Conversions in Central and Eastern Europe

The Politics of Religion and Nonreligion across the 20th Century

Edited by Gašper Mithans, Heléna Tóth and Matteo Benussi

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Introduction

Over the past three decades, the rise of political religion from the ruins of secularist projects in post-socialist Eastern Europe – and beyond – has added a new nuance to the terminology of "conversion." It is now understood not just as an embrace of faith in its transcendent sense but as an activation of religious resources to provide a political foundation for immanent social formations based on elements of ethnicity, race, or upbringing. On the one hand, we have witnessed the sacralization of sociopolitical identities, which resist critical scrutiny and demand unconditional reverence as they assume the mantle of religion's ultimate truths. On the other hand, we observe the immanentization of religion's truths into a mirror of "society as such."

This interdisciplinary chapter, cowritten by a theologian and an anthropologist, posits that the dialogue between the social sciences and theology can enrich our understanding of this dynamic. Moving beyond the conventional social-scientific view of religion as a mere societal phenomenon, such dialogue sheds light on the existential, affective, and alethiological dimensions that make it so powerful as a political force.

Drawing on post-Yugoslav critical literature and post-Soviet examples and applying theoretical reasoning developed in relation to the 1990s Yugoslav Wars to the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian conflict, this chapter advances the concept of "ethnoreligiosity" to describe a political ontology that has proved attractive but destructive in post-socialist Eastern Europe. This concept was coined by one of this chapter's authors (Sekulić 2022) to enhance the critical tools necessary for addressing the challenges of our time. While Sekulić's original studies dealt specifically with post-Yugoslavia, this contribution tests the concept's applicability to Eastern Europe and beyond. By looking at Catholic and Orthodox examples from wartime Croatia and Serbia as well as Putin's Russia, this chapter illuminates some of the religious shifts shaping the post-socialist Eastern European region. Analyzing conversion as the sacralization of ethnonational identities also offers insight into the global revival of political religions and their ethical implications for global security.

The collapse of the Eastern Bloc was seen by the "Western" world as the victory of democracy and liberalism over one-party rule and authoritarianism. Some

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opined that history itself had reached its endpoint and a new era of human flourishing would unfold – a vision that, albeit secularist, carried distinct eschatological tones (Fukuyama 2006). Against this backdrop, the 1990s Yugoslav Wars were seen as an atavistic anomaly, the last salvo of a civilizational phase marked by ethnonational and religious conflicts (Woodward 1995).

However, hopes for an era of expansive peace and prosperity proved to be naïve. By the turn of the millennium, religious and ethnic strife had been recognized as a major threat to post-Cold War global security (Fox 2002, 143). Instead of vanishing, the interlocking of religion and ethnonationalism in Eastern Europe not only reemerged but solidified (Malešević 2013; Paić 2016), with the formation of "new" identity politics shaped by "old" ethnic and religious principles and rhetoric – a pattern recently exemplified by the Putin regime's cultural war against the "collective West" and its spiritual decadence, which found receptive audiences across the region. Thus, in retrospect, rather than being a glitch on the path to the "end of history," the Yugoslav Wars can be seen as ushering in a new series of conflicts in post-socialist societies (Perica 2002; Mojzes 1994, 2011), culminating in the recent escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict into all-out warfare (D'Anieri 2019; Wanner 2022, 2023; Plokhy 2023).

Of course, drawing a direct parallel between the post-Yugoslav conflicts and the current war in Ukraine would minimize the great regional and historic heterogeneity within the part of the world we call Eastern Europe. Nor is the intertwining of radical ethnonationalism with religion, along with its most tragic manifestations, ethnic cleansing and genocide, exclusive to the former socialist bloc. Yet the extant commonalities between post-socialist and post-atheist societies should not be overlooked and, as this chapter argues, a careful juxtaposition may pay high conceptual dividends. In what follows, we explore this juxtaposition contrapuntally rather than through one-on-one comparison. We draw on the case of former Yugoslavia primarily through theoretical, philosophical, and theological literature on warmaking and religion produced by Southeast European thinkers in the wake of the 1990s' Yugoslav Wars. Ethnoreligiosity in Russia will be explored by discussing three occurrences in the light of the conceptual insights gleaned from the ex-Yugoslav experience. These three instances are the Russian Orthodox Church's involvement in the "Special Military Operation" against Ukraine; the partial consolidation of the pseudoscientific theory known as the New Chronology; and Vladimir Putin's political appropriation of three Russian Christian thinkers – Vladimir Solovyov (1853–1900), Nikolai Berdyaev (1874–1948), and Ivan Ilyin (1883–1954). By exploring resonances between past and current crises, between the Balkan Peninsula and the Pontic Steppe, we aspire to shed light on the ongoing process of conversion of bodies politic to a political ontology of sacralized violence across Eastern Europe.

