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Europe's New Religious Conflicts: Russian Orthodoxy, American Christian Conservatives and the Emergence of a European Populist Christian Right-Wing

The fall of the Berlin Wall thirty years ago marked the end of one era and the beginning of a new one. The end of the Cold War, the end of the division of Europe between a communist East and a capitalist West, promised social and political change. It promised the dawn of an open society, oriented towards individual human rights and democratic institutions, a free market and free academia.

Twenty years later, many achievements have been made, but also many setbacks have materialised. In 2020, the Central European University moved from Budapest to Vienna, because laws passed by the right-wing populist Hungarian government made it impossible for it to stay there. Poland has embarked on a judicial reform that the European Commission considers to be a violation of EU rules. In Bulgaria, the Constitutional Court has refused to ratify the Istanbul Convention, a Council of Europe document on gender-based violence. Russia adopted a constitution that will allow it to ignore the European Convention on Human Rights. Three decades after the end of the Cold War, Europe appears torn and divided again, only in different ways from in the past. “The End of history”,¹ as Francis Fukuyama called the vision of the global triumph of a liberal order after the end of the Cold War, has not taken place. Much malice has been poured over the thesis of the end of history. A crude philosophy of history, a Hegelian vision, haunted, as Jacques Derrida judged, by “the specters of Marx”.² A vision that ignored the dark side of liberalism, the material inequality in capitalism, injustice, racism, and sexism, such was the criticism waged against “The End of History”. The theory that an open society and liberalism will inevitably prevail has always been controversial, and it is now – after the global economic and debt crisis, after the rise of right-wing populist politicians on all continents – over and done with. However, I do not want to speak about the liberal order ironically. Instead, I seek to understand, from the vantage point of *the end* of the end of the Cold War, in which condition liberal

1 F. Fukuyama, “The End of History?”, *The National Interest* 16 (1989): 3–18.

2 J. Derrida, *Spectres de Marx: L'État de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale* (Paris: Galilée, 1993); English translation: *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (New York/London: Routledge, 1994).

democratic values are in Europe and in the world today. By liberal democratic values, I mean: democratic values (the idea that power in a state comes from the people) coupled with guarantees for minorities (even a democratic majority cannot oppress minorities in its midst) and limited state sovereignty (the state is bound by treaties to supranational human rights standards). Why are these liberal political values going through a crisis today?

There are many avenues one could take to answer this question. From a political economy perspective, we could point to how rising social inequalities raise questions about the liberal democratic social contract. From a political perspective, we could identify controversies over migration and the rise of populism as the main important factor in this crisis. The perspective I develop in this essay is that of a political sociology of religions. I want to consider the crisis of the liberal democratic order through the lens of the religion-society-politics triangle. What does this lens reveal about our political situation today? Three theoretical perspectives are helpful here.

First, secularisation: the secularisation thesis states that traditional religions are losing importance in modern societies, that they are moving out of public life and politics into the private sphere, and that fewer and fewer people are practising a religion (in the classical formulation of Peter Berger).³ The question as to whether secularisation makes religions disappear or not, has already filled many book-shelves. But in a way, it is a wrongly posed question. It is more interesting to ask how secularisation *changes* religions. That secularisation *does* change religions is undeniable. Churches and religious communities first reacted to secularisation defensively, and then, after the Second World War – as the Catholic Church did in the course of the Second Vatican Council – with a change of attitude: the Catholic and Protestant churches have largely accepted that their status has changed from being a power that dictates the social and political order of a society to being *one* formative force among others.⁴ To the same extent that religions have acquired the status of one association among others, their relationship to politics has also changed. Where previously religion preceded political decisions, religion now becomes one of the factors influencing politics. As a consequence, a paradoxical shift within modern religions takes place: while religions as a practice of faith under conditions of secular modernity have become more diverse and pluralistic, religions as institutions within the state – in the framework of national legisla-

³ P.L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1967).

⁴ J. Casanova, “Global Religious and Secular Dynamics. The Modern System of Classification”, *Religion and Politics* 1/1 (2019): 1–74.

tions – have become more uniform and more legalised. Olivier Roy speaks in this context of a “formatting of religion” according to the rules of the constitutional state.⁵

Second: functional theories of religion, as in Robert Bellah’s well-known concept of civil religion, assume that in modern societies religion continues to have a cultural and community-building effect, even if it is no longer recognisable as such.⁶ From this perspective, the profane values and symbols of a society can become ‘sacred’, not for theological or religious reasons, but – ultimately – for sociological and political reasons. A different interpretation is put forward by Jocelyne Cesari drawing on Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s original take on *religion civile*. There, civil religion means “a state-centred project aimed at securing the loyalties of citizens through rituals and symbols”.⁷ Civil religion in this sense is a state-centred religion, and not – or not first and foremost – a system of shared beliefs. The implication of civil religion as a state-centred religion is that the religious tradition in question and the state are mutually constitutive, that they depend on each other and that they are transformed by their relationship.

In order to illustrate the two theoretical perspectives, let me add two examples. Both are taken from my current research, the “Postsecular Conflicts” research project, which is concerned with the transnational and interdenominational dynamics of value conflicts and their protagonists, in particular with the role of one protagonist that could be called a newcomer to the global culture wars: Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church.⁸

In the thirty years since the end of the Cold War, the Russian Orthodox Church has gradually moved from being one religion in the Russian Federation to becoming the provider of a new civil religion for the Russian state. An architectural expression of this idea can be visited on the outskirts of Moscow, where the Moscow Patriarchate and the Russian Ministry of Defence have built a monumental cathedral to the Russian Armed Forces. The cathedral made headlines in spring 2020 when plans to install an art work representing Vladimir Putin in the church became

5 O. Roy, “Rethinking the Place of Religion in European Secularized Societies: The Need for More Open Societies”, Conclusion of Research Project ReligioWest, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute, March 2016, available at <http://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/40305> (accessed 12 January 2021).

6 R.N. Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in a Time of Trial* (New York: Seabury, 1975).

7 J. Cesari, *What is Political Islam?* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2018), 193.

8 Visit the website here: <https://www.uibk.ac.at/projects/postsecular-conflicts/> (accessed 12 January 2021).

public. The plan did not materialise in the end, but, in any case, the building itself is the visual expression of Russia's new civil religion.⁹

From the perspective of civil religion as a state-centred religion, a commitment to liberal political values is not obvious: democracy, the idea that power in the state emanates from the people, may still be valid from this perspective, but it is actually irrelevant, because if society and politics are equally permeated by religion, democratic negotiation is no longer needed. There is no need for liberal minority rights at all, but only – the current slogan of the Russian government and the Moscow Patriarchate in unison – for “traditional values”.¹⁰ In Russia, these traditional values are decreed by state laws: the ban on homosexual propaganda, the ban on violating religious feelings, the ban on swearwords in theatre and film – in recent years the Kremlin has implemented many laws that shape society according to the canon of traditional values.

From the secularisation perspective, the significance of liberal political values is completely different. Here, religion is seen as inwardly differentiated and, at its external border, where it meets the secular state, as legally defined. It is a part of civil society *vis-à-vis* the state and state institutions. Religion is therefore dependent on pluralistic, liberal democratic values, if only for its own survival. Religion should become, out of pure logic, a protector of these pluralistic, liberal democratic values.

Even for this last perspective one can find an example from the Russian Orthodox context. In September 2019, more than 170 priests of the Russian Orthodox Church published an open letter calling for the release of young demonstrators who had been arrested in August during peaceful street protests against the Moscow city government. During the protest marches, demonstrators had repeatedly sought – and found – shelter from police in churches in downtown Moscow. With this letter, the priests sent a signal that the Russian Orthodox Church was not only a pillar of the Russian state, but could also be an opponent, standing on the side of civil protests for free elections. What was particularly interesting about this protest of the priests was that in their letter they referred to the legacy of the well-known dissident priest of the Soviet era, Alexander Men.

There can also be a third perspective on the relationship between religion, society and politics, the perspective of culture wars. *Culture Wars* is an analysis

⁹ For a more detailed argument, see K. Stoeckl, “Russian Orthodoxy and Secularism”, *Religion and Politics* 1/2 (2020): 1–75, on pp. 49–56.

¹⁰ See A. Agadjanian, “Tradition, Morality and Community: Elaborating Orthodox Identity in Putin's Russia”, *Religion, State and Society* 45/1 (2017): 39–60; E. Stepanova, “The Spiritual and Moral Foundations of Civilization in Every Nation for Thousands of Years: The Traditional Values Discourse in Russia”, *Politics, Religion and Ideology* 16/2–3 (2015): 119–136.

by the American sociologist James Hunter, who uses it to describe the conflicts between progressive and conservative groups in the United States on issues such as abortion and homosexuality.¹¹ These moral conflicts, Hunter noted, have polarised American society for decades, and they polarise religious communities in particular. Religious market theory supports this analysis. It describes religions as competitors in a free market of world views, where extreme, strong messages – extremely conservative or extremely progressive – have competitive advantages over moderate messages. The moderate, large churches lose believers, the radical religious communities gain them.¹² In this situation, ideological differences become more important than confessional ones. The culture wars lead to interdenominational coalitions and mobilisation. From the culture wars perspective, the religion-society-politics triangle looks different again. Culture wars are battles over what stands at the centre of this triangle. It is not so much democracy that is under attack, but the added term *liberal*: conservatives generally reject the idea that the democratic state actively protects all minorities from discrimination as a form of relativism. Liberals, likewise, find it difficult to accept that liberal democratic minority rights may end up to the benefit of illiberal lifestyles – a topic recently explored by Susanna Mancini and Michel Rosenfeld in the volume *The Conscience Wars*.¹³

That the culture wars described by Hunter in 1991 have become a global phenomenon is not a novelty. What is relatively new is that Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church have become active players in the global culture wars.¹⁴ In the thirty years since the end of the Cold War, the Russian Orthodox Church is itself being shaped by the culture war dynamics, with the result that today the Russian Orthodox discourse on traditional values mirrors the topics, patterns and strategies of Christian Right groups in the West. American Christian Right groups actively promoted conservative family values and traditional gender roles in the early years after Perestroika.¹⁵ Their Cold War anti-leftism and anti-liberalism resonated with the disillusionment felt by many Russians with regard to the Soviet past and to the chaotic transition to market liberalism of the 1990s. Scholars and observers have, for the most part, been interested in the question as to how post-Communist soci-

11 J.D. Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

12 R. Finke/R. Stark, "Religious Choice and Competition", *American Sociological Review* 63/5 (1998): 761–766.

13 S. Mancini/M. Rosenfeld (ed.), *The Conscience Wars: Rethinking the Balance between Religion and Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

14 See K. Stoeckl/D. Uzlaner (ed.), *Postsecular Conflicts: Debating Tradition in Russia and the United States* (Innsbruck: Innsbruck University Press, 2020).

15 P.L. Glanzer, *The Quest for Russia's Soul: Evangelicals and Moral Education in Post-Communist Russia* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2002).

eties ‘learnt’ about democracy, liberalism, and the advantages of an open society. What such a perspective overlooked (or downplayed due to an intrinsic bias) were the existing tensions within the Western social order described by Hunter as “culture wars”. Illiberal, traditionalist and social conservative ideas were also part of the Western exportation of ideas to post-Soviet Russia, and they became an important source for contemporary Russian conservatism.¹⁶

The engagement of Russian Orthodoxy on the frontlines of the global culture wars can be interpreted as an indicator of an increasing ‘marketisation’ of religion. In his book *Holy Ignorance*,¹⁷ Olivier Roy has made the argument that present-day conservative religious tendencies are not the fruit of a (re-)rooting of religions in traditional societies, but instead the result of a global diffusion of ‘markers’ of religious conservatism that owe little to traditional concerns and practices and more to modern political dynamics. “No to abortion” and “no to same-sex marriage” are the global markers of religious conservatism for Protestant Evangelicals in the United States and in Brazil, for conservative Catholics in France and Honduras, and for Orthodox traditionalists alike.

Russian anti-liberalism is attractive to conservative Christians in the West, who resent the liberal and secular character of their own societies. This is particularly true in some of the new member states of the European Union, who have recently experienced a political right-turn. The conservative resentment over rapidly changing societies is frequently wedded to a general opposition to the European Union and Brussel’s control over national politics. This explains why some right-wing parties in Europe have not only adopted the anti-liberal rhetoric of traditional values, but have also looked to Putin’s Russia for a model of authoritarian government.¹⁸ However, in the United States, too, conservative Christians have been attracted to Russian Orthodoxy as a stronghold of traditional values, as is demonstrated in the ethnographic work on conversions to Russian Orthodoxy by Sarah Riccardi-Swartz.¹⁹

¹⁶ This connection is explored in more detail in Stoeckl/Uzlaner (ed.), *Postsecular Conflicts*. See also M. Suslov/D. Uzlaner (ed.), *Contemporary Russian Conservatism: Problems, Paradoxes, and Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

¹⁷ O. Roy, *Holy Ignorance: When Religion and Culture Diverge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

¹⁸ M. Laruelle (ed.), *Entangled Far Rights: A Russian-European Intellectual Romance in the Twentieth Century* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2018) and M. Laruelle, “Mirror Games?: Ideological Resonances between Russian and US Radical Conservatism”, in Suslov/Uzlaner (ed.), *Contemporary Russian Conservatism*, 177–204.

¹⁹ S. Riccardi-Swartz, “American Conversions to Russian Orthodoxy Amid the Global Culture Wars”, *Berkley Center Blog “The Culture Wars Today”*, 18 December 2019, available at <https://>

For conservatives in the West and in the Global South, Russia under Vladimir Putin has become an attractive partner against liberal values and against an international human rights regime that is frequently perceived as “too liberal”.²⁰ Scholars have usually interpreted the Russian Orthodox Church’s international value-based agenda as an instrument of Russian soft power and foreign policy.²¹ I argue, instead, that we need to focus on the Russian Orthodox Church as a moral norm entrepreneur in its own right. The Moscow Patriarchate has consistently acted as a moral conservative agent at the international level in different institutional forums since 2008; the Moscow Patriarchate and the Russian state have co-created and co-defined a Russian leadership role in the promotion of traditional values against the liberal international human rights regime, and hence Russia has become a key-player in the global culture wars. The Russian Orthodox Church today is as global as it is national. It is part of a worldwide religious market in which its appeal lies precisely in being considered a particularly conservative church. In this situation, the boundaries between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian state are blurred.

The fascination with Russia and traditional values as a bulwark against liberalism is evident not only among conservative Christians in the United States and in the new member states of the European Union. It can also be observed among the populist right in Western Europe. One example was the World Congress of Families, which took place in Verona in March 2019. The event was organised by the American International Organization for the Family (IOF) and the Italian NGO Pro Vita e Famiglia, and it was supported by the Italian League Party, which was in government at the time. It was met by impressive street mobilisation on the part of feminist and women’s rights groups, such as the NGO Non una di meno, who were joined by activists from other parts of Europe. Verona provided a glimpse of the reality of global culture wars. Why – one may ask – has the Italian League – which worshipped the waters of the river Po under its founder Umberto Bossi – turned into a defender of traditional Christian values? Why does its leader, Matteo Salvini, not miss a single opportunity to present himself with a crucifix or rosary in his hand? The answer is not only that the League is exploiting Christianity against

berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/american-conversions-to-russian-orthodoxy-amid-the-global-culture-wars (accessed 12 January 2021).

²⁰ C. McCrudden, “Human Rights, Southern Voices, and ‘Traditional Values’ at the United Nations”, *University of Michigan Public Law Research Paper* 419 (2014), available at <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2474241> (accessed 12 January 2021).

²¹ A. Curanović, “The Guardians of Traditional Values: Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church in the Quest for Status”, in M. Barnett *et al.* (ed.), *Faith, Freedom and Foreign Policy: Challenges for the Transatlantic Community* (Washington: Transatlantic Academy, 2015), 191–212.

Islam and against immigration, although this is one part of the answer. The answer is that conservative family values have become a global currency for actors on the right who want to oppose liberal democratic values and supranational human rights.

In the “Postsecular Conflicts” research project and our publications we have explored in considerable detail the ways in which, during the early 1990s, the American Christian Right exported its ideas to Russia and to the Russian Orthodox Church. Scholars of Russian Orthodoxy – and I do not exclude myself here – have for a long time overlooked these ties and influences because the emergence of Orthodoxy as Russia’s new civil religion appeared more important or more relevant. In reality, however, the moral conservative norm of mobilisation against same-sex marriage, against abortion, and against LGBTQ-rights has united Christian conservatives from the United States, Europe and Russia. As Evangelicals, Catholics and Orthodox actors from different countries form transnational and interdenominational coalitions against liberal values, they reshape the presence of religion in national political and public debates. They challenge established religion-state relations in different national contexts, and also the leadership of their churches.

The globalising culture wars and the new role of Russia as a promotor of conservative, traditional Christian values gives rise to a new type of religious conflict in Europe, which is no longer between the different confessions and no longer between the religious and secular, but over the very meaning of Christianity in Europe. At first I asked the question why the expectations of an open society were disappointed after the end of the Cold War. Why are liberal political values going through a crisis today? And what role does religion play in this crisis? I think that we have now taken one step further towards answering this question. Actually, the question why liberal political values are contested today is misplaced. They have always been the subject of criticism, and that is normal in a pluralistic society with different views of what constitutes a good life. Religion is a legitimate source of such views. But the questions as to how liberal democratic values have become controversial today, who is making them controversial, and by what means – these are questions that we as scholars should and can answer. The triangle religion-society-politics and the lens of Russian Orthodoxy has opened up new perspectives on the panorama of Europe’s new religious conflicts.