual orientations, individual pursuit of happiness, and the free market. Traditional Christianity *as a belief system* lost its cultural relevancy. In a constantly

<sup>34</sup> Functionally, the religious devotion connects individuals to each other, not to Gods or deities, and *vice versa* – the commitment of group's members to one another is an expression of their commitment to God. **Jeffrey R. Seul.** Ours is the way of God: Religion, Identity, and Intergroup Conflict. – *Journal of Peace Research*, 5/1999, p. 559.

<sup>35</sup> Starting from the Enlightenment era, anyone who doubted and questioned the inherent superiority of Western civilization, like Jean-Jacques Rousseau did in his "Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men" (1755), risked to ostracize himself from the social culture by asking questions commonly not asked or considered adequate.

<sup>36</sup> **Ibrahim Kaya.** Modernity, openness, interpretation: a perspective on multiple modernities. – *Social Science Information*, 1/2004, p. 49.

extending religious market, where individuals found new forms and ways of how one can be legitimately religious and/or “Christian by belief”, any particular interpretation of Christianity became a matter of subjective preference.

In some societies, religion has remained as a major cultural marker of identity, but socially ‘sacred’ has become primarily related to secular communities, and this-worldly goals and values.

Analytically, religion as ‘belief’ can be distinguished from religion as ‘identity’.<sup>37</sup> As mentioned above, if religion is related to a culture of political community or culture of the minority, it refers symbolically and inclusively to every member of the respective cultural community, and to *religious choice* – or to a religious choice of a religion ‘as belief’ – of no one. In the like manner, it does not refer to the *choice* of the religion ‘as identity’ either. I may choose which cultural community to belong to, but this choice is reflected in “letting the cultural community choose me”, not in me choosing the cultural community. How is this so?

If I as an Estonian choose Islam as my religious identity, I will remain culturally Estonian unless I become a member of minority or majority Muslim culture. Similarly, while living in Estonia, I cannot choose the “civil religion” of US. I can let the cultural religion of US choose me only in the United States, only by integrating into its culture. On the other hand, I can choose to reject the Estonian cultural norms and habits, and act ‘as if’ American or Muslim. My co-patriots will then recognize my efforts to distance myself from the surrounding culture, whether Americans or Muslims will accept me as ‘one of their own’, is the crucial matter.

On the level of culture, religion as identity functions unrelated to the choices of an individual, although the choices of the individuals enable them to change their cultural identities, and to distance themselves from or assimilate into different cultures. Nevertheless, the effectively constructed religious symbols in the cultural identity function independently from the cultural choices of the individuals (the religious symbols have become ‘as if’ objective and essential features of the cultural community).

Religion as ‘belief’ has significantly declined in substance and scope from the European cultural consciousness and social belief systems, religion as ‘identity’ has significantly persisted in Europe’s East and West, North and South. Increasing proportions of the populations are alienated from the traditional religious services, beliefs and practices. Yet, the majority of individuals turn to cultural religious identities (not necessarily religious beliefs) and

---

<sup>37</sup> Linda Woodhead differentiates religion as belief from religion as identity as follows: if references to belief define religion, then to be religious means to believe in certain religious dogmas, doctrines and propositions; when religion is treated as a source of identity, it can be “both a matter of social ascription and of personal choice” (of identity). **Linda Woodhead.** Five concepts of religion. – International Review of Sociology, 1/2011, pp. 112, 119.

rituals in order to restore and maintain the psychological sense of certainty, order and meaning. This occurs at crucial moments of individual life – at birth, marriage and death –, at crucial moments of national history – such as during transitions from Communist collectivist systems to free market democracies – or during personal, social, economic, environmental or political crises.<sup>38</sup>

The relationship of religion and state has changed similarly to the relationship between agriculture and the economy. Agricultural production is important for a national economy and for all the members of society, yet the life style of the members of advanced societies does not resemble the life style of their ancestors in agrarian societies (it has changed from parochial and rural to urban and mobile), and their religion too, has changed. They do not live or believe like their ancestors, yet their functional need (for agricultural food and for meaning, order, and certainty provided by religion, ideology, science or philosophy) is the same.

Correspondingly, individuals, groups and societies have *always* had some form of ideas that have given meaning to their existence, have legitimized their status and pursuits, *and* their *economic* and *political interests*. When Samuel P. Huntington argued that in post-Cold War era, “Individuals identify themselves with religion, family, blood and belief, not with political ideology or economic interests”<sup>39</sup>, he referred to the change ideas of legitimation (presumably from secular-ideological to cultural-civilizational). However, humans have never been willing to justify their economic and political interests by straightforwardly rational and transparent economic and political reasoning. Correspondingly, irrespective of the religious or secular nature of legitimation (religious or secular), mere economic legitimation of economic purposes, political rationalization of political interests has always been difficult or inefficient at least for those who want to exercise a coercive power over others. The settlers of Australia rationalized their wish to acquire the land from the Aboriginals with economic argumentation (Aboriginals were poor utilizers of land), yet their right to the land became ‘as if’ self-evident only by the help of polygenetic theories of racial supremacy. Similarly, in the post-Yugoslavian conflicts of early 1990s, the ‘real’ concern of the parties involved seemed to be related to territorial sovereignty. At the same time, the conflict was not

<sup>38</sup> Noam Chomsky argues that the terrorist attacks of 9/11 constituted a shock both for the populations of the United States, and of Europe, because for more than a century they had not suffered an attack from the colonized territories (or subordinated regions) from abroad (“England was not attacked by India nor Belgium by the Congo”). **Noam Chomsky**. September 11. Allen & Unwin: Crows Nest, 2001, pp. 11–12. Collective public religious rituals were instrumental in relieving the fears, vulnerabilities and existential insecurities sensed due to the attacks of 9/11.

<sup>39</sup> **Samuel P. Huntington**. If Not Civilizations, What? Paradigms of the Post-Cold War World – Foreign Affairs, 5/1993, p. 194.

only accompanied, but also originated from the increasing representation of the opponents as evil ‘Others’, followers of heresies and subjects to tyranny.<sup>40</sup> The conflict culminated with the Bosnian genocide.

The general observation of Samuel P. Huntington should be analyzed in more detail. What kind of religion (or culture) is becoming increasingly a resource of political identity (and of political legitimacy)? What kind of religious, political or ‘third agents’ (such as mass media) are the authoritative interpreters of “religion in culture”? When we *observe* “religion in culture”, should we *interpret* it as religion subjected to a ‘cult of community’ or a community subjected to a worship of divinity?

Virtually all political states have positive connections to some form of religion (either in the form of chaplains in public institutions, publicly acknowledged religious communities and religious holidays, religious services at national anniversaries, religious education as part of state education etc). The connections between religion and politics tend to persist, but the nature of the relationship between state and religion has changed irrevocably.

Irrespective of the particular formal organization of religion and state and the informal connection of church to national identity, national communities worship *national heroes*, are worried about *national dangers*, believe in the everlasting fate of the national culture and community. This description is especially relevant for historical cultures with Protestant established churches, because in the latter the church has been far less autonomous from state, less differentiated from the national community than in traditionally Catholic cultures, where Catholic *beliefs* have some authority in society and culture and are defined primarily by the church. In Protestant cultures with national churches, individuals have a great freedom to give meaning to their religion autonomously from the authority and influence of the church hierarchy and institution. Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart argue that in these cases, the religious identity (and beliefs) which are relevant for the cultural community are transmitted and interpreted primarily by the national educational system and the mass media, not by the church.<sup>41</sup>

The culture of the United States is also traditionally Protestant, but in many ways contrasts to Protestant societies with historical national churches. Unlike most European societies, and virtually in contrast to *all of the European Protestant societies*, for about half of a century there have been ‘culture wars’ with a strong religious involvement in the United States over the boundaries of what is considered morally sacred. The boundaries of the morally accepted behaviors are contested passionately in any society (i.e. those who

<sup>40</sup> **Vilho Harle.** *The Enemy with a Thousand Faces: The Tradition of the Other in Western Political Thought and History.* Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000, p. 5.

<sup>41</sup> **Pippa Norris, Ronald Inglehart.** *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 17.

defend or undermine the existing boundaries have strong convictions hardly amenable to compromises).<sup>42</sup> The United States, however, differs markedly from European cultures by having a large and strong social religious movement that challenges the moral *status quo* and is committed to traditional Christian values.<sup>43</sup>

Post-communist cultures in East-Central Europe differ from West-European cultures by having their national identity more interrelated with religion. As Ina Merdjanova has observed, this fusion between religion and nationalism helps to create and preserve identity and “stimulates intra-societal integration”, but it also tends to delimitate, alienate and increase animosity “towards the ‘Other’”.<sup>44</sup>

In Western Europe, the concerns focus on the increasing cultural presence of the Muslim minorities. When the culture of the minority is not assimilated to the core culture, and the definition of the reality specific to the minority community is not effectively segregated so that it remains irrelevant to the mainstream culture, then the presence of this cultural minority undermines the plausibility of the dominant social creed (ways of life, norms, beliefs and values). The ensuing ‘cultural conflict’ is not about differences in religious dogmas or moral values, but due to an increasing sense of insecurity provided by competing versions of cultural social order. As noted above regarding East-Central Europe, the increasing fears and worries about the cultural ‘Other’ also perform positive functions in Western Europe. Nothing unifies and integrates members of society better than a common hatred (and a corresponding common fear).<sup>45</sup>

Both in Western Europe and in America, Islam has increasingly become a cultural ‘Other’. In part, this has been the resurrection of the old discourses of Orientalism, which were instrumental in subjugation of societies during the era of colonization and depicted the “West” as a dynamic, complex, and ever-changing society, and the “Orient,” particularly the world of Islam, as static,

<sup>42</sup> Stout 2010, pp. 15–18.

<sup>43</sup> Grace Davie. Global Civil Religion: A European Perspective. – *Sociology of Religion*, 4/2001, p. 457. One of the reasons, why the US public sphere enables the political participation with strong religious motivations may be due to the type of secularism. Unlike to European secularisms, the US secularism relates positively to Christian religious traditions, it is secularism with identifiably ‘religious values’. Jeff Haynes. Religion and international relations after ‘9/11’. – *Democratization*, 3/2005, p. 409.

<sup>44</sup> Ina Merdjanova. In Search of Identity: Nationalism and Religion in Eastern Europe. – *Religion, State & Society*, 3/2000, p. 234.

<sup>45</sup> The shared hatred (and fear) is the most efficient means of social unification in a liberal democratic society. In illiberal societies, a strong promotion of collective national or social values can function as efficiently as fear. In liberal democratic societies, however, unless unified by common fear and hatred, the society is inclined towards social disintegration as the individuals and groups are prone to pursue their self-interest and self-advancement.

violent, patriarchal, barbaric, and despotic, and in need of Western intervention.<sup>46</sup> Within this discourse, especially the Arab Muslims are perceived to have a long-time hatred towards the West.<sup>47</sup>

A negative depiction of Islam re-appeared strongly in West during 1980s and culminated with the ‘clash of civilization’ thesis in the mid-1990s.<sup>48</sup> Later revisions in this discourse, particularly after 9/11, have concentrated on *Islamism* and *Islamofascism*.<sup>49</sup>

The attacks of 9/11 did not target religious objects and did not distinguish between the religious identities of the casualties, yet the following ‘aggressive hyperpatriotism’ in the United States “pointed to Islam as the antithesis of all that was good and worthy in America and led many to ask whether Muslims could be good Americans”<sup>50</sup>. Islamic communities started to be depicted as monolithic – following the same beliefs and practices irrespective, whether they origin from Somalia, Iran or Pakistan –, sexist religion, inherently violent, and prone to terrorism, not to democracy.<sup>51</sup> The main problematic bias with such a description of tensions between West and Islam is the lack of attention on the actual foreign policies of the Western countries in the Middle East (their economic, geopolitical and military support to authoritarian regimes), and in particular in relation to Palestine and Arab nationalism.<sup>52</sup>

Islam and the Ottoman Empire had been the defining cultural ‘Others’ for Western Europe until the First World War. During the Cold War, Communism

<sup>46</sup> **Deepa Kumar**. Framing Islam: The Resurgence of Orientalism During the Bush II Era. – Journal of Communication Inquiry, 10/2010, p. 5. **Marranci** 2004, pp. 106, 107.

<sup>47</sup> **Andrew A. G. Ross**. Emotion, Agency and the Politics of ‘Anti-Americanism’. – Millennium: Journal of International Studies, 1/2010, p. 109.

<sup>48</sup> It is worth noticing that Samuel P. Huntington’s ‘clash of civilizations’ thesis referred to ‘Islamic civilization’ as a unit of analysis and argumentation, not to Islamism. Similarly, in a conversation published in 2005, Huntington’s list of reasons why the majority of armed conflicts in 2000 involved Muslims, did not include explicit references to Islamism: the lack of a core state that could provide leadership to Islam; response to unsuccessful modernization; absence of pluralism and liberty and open politics; and historic resentment, particularly among Arabs, due to “great injustices imposed on them by the West”. **Michael Cromartie** (ed.) Religion, Culture, and International Conflict: A Conversation. Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005, p. 5.

<sup>49</sup> Francis Fukuyama has argued that the core enemy in the international fight against terrorism is neither Islam as a religion nor Islam as a civilization, but rather “Islamofascism that is, the radically intolerant and anti-modern doctrine that has recently arisen in many parts of the Muslim world”. Fukuyama pointed to Saudi Arabia as the main source of Islamofascism. **Francis Fukuyama**. Has history started again? – Policy, 2/2002, p. 6.

<sup>50</sup> **Akbar Ahmed**. Journey into America: The Challenge of Islam. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2010, p. 7.

<sup>51</sup> **Kumar** 2010, p. 5.

<sup>52</sup> **Ervand Abrahamian**. The US media, Huntington and September 11. – Third World Quarterly, 3/2003, pp. 529–544.

had replaced Islam, and the Ottoman Empire had ceased to exist. After the Cold War, Turkey and Islam have re-appeared as cultural 'Others'<sup>53</sup>, both often perceived to be in contrast with everything considered to be European.<sup>54</sup>

Particularly paradoxical is the perceived cultural image of Turkey. On the one hand, it is difficult to find a country among Muslim-majority countries, which has undergone more political or cultural westernization and has more diligently secular polity than Turkey. Turkey is exceptional in lacking the historical experience of colonization by Western capitalist states and the experience of Communist rule. Yet, a great bulk of Europeans believe that there are essentialist differences between European cultures and the Turkish culture, wherefore the possibility of increasing influx of Turkish Muslims to the labor market of the European Union is believed to undermine such core values of European culture as democracy, equality and human rights.<sup>55</sup>

Three aspects seem to make religion exceptionally instrumental in the construction of cultural confrontations.

First, many long-lasting political conflicts, where the involved parties sense the situation gone outside of ordinary human means of control (such as a situation of Palestinians in West Bank and Gaza), have obtained religious overtones. To put it differently, the greater the economic, political and social fears, grievances and vulnerabilities, the more religious the conflicts tend to become. It is not that religion causes these conflicts, but religion may be more efficient than ideology in extraordinary and long-lasting crises.

Secondly, the conflicts are not constructed between the 'most different' or the 'most alien' religions or cultures, but the 'Other' is most likely found amongst those, who are perceived to undermine either the political or the economic sense of security. An ideal 'Other' follows a different religious tradition, but the cultural differences are concentrated upon, and religious legitimation is sought, only when the cultural fears and feelings of vulnerabilities based on economic, political and social factors have gained their way. Correspondingly, in such conflicts religion is fused with national identity according to a pattern, where the representative community is a *national* culture, identity and interests, grievances and fears are overwhelmingly non-religious (related to social, economic and political factors) during the initial phases of the conflict.

Thirdly, one has to bear in mind that the core cultures in the United States and in European countries are secularized (i.e. lacking any binding religious

<sup>53</sup> **Benoît Challand.** From Hammer and Sickle to Star and Crescent: the Question of Religion for European Identity and a Political Europe. – Religion, State and Society, 1/2009, p. 66; **James Kurth.** Europe's Identity Problem and the New Islamist War. – Orbis: A Journal of World Affairs, 3/2006, p. 541.

<sup>54</sup> **Marranci** 2004, p. 115.

<sup>55</sup> **Sabine Strasser.** Europe's Other. – European Societies, 2/2008, p. 178.

authority in media, public morality, education, culture, politics, economy, entertainment etc). The pattern and degree of cultural secularization varies, but the Western cultures do not adhere to explicitly religious beliefs and norms any more.<sup>56</sup> The social belief systems in contemporary European cultures focus on consumerism and individualism. They value the autonomous choice of an individual in cultural tastes, sexual relationships, modes of cohabitation, places of residence and choices of religious belief. Individuals mostly feel that psychological deprivation, fulfillment of individual expectations, social status, subjectively inferior or superior, personally successful and failing (which can all be considered indicators of the social belief system or the ‘social stock of knowledge’) are not dependent on their membership and status within a certain religious or ideological community. It is externally manifested, interpersonally and inter-subjectively perceived, in their ability to procure material goods and immaterial services in and outside supermarkets. Poor individuals may feel satisfied and rich people dissatisfied, but their social situation, its ‘goodness’, its limits and opportunities, are evaluated by their social co-members according to the level of consumption they can afford. The level of consumption is believed to demonstrate manifestly and externally the merits, goodness and moral content of the character of an individual, which is also perceived to be the source of greatest happiness.

The meta-ideology of post-Cold War European societies is Liberalism,<sup>57</sup> which corresponds best to the culture of expressive individualism, hedonism and consumerism. Problematically, however, the Liberal meta-ideology facilitates social disintegration, and is therefore incapable of coping effectively with the threat of Islamism.<sup>58</sup>

It seems likely that the increasing cultural presence of the Muslim minorities helps Europeans to rediscover and revitalize the religious roots and symbols of their cultural identities. In general, there seems to be four roads, by which this may happen.

The least likely is the return to the Medieval or early modern versions of social belief systems, where explicitly Christian *beliefs* functioned as the singular cultural *lingua franca*. This pattern of the relationship of Christianity and culture has been exceptionally intolerant, excelling in legitimating hatred

---

<sup>56</sup> Vatican is the exception. In several cultures – such as Poland and Romania – traditional churches still wield a significant cultural authority, but they are better understood as ‘religious players in a secular game’, who are not able to define and control the parameters of the cultural life any more.

<sup>57</sup> Kurth 2006, pp. 542–543.

<sup>58</sup> James Kurth has argued that dominance of Liberalism will be short-lived and advises the restoration of once-dominant Christian identity that would strengthen Europe in the war with Islamism. *Ibid.*, pp. 541, 544, 557. Paradoxically, if the liberal societies are prone to promote disintegration and individualization, the ‘fear of Islamism’ fulfills a very useful political function of a social unifier.

and subjugation.<sup>59</sup> The European dominant (democratic, anticlerical and secularist) pattern of modernization contrasted strongly with the illiberal, authoritarian, anti-individualistic and undemocratic Christian *ancien regime*. Therefore, its restoration in the future is undesirable and highly unlikely.

Less likely, but hardly imaginable at present, would be the restoration of the pattern of 20<sup>th</sup> century Clerical Fascisms, which in contrast to Soviet Atheism attempted to modernize illiberally and undemocratically, but together with the church and traditional religion. As democracies do not consider clerical systems of political order legitimate, the restoration of the 'clerical road to modernity' requires the restoration of authoritarian forms of government. If the latter happens, the first is possible.

Most probably the European countries will not emulate the religio-cultural pattern of the United States (combination of Judeo-Christian 'civil religion', 'passively secularist' polity, denominational culture, legitimate political participation of the large-scale religious political opposition). As most of European political cultures have ceased to rationalize politics and social issues in religious terms, it is also unlikely that religion in Europe could regain the "lost" territories soon or without battles. The failed attempts to include references to Christianity in the draft of the European Constitution testify to the latter. European predominantly homogeneous 'religious markets' – where a majority of the population are formal members in a single religious tradition – will even less likely resemble the denominational culture of the US any time soon.

Yet, the cultural connections to the religious symbols of *identity* are strengthening at present and will continue to be so in the coming future. Why should this be? Various new (Facebook, iPad etc) and old "agents of social disintegration" (cable networks, internet) put an increasing pressure on all kinds of human association (families, local communities, national cultures, close relations, the relationship between parents and children or between relatives). The new means of interpersonal communication enable an increase in the quantity of relationships and networks in which an individual is involved. They foster 'loose' relationships with low levels of commitment and bonding. Any strongly bonding relationship, whether between man and woman, father and son, citizen and nation, is relativized by the constant increase of causes, initiatives, networks, information, offers, goods, opportunities and services offered via new means of communication. This situation enhances the pluralization of religious and ideological beliefs and information about

---

<sup>59</sup> In his monumental work on religious toleration in Western history, Perez Zagorin summarized the historical practice of cultures defined by Christian religious beliefs as follows: "Of all the great world religions past and present, Christianity has been by far the most intolerant". **Perez Zagorin**. *How the Idea of Religious Toleration Came to the West*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003, p. 1.

reality, products and producers of reality. It also pluralizes the communities, each constructing their own version of reality. The only remaining politically inclusive and integrative ideology is nationalism, and the only culturally inclusive and integrative type of religion will be religion as a symbol of a cultural identity.

## Conclusion

“Should” this article end with a moral exhortation to stop the negative constructions of ‘Others’ in our society and culture? “Should” I encourage us all to be more emphatic?

I do not think so.

If we could meditate and think for a while on how ‘Others’ perceive themselves and how they may see ‘Us’, we *will* evidently be better able to understand and tolerate the respective ‘Other’.<sup>60</sup> If we continue doing so, however, the likelihood of a better world will be lower than the likelihood of ‘Us’ becoming the next victims.

I am calling upon the reader instead to recognize how we function as a culture. To recognize the instances, where we actually are not rationally analyzing the patriarchal defects of, let us say, Islamic culture or the psychological disposition of the Islamist, but we are actually involved in a psychotherapy of ‘Self’ through the discourse about the ‘Other’. The ‘Other’ helps us. The ‘Other’ draws attention away from everything unpleasant in ‘Self’. To recognize in these matters that the ‘Other’ is as human as the ‘Self’. For humans, the ‘good’ world is often dependent on the knowledge of who the ‘(d)evil’ is.

## Acknowledgements

The research conducted for this article was assisted by the Targeted Financing Grant SF0180128s08 of the Estonian Science Foundation.

## References

- Abrahamian, Ervand.** The US media, Huntington and September 11. – *Third World Quarterly*, 3/2003, pp. 529–544.
- Ahmed, Akbar.** *Journey into America: The Challenge of Islam*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2010.
- Alexander, Jeffrey C.** Citizen and Enemy as Symbolic Classification: On the Polarizing Discourse of Civil Society. – *Real Civil Societies: Dilemmas of Institutionalization*. Jeffrey C. Alexander (ed.) London: Sage, 1998, pp. 96–114.

<sup>60</sup> **Monroe, Martínez-Martí** 2008, p. 858.

- Bell, Daniel.** *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties.* Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1960.
- Berger, Peter L.** Introduction: Between Relativism and Fundamentalism. – Between Relativism and Fundamentalism: religious resources for a middle position. Peter L. Berger (ed.) Cambridge: William Eerdmans, 2010, pp. 1–13.
- Berger, Peter L.; Luckmann, Thomas.** *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge.* London: Penguin Books, 1991 (first print 1966).
- Campling, Jo.** *Religion, Ethnicity & Society.* New York, NY USA: Palgrave Publishers, 1999.
- Challand, Benoît.** From Hammer and Sickle to Star and Crescent: the Question of Religion for European Identity and a Political Europe. – *Religion, State and Society*, 1/2009, pp. 65–80.
- Chomsky, Noam.** September 11. Allen & Unwin: Crows Nest, 2001.
- Crippen, Timothy.** Further Notes on Religious Transformation. – *Social Forces*, 1/1992, pp. 219–223.
- Crippen, Timothy.** Old and New Gods in the Modern World: Toward a Theory of Religious Transformation. – *Social Forces*, 2/1988, pp. 316–335.
- Cromartie, Michael** (ed.) *Religion, Culture, and International Conflict: A Conversation.* Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005.
- Davie, Grace.** Global Civil Religion: A European Perspective. – *Sociology of Religion*, 4/2001, pp. 455–473.
- Fukuyama, Francis.** Has history started again? – *Policy*, 2/2002, pp. 3–7.
- Gentile, Emilio.** *Politics as Religion.* Princeton University Press, 2006.
- Girard, René.** Generative Scapegoating. – *Violent Origins: Walter Burkert, Rene Girard, and Jonathan Z. Smith on Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation.* Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly (ed.) Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987, pp. 73–105.
- Harle, Vilho.** *The Enemy with a Thousand Faces: The Tradition of the Other in Western Political Thought and History.* Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000.
- Haynes, Jeff.** Religion and international relations after '9/11'. – *Democratization*, 3/2005, pp. 398–413.
- Hoffer, Eric.** *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements.* New York: Harper & Row, 2010 (first print 1951).
- Huntington, Samuel P.** If Not Civilizations, What? Paradigms of the Post-Cold War World – *Foreign Affairs*, 5/1993, pp. 186–194.
- Jenkins, Philip.** Demographics, Religion, and the Future of Europe. – *Orbis: A Journal of World Affairs*, 3/2006, pp. 519–539.
- Kaya, Ibrahim.** Modernity, openness, interpretation: a perspective on multiple modernities. – *Social Science Information*, 1/2004, pp. 35–57.
- Kumar, Deepa.** Framing Islam: The Resurgence of Orientalism During the Bush II Era. – *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 10/2010, pp. 1–24
- Kurth, James.** Europe's Identity Problem and the New Islamist War. – *Orbis: A Journal of World Affairs*, 3/2006, pp. 541–557.
- Marranci, Gabriele.** Multiculturalism, Islam and the Clash of Civilisations Theory: Rethinking Islamophobia. – *Culture and Religion*, 1/2004, pp. 105–117.

- Merdjanova, Ina.** In Search of Identity: Nationalism and Religion in Eastern Europe. – Religion, State & Society, 3/2000, pp. 233–262.
- Meyer, David S.** Constructing Threats and Opportunities After 9/11. – American Behavioral Scientist, 1/2009, pp. 10–26.
- Modood, Tariq.** Moderate Secularism, Religion as Identity and Respect for Religion. – The Political Quarterly, 1/2010, pp. 4–14.
- Monroe, Kristen Renwick; Martinez-Martí, Maria Luisa.** Empathy, Prejudice, and Fostering Tolerance. – Political Science & Politics, 4/2008, pp. 857–863.
- Niebuhr, Reinhold.** Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics: His Political Philosophy and Its Application to Our Age as Expressed in His Writings. Harry R. Davis, Robert C. Good (eds.). New York: Scribner, 1960.
- Norris, Pippa; Inglehart, Ronald.** Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Ross, Andrew A. G.** Emotion, Agency and the Politics of ‘Anti-Americanism’. – Millennium: Journal of International Studies, 1/2010, pp. 109–125.
- Schmames, Gerald; Miller, Joshua.** The Discourse of Denigration and the Creation of “Other”. – Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare, 3/2000, pp. 39–62.
- Seul, Jeffrey R.** Ours is the way of God: Religion, Identity, and Intergroup Conflict. – Journal of Peace Research, 5/1999, pp. 553–569.
- Stout, Jeffrey.** The Contested Sacred: The Place of Passion in Politics. – Commonwealth, November 5/2010, pp. 15–18.
- Strasser, Sabine.** Europe’s Other. – European Societies, 2/2008, pp. 177–195.
- Torres, Carlos Alberto.** The Church, Society, and Hegemony: A Critical Sociology of Religion in Latin America. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1992.
- Voegelin, Eric.** The Political Religions. – Eric Voegelin, Modernity without Restraint: The Political Religions, the New Science of Politics, and Science, Politics, and Gnosticism. Manfred Henningsen (ed.), Columbia, Mo: University of Missouri Press, 2000, pp. 19–73.
- Woodhead, Linda.** Five concepts of religion. – International Review of Sociology, 1/2011, pp. 121–143.
- Zagorin, Perez.** How the Idea of Religious Toleration Came to the West. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.