Ethnoreligiosity as Political Ontology

This chapter frames ethnoreligiosity as a process of sacralization of ethnonational polities and ethnonationalist politics. It describes it as a background political

ontology that may underpin and inform but is not reducible to defined political ideologies and movements. Furthermore, the concept of ethnoreligiosity does not merely indicate the role of national churches in fomenting nationalist radicalization, though that may happen (Šagi 1993; Vrcan 2001; Mardešić 2002; Perica 2002; Badurina 2019), but specifically the sacralization of ethnonational tropes – such as the people, the motherland, the state – and praxes, most notably political violence itself. In Durkheimian terms, ethnoreligiosity elevates one's *ethnos* above neighboring groups into an exceptional, "set apart" realm characterized by unique prerogatives and rights. Ideologically, an ethnoreligiosic[1] political ontology may translate into extreme religious nationalism, as was the case for the segments of the Serbian Orthodox and Croatian Catholic communities in which Ustashism and Chetnikism took hold in the 1990s. Ethnoreligiosity may also be allied to an imperist form of (ethno)nationalism that frames a given ethnic group as uniquely deserving of ruling over an empire, as in the case of Putin's Russia (Boterbloem 2020; Benussi 2024). An ethnoreligiosic political ontology may foster extreme and toxic social outcomes: to be a Catholic (Croat), one is supposed to align with Ustashism, to be an Orthodox Christian (in Serbia), one should embrace Chetnikism, or (in Russia) endorse the imperial agenda of *russkii mir* and support the Kremlin's military adventurism.

A rise in ethnonational identitarianisms and desecularization dynamics may be seen as responses to the destabilizing effects of globalization within the dominant neoliberal framework, which may trigger feelings of fear, insecurity, alienation, and dispossession (Zielonka 2018; Krastev and Holmes 2019; Burton 2022). The perception of existential threats to particular traditions, cultures, and values can lead to a regrouping around ethnic and religious factors, as these elements are seen as the most effective mechanisms for restoring a sense of belonging and stability or civilizational distinctiveness and grandeur. However, in cases where universalist, Axial religions are mobilized for ethnonational identitarian purposes, this situation can create a theological paradox. A contradiction may arise if a self-identifying believer becomes so committed to a particular worldly collective that their commitment takes precedence over their faith in a universal transcendental truth. This paradox becomes especially evident when a secular identity is seen as a "sacred framework" underpinning human existence. In Christianity, as in other universal faiths, an individual can enter a personal relationship with God only through the realization of God's presence in their life, not as part of a group or by the demands of any collective, even if that collective is religious in nature. Specifically, one does not belong to the Christian community by birth but only through baptism (Benussi and Manzon 2023). Thus, while the political ontology of ethnoreligiosity may influence transversal sections of society at times of crisis, it becomes particularly dangerous when ecclesial institutions betray the universalism of their message, investing religious nationalism with the legitimacy of organized faith and incorporating ethnonational mythology into theological discourse. When ecclesial institutions embrace this as a part of their mission, congregants may perceive supremacist or genocidaire messages as "religious" despite being rooted in worldly ethnonationalistic interests and motives.

In this context, a peculiar form of "conversion" takes place in which religion itself has its fundamental tenets overturned. Indeed, an integral part of the ethnoreligiosic political ontology, which is primarily (self-)defined through opposition to an external "other," is the creation of and fixation on a *mortal enemy*. This may imply an identification of the self with Christ and His suffering and the enemy with the tormentors of Christ, which can lead to the dehumanization of a strategic/military adversary. Domestically, this fosters a division of the community, by ethnonationalist criteria, into "loyal" and "disloyal" members, with the latter's membership status cast into doubt. Cast in ethnoreligious terms, this division positions "true believers" in a country's holy cause against the "apostates" who sully the purity of the body politic.

We have emphasized that, though Central European contexts may lend themselves to comparison due to cultural commonalities and shared historical experiences, it would be remiss not to acknowledge the differences between the former Yugoslavia and the East Slavic region. One important point of dissimilarity concerns the two areas' post-imperial and post-colonial dynamics. No Southeast European country could claim – or be saddled with – the mantle of the Ottoman or Hapsburg imperial histories, despite competition for regional predominance and a contested legacy of "Serbian hegemony" over Yugoslavia. By contrast, the regional hegemon in post-Soviet Central Europe, the Russian Federation, has proven that it is still influenced by the imperial myths and visions of its predecessor states. This means that warmaking, in the two contexts, is sustained by and justified through different theo-ontological underpinnings – which we respectively refer to as a "theology of national liberation" and an "imperist political ontology."

Sociologist Željko Mardešić has identified the theology of national liberation as a prevalent political ontology in post-socialist Southeastern Europe. Unlike Latin American liberation theology, here the focus is not on class but on ethnonational concerns. This theological discourse emerges from feelings of hostility toward supranational sociopolitical structures and is compounded by democratic shortcomings, bureaucratic dysfunction, and widespread distrust of secular institutions. Ethnically charged feelings of marginalization, injustice, and disenfranchisement vis-à-vis ongoing sociopolitical crises often act as catalysts, with religion offering dependable interpretive frameworks, affective resources, and organizational platforms for articulating the interests of emerging nationalizing groups (Jukić 1988, 5–53). This process is fraught with risks, namely, to paraphrase Carl Schmitt's famous dictum, the theologization of secular political concepts such as nation and state, along with the reshaping of universal religious narratives to suit the particularist interests of the *ethnos*.

In Putin's Russia, the sacralization of the nation and the state – for example, through the idea of a "God-bearing nation" endowed with a special relationship with the Divine (Składanowski 2023) – occurs in conjuncture with the exaltation of a self-appointed imperial and neo-imperial mission. An "imperist" political ontology, then, does not emphasize national liberation but normalizes and elevates imperial rule, an ordering of the world within which the Russian polity and "people" are essentialized and "set apart" as the carrier of an empire-making mission that is

at once geopolitical and salvational.[2] By virtue of ostensibly inherent exceptional characteristics, Russia is placed at the apex of an ethnic hierarchy and rhetorically endowed with a "sacred" right and duty to rule above its neighbors. Catchwords such as "country-civilization" (*strana-tsivilisatsiya*) exceptionalize the Russian Federation, casting it as something more than a "mere" country expected to abide by international law, while the concept of the Russians as a "state-forming people" (*gosudarstvoobrasuyushchy narod*), formally enshrined in the Russian constitution in 2020, exceptionalizes the position of the Russian people within the multiethnic Federation. The Church plays a vital role in shoring up and legitimizing the imperial *ethnos*'s state- and warmaking (Blackburn 2021; Shnirelman 2022; Dubtsova 2024; Kolov 2024).

Either in its national liberationist or imperist variant, ethnoreligiosity describes processes of sacralization of violence that cannot be reduced to "secular" rubrics such as nationalism or irredentism, yet do not pertain to the theological and ethical domain of religion – rather, they unfold in an area of indistinction that overlaps with both secular nationalism and doctrinal Christianity.

Ecclesia, *ethnos*, and *laos*

In theological terms, it can be useful to make a distinction between faith and religion: there is a qualitative difference between the legacy of Jesus of Nazareth ("faith") and the assemblage of communities, practices, and institutions founded upon and around that legacy ("religion"). Even if these aspects can be analytically distinguished, it is often hard to disentangle them in practice: an ambiguity that extends to the "theosocial" assemblage of the Church. Ecclesial communities and structures may align to varying degrees with the ideal path embodied in the practice of Jesus of Nazareth, but they are not the ultimate measure of faith, for the only true measure is found in the practice of Jesus and the message of the Gospel. Theologically, it is salvation through the Gospel that matters, and the Church, with its structures and followers, serves as a framework for salvation inasmuch as it aligns with that message. However, due to human fallibility and the ambitions of its hierarchies and members, the Church tends to find itself at odds with the universal message of the faith, creating a divide between the evangelical spirit and religious practices.

This should not come as a surprise: as social entities, ecclesial communities and structures tend to adjust to their sociopolitical context, becoming porous to worldly narratives and praxes. The issue here, however, is not in the Church's adaptation of the Gospel message to different cultural contexts (proclaiming the Christian faith in specific cultural settings while respecting local traditions, customs, and languages). The real problem arises when a community identifying as the Church begins to politicize the content of the Gospel to pursue earthly interests and serve worldly agendas. The risk of such a move is the occurrence of a "counter-evangelical shift," in which *laos* – the people of God – becomes conflated with *ethnos* – a historical people – thus reducing the universality of *laos* to the particularity of *ethnos* (Sekulić 2022; see Balibar 2004). Here, *laos* refers to a community of believers who, through their personal faith in God, become part of God's people. Within this

community, ethnic or worldly identity is irrelevant, even though members retain their affiliations to certain social groups. Conversely, *ethnos* refers to a group of people self-identifying as a bounded community in terms of shared ancestry, culture, and/or language, who may also be invested in certain religious practices associated with that historical and cultural heritage.[3]

If framing the ethnonational community as "one large family" can be dangerous, then casting it as "one large holy family" is even more problematic. Here there is a risk of "slippage" between *ethnos* (which becomes sacralized) and *laos* (which becomes ethnicized), which partly stems from the "broad ecclesiologies" of Orthodox and Catholic Christianity. Weber famously defined churches as both "voluntary associations" for religiously qualified people – that is, believers animated by faith – and "compulsory associations for the administration of grace" (Weber 1946, 314) that extend their jurisdiction potentially to all members of their titular flock, not just the faithful churchgoers. Eastern Orthodoxy has historically tended to articulate itself into a plurality of "national churches" roughly mapping onto linguistic and regional groupings. Catholicism is of course a – small c – catholic polity under the primacy of Rome, but it too is institutionally organized on a national basis, and at the local level its identification of the Church with a broadly defined "people" (Benussi and Manzon 2023) resonates with national framings. A tendency to conflate ethnonational-linguistic and ecclesial communities has been termed, especially in Eastern Christianity, "ethnophyletism." Ethnoreligiosity encompasses, and to an extent presupposes, but is not identical to, ethnophyletism. The latter likens, say, being a Serb to being a member of the Serbian Orthodox Church or a Russian to a member of the Russian Orthodox Church – and *lato sensu*, to extend the concept to a Catholic context, being a Croat to being a member of the Catholic Church in Croatia. Ethnoreligiosity, by contrast, indicates an ontological ordering that "sets apart" one's *ethnos* as endowed with the sacred, exceptional, even eschatological qualities of *laos* while preserving its exclusionary particularity, projecting the transcendental preeminence of *laos* back onto the sociopolitical plane of *ethnos* as worldly hierarchism and supremacism.

Taking ethnoreligiosic political ontologies into account helps us to understand the patterns and perils of conversion in post-communist times, which, according to cultural theorist Boris Buden, often manifests as a "cultural," public/discursive event rather than a spiritual one. This form of conversion is articulated through a "newly established language of faith," one that emphasizes cultural differences for worldly ideological purposes (Buden 2012, 131, 163). This process risks creating a type of religious subjectivity that is prone to identifying the liturgical community with the nation-state. Such subjectivity slips from citizenship – identified as a set of civic rights and duties – to membership in a sacred, or sacralized, body politic, "one large holy family" to which ingroups owe "loyalty" under pain of apostasy and betrayal, with outsiders often being considered "enemies." In the contexts of Serbian and Croatian ethnoreligiosic patriotism, for example, "loyal" subjects are those who support the holy cause of ethnonational interest, while "heretics" and "disloyal" individuals are those who oppose it for any reason. Similarly, under Putin's tenure, Russia's mainstream patriotic discourse has come to include the

tropes of "fifth columns," wicked "scum and traitors" from which the semi-sacred body politic needs to be "purified." Additionally, in former Yugoslavia and the ex-USSR, a slippage of *laos* and *ethnos* has been taking place in the context of regional ethnonationalist tensions and irredentist claims, with segments of both the Serbian and Russian Orthodox Churches, as well as the Catholic Church in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, endorsing ethnic pretenses as "holy" causes and treating coveted territories as a promised land worthy of sacrifice. Thus, religious structures that embraced ethnoreligiosic political ontologies and endorsed ethnonationalist policies have been complicit in elevating secular goals to the sacred level of near-religious duties.

In sum, the radicalization of ethnoreligiosic political ontologies, which began over three decades ago, has permanently and violently altered the sociopolitical landscape of Eastern Europe. In former Yugoslavia as well as Russia, a narrative emerged that added a "religious element" to post-communist transformation, promoting the idea of ethnonational states, defined through confessional difference, replacing the ruins of state atheist multinational federations (Baković 1992; Mladenović and Ćulibrk 1996; Buden 2012). In former Yugoslavia, clear-cut differences between the dissolved federation's demographic components could not be mapped onto political lines alone until (or unless) religion entered the equation, leading to the rough differentiation of Croats as Catholics, Serbs as Orthodox Christians, and Bosniaks as Muslims (Kordić 2009; Budak 2010). The situation north of the Black Sea is somewhat specular, with Russian national imperists claiming that the Ukrainians are "actually Russian" because they have the same ancestral essence, to which the Orthodox religion, and particularly Kyiv's descendancy, is crucial. In Ukraine, collective emancipation from Russia's embrace has required severing ties with the Moscow Patriarchate that had exerted its sovereignty over Ukraine since the 17th century, and reassembling an Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which was granted autocephaly in 2019 in the context of an ongoing dispute with the Russian Orthodox Church.

Churches at War

One particularly glaring example of ethnoreligiosity is the direct involvement of ecclesial structures and communities in warmaking in pursuit of (ethno)national interest. Across the former Eastern Bloc, Churches are often seen as a righteous force that sustained the people's spirit and preserved the national community during the perceived suppression of ethnonational identities under socialist rule (Jukić 1997, 425–26; Mardešić 2007, 756–94). Yet there is a darker side to such an uplifting tale of spiritually inspired underdogs, as it highlights the role of Church actors in sacralizing ethnonationalist agendas – lifting, so to speak, ethnonationalism from the domain of transient worldly politics to the realm of timeless, transcendental truth.

This created a reinforcement loop in which ethnonationalists were perceived as fulfilling a "holy duty," while Churches assumed the role of furthering worldly policies. The issue is compounded when this eschatological dimension transitions

into practical support for military aggression. As sociologist Srđan Vrcan (2006, 33) noted, the mobilization of religious arguments and actors in support of war narratives is not unexpected, as it occurs under the guise of the doctrine of just war (*bellum justum*). The consequences of framing worldly conflicts as sacred crusades is vividly reflected in the conduct of religious institutions across wartime former Yugoslavia and in the wartime Russian Federation. Despite rhetorical references to peace and neighborly love, clerical hierarchies have proved adept at turning a blind eye to atrocities and violence on the ground (Mardešić 2002; Horvat, Glad, and Starčević 2003; Glad 2017; Badurina 2019; Sekulić 2024). Thus, even some of those who are supposed to dislike war in point of doctrinal principle may view concrete pacifist stances with suspicion, believing ethnonational causes to be religiously justified or justifiable.

In former Yugoslavia, institutions such as the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina – alongside other proponents of ethnonationally oriented groups, institutions, and organizations – played a significant role in dismantling the socialist regime and initiating the establishment of new ethnonational order through the theologization of national discourse (Jukić 1997, 425). The dissolution of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia had left a vacuum, and Churches emerged as a fitting contender for the role of ideological guardian of social order (Popović 2010, 70–74; Paić 2013, 138). As this order unraveled along ethnonational lines, these Churches, willingly or unwillingly, became not only the "guardians" of their respective peoples but also a "spiritual driving force" behind the idea of swift military solutions to political problems. As religious institutions became more deeply entrenched in the ideological bedrock of ethnonationalism (Vrcan 2001, 14–15, 29), militant rhetoric took on an added layer, portraying the ethnic collective as a community of believers. Thus, the theology of national liberation finally assumed its darker political-religious form, culminating in the violent collapse of the Yugoslav federation.

The ecclesial dynamics in the East Slavic region only partly overlap with the former Yugoslav pattern. In Ukraine, the project of a national Eastern Orthodox Church distinct from the structures of the Russian Empire's ecclesial hierarchy, the Moscow Patriarchate, was pursued throughout the Soviet period amid many setbacks and withdrawals into exile. The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, for its part, was viciously suppressed under socialist rule due to its double association with foreignness (as Catholic) and nationalism (as Ukrainian) yet survived as a catacomb church. In 2018, Ukraine's two independent-minded Eastern Orthodox Churches merged into a unitary polity, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine – partly recognized by most, but not all Orthodox Churches – while the Ukrainian branch of the Russian Orthodox Church was formally outlawed in 2024. The prism of a theology of national liberation can be easily applied to these dynamics in the context of Russia's long colonial entanglement in Ukraine and its renewed and escalating war against a newly independent neighbor. Paradoxically, Russian military assaults imbued an otherwise problematic process of ecclesiological restructuring and consolidation with great urgency (Wanner 2022; Babie 2023). Ethnographic material collected by Matteo Benussi in 2024 suggests that both the Orthodox

Church of Ukraine and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church contribute both morally and materially to the country's defense capabilities in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian War. This, however, is framed not as aggression but as meeting a dire need for self-defense in the face of an existential threat.

Even though the Russian Orthodox Church, too, was persecuted under Soviet state atheism, it would be problematic to frame its engagement in the Russo-Ukraine War in terms of a theology of national liberation. The émigré Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, for example, criticized the Moscow Patriarchate for collaborating with the atheist Soviet authorities and allowing KGB infiltration but returned to the fold of the Russian Orthodox Church in 2006. Despite its tense relationship with the Soviet government, influential parts of Russian Orthodoxy, both in Russia and abroad, remained beholden to an imperial understanding of Russia. The White Orthodox émigrés had a political and romantic allegiance to the Empire, while the Soviet-subservient Russian Orthodox Church allowed itself to be used for the Kremlin's internal imperialist policies, especially in west Ukraine, where Greek Catholicism was being suppressed (Bociurkiw 1981). Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and especially with the rise of Putinism, the Russian Orthodox Church hierarchy has proved to be a willing partner in the consolidation and legitimation of the imperist political ontology of the "Russian world" (*russkii mir*). As regards Ukraine, for example, the Moscow Patriarchy has insisted on considering it canonical territory, while Patriarch Kirill and the Church justified the aggression, supported the mobilization of troops, perpetuated the assimilationist trope that Ukrainians are a Russian sub-*ethnos*, and declared the invasion of Ukraine (which technically cannot be called a war in Russia) a "Holy War" (Chapnin 2018; Kilp and Pankhurst 2022; Horsfjord 2024; Russian Orthodox Church 2024). This vision theologizes great-power expansionism and an ethnic hierarchy with the mighty Russian people at the summit, while the sacralization of war reinforces Putin's claim that "God is with us" (Pavlova 2024).

Both morally and theologically, we argue that this is not faith in its truest sense, as commitment to a universal message should contribute to the elevation of humankind. Instead, it is a politicized (per)version of religion that serves as an ideological foundation for a political culture where racial and ethnic parochialism intertwines with confessional identitarianism. In other words, it involves a pervasive ethnicization of *laos* and sacralization of *ethnos*, a particularly extreme form of identity politics prone to degenerate into violence.

The Sacralization of Culture

With this section, we move beyond institutional framings of ecclesia as church institutions and leaders into its broader configuration as a "people" bound by confessional identity and claiming a special relationship with God. The conflation of *ethnos* and *laos* is germane to an exaggerated emphasis on one's "culture," its uniqueness, and supposedly unparalleled achievements and exploits. According to political analyst Dejan Jović (2001, 119), the merging of culture into an ethnonationalistic framework in the former Yugoslav countries resulted in the fate of an

ethnos being identified with that of its putative culture. Philosopher Rastko Močnik (2016, 180) describes "national culture" as a sort of intimate endowment exclusive to community members and inaccessible to those outside it. This ethnocentric culturalist rhetoric, anthropologist Ivan Čolović noted (2008, 11–24, 73–111, 201–10), is pervaded by mythological elements and historical distortions aimed at elevating the nation's cultural patrimony to a "super culture" status. When these narratives proliferate, the body politic becomes saturated with a constant need for self-identification: everything is subsumed under (national) culture, including the sacred. Within this mindset, religious structures come to play a role as the custodians of culture and its purity.

Čolović (2008, 201) observed that the dangers of essentializing culture do not lay solely in ideological exceptionalism but in enforcing such perceived primacy through all available means, including violence. In the Balkans, this has seen cultural disputes spiral into physical confrontations, with assertions of cultural uniqueness escalating into policies of ethnic cleansing and genocide. "Culture" morphs into what can perhaps more aptly be described as "killture," a *weltanschauung* merging a culture-supremacist attitude (there are superior and inferior cultures) with a culture-segregationist one (strict boundaries between cultures must be enforced) and taking them to the extreme. The Yugoslav conflicts of the 1990s first turned "killture" into political agenda and then into military strategy. Indeed, it has been argued that the brutal interethnic conflicts in the Yugoslav Federation were waged in the name of culture itself (Čolović 2008, 201). This framework could also be applied to wartime Putinist Russia, where culturally supremacist and intolerant narratives about the preeminence of a Russian "civilization," never far below the surface of post-Soviet discourse, have become commonplace – from neo-Eurasianism to neo-Tsarist chauvinism, to the de facto official narrative of a *russkii mir* contraposed to a West "fallen into Satanism" (Russian Orthodox Church 2024). And all this feeds into the "killtural" violence unleashed against Ukraine's cultural specificity.

To appreciate the import of civilizational supremacism in Russia and its interconnection with ethnoreligiosity, it is helpful to briefly turn to an example which may appear "fringe" in its radicality but is nonetheless illustrative of wider dynamics in the mainstream: Anatoly Fomenko's New Chronology. In the broadest possible strokes, the New Chronology is a pseudoscientific paradigm proposing that historiography has been falsified, and (almost) all human history is in fact Russian history. The theory emerged in the late Soviet era from a small research group led by mathematician Anatoly Fomenko, intent on a patriotic retelling of the past based on a highly idiosyncratic and nonchalant application of astronomy and, later, linguistics, building on earlier traditions of historical hyper-revisionism and negationism (Jean Hardouin, Isaac Newton, and especially Nikolai Morozov). Since the mid-1990s, the New Chronology has morphed into a mass phenomenon, buoyed by endorsements by celebrities such as chess champion Garry Kasparov and right-wing adventurist Eduard Limonov (Rogatchevski 2020), and in 2019, a Multimedia Museum of the New Chronology opened in Yaroslavl. Professional academics' attempts to disprove the New Chronology and curb its success have

been in vain. As is often the case with pseudoscience and conspiracy theories, it is hard to tell how many Russians "really believe" in the New Chronology. What matters is what it is that makes it resonant and intriguing to toy with and contemplate, at least, as a possibility.

The New Chronology posits that history as it is taught in schools is full of "phantoms," that is, misplaced and mistimed retellings and repetitions of a single, shorter, and tighter arc, identified by mapping Biblical narratives of celestial phenomena onto later astronomic events. Within this smaller arc, there are, for instance, no Pharaonic Egyptian, Ancient Greek, Mesoamerican, or Early Medieval English histories: events narrated in such settings are in fact phantom images of occurrences centered upon Eurasia between the 10th and 17th centuries. For most of this period, the world was dominated by a Great Empire, the "Rus-Horde," which spanned most of Asia, Europe, and Africa, and later even crossed the Atlantic, establishing the civilizations we think of as "Mayan" or "Aztec." Episodes from myth, Scripture, or old chronicles, from the Trojan Wars to the Israelites' Exodus, from the Mongol conquests to Columbus's voyages, are in fact poorly understood developments that pertain to the imperial history of the Rus-Horde and its civilizational exploits, later erased from the record by scheming Western penmen (Nosovsky and Fomenko 2009, 2010, 2014).

The way in which the New Chronology interprets sacred history is especially revealing. Tales from the Old Testament are recast as exploits by Rus-Horde rulers and warriors: thus, for instance, Moses's crossing of the Red Sea is "actually" the maritime expansion of the Great Empire. Key motives and tropes of Christianity are grafted onto the New Chronology and Russified. The historical Jesus is thus identified as Saint Andrey Bogolyubsky, medieval ruler of Vladimir-Suzdal. This figure is also cast as the original source for a range of mythological and biblical figures (King David, Odin, King Arthur . . .). Jesus's birthplace is established in Crimea, and the site of his death in Tsargrad – that is, Constantinople, which the New Chronology turns into a vassal of the Rus-Horde. Jesus is said to have spent most of his life in the Russian metropole, the homeland of Virgin Mary, who was therefore a Russian by birth. The New Jerusalem prophesized in the Book of Revelations is in Moscow and identified with the Kremlin itself.

On the one hand, the New Chronology appears secularist in inspiration. Fomenko's theory expunges Divine agency and retells religious stories as mundane ones: the notion of the "angel," for example, is reduced to the name of a dynasty. Its retelling of the Old and New Testament stories is not compatible with Church teachings and as such has been criticized by Orthodox authorities. On the other hand, Fomenko's theory is heavily dependent on Biblical materials, albeit reinterpreted in a new, ethnocentric light. It not only subordinates all human experience to Russia's particular experience but also ethnicizes the sacred time and space of Scripture. Simultaneously, it infuses Russian history with the sacrality of religious motifs and themes, thereby elevating Russia above any other political entity and confirming its messianic status as a universal empire. It funnels the religiously resonant, affective power of Christianity – and to a lesser extent Old World mythology – into one country's national storytelling. At least some of its resonance

and attractiveness, even just as a thought experiment, stems from this retrospective, pseudohistorical "conversion" of Biblical *laos* into Russian *ethnos*.

The Russian state has not officially endorsed the New Chronology, though figures close to the Putin regime have lauded it as "patriotic" (Glazev 2020). Nonetheless, at a time of extreme politicization of history in Russia, the increased visibility and legitimacy of such an outlandish narrative is noteworthy. Russia's leadership may not "believe" in Fomenko's theory, but its enduring and indeed growing presence at the margins of the mainstream seems to confirm that under mature Putinism, "nothing is true and everything is possible" (Pomerantsev 2014) as long as it aligns with state-promoted political ontology of empire and is compatible with the Kremlin's civilizational chauvinism.

Narratives of civilizational grandeur and uniqueness are foundational to the Kremlin's project of a "Russian world" whose greatness is to be (re)established through force. This aggressive modus operandi ennobles revenge and conquest, covers one's own war criminals in glory, and views the victims of others with disdain. It drives governmental endeavors that employ organized violence to cleanse one "culture's" living space from any traces or memories of the other. In the nation-states formed from the remnants of the Yugoslav Federation, this cleansing was executed through a range of methods, from military operations to cultural or linguistic purges, the destruction of books and undesirable cultural artifacts, censorship against artistic expression, limiting the translation and distribution of undesirable texts, the expulsion of intellectuals and artists, and so forth (Ivančić, Polan, and Stjepanović 2019, 19–21; Sekulić 2020, 56). Sadly, "killture" remains a specter haunting nationalist revivals across Eastern Europe, as the *russkii mir* project and the Russo-Ukrainian War grimly illustrate. The idea of national culture as a pinnacle that all must safeguard primarily serves to create a context that justifies inhumanity.

Universalism Betrayed

The exploitation of religion's universalist force for particular ends is one of ethnoreligiosity's most consequential implications. Reflecting on the pastoral fiascos of religious institutions during post-socialist transition, the sociologist-cum-Franciscan Špiro Marasović (2002, 205–7) has offered the term "ethnic ecclesial consciousness" to describe a framing of the Church not in universal terms as the people of God but as an ethnocultural community. Marasović posits that, in former Yugoslavia, the fear of assimilation due to similarities among ethnolinguistic groupings led to the adoption of essentialist ethnic or racial theories as a means of safeguarding and stabilizing the boundaries of identity: confessionalism was central to this siloization, leading to a conflation of Croats with Catholicism, Serbs with Orthodoxy, and Bosniaks with Islam. Within this paradigm, ritual initiation into faith was conceptualized as a kind of sanctified entry into the national collective: those who do not fit the mold of authentic ethnic identity can still, more than three decades after the war, be perceived as a potential threat to national purity. Rather than conveying a universal message to all human beings, religion is thus cast as a distinct

spiritual legacy, or even mission, pertaining to a particular nation, ancillary to a politicized ethnoculture.

In relation to post-Yugoslav societies more broadly, Ivan Šarčević (2022, 29) has argued that the descent of spirituality into ethnonationalism stemmed from the prevailing of an *ethnos*-based sense of community over a *demos*-based body politic that allowed for ethnic diversity. Organicist communities tend to be characterized by conformity, which philosopher Radomir Konstantinović defined through the concept of parochialism: an enclosed worldview dominated by the sociopolitical status quo (2009). A parochial worldview idealizes the static vision of a golden past, portraying it as an unspoiled, harmonious lifeworld to which it is vital to return. Traditionalism emerges as a defining trait, suppressing the acknowledgment of a dynamic historical narrative and evolving societal ethos (Marasović 1997, 41). From a public theological viewpoint, for the Croatian Catholics and Serbian Orthodox communities during wartime, this distortion led to disregard of pan-human Gospel principles in favor of parochial norms, resulting in both intellectual and spiritual stagnation.

Once again, reflections emanating from the experience of the Yugoslav Wars can shed some light on the dynamics observed in wartime Russia. Let us consider the episode of Vladimir Putin donating philosophy books to regional governors and party leaders across the country in early 2014, concomitantly with Russia's annexation of Crimea – and how it resonates with the concepts of ethnic ecclesial consciousness, parochialism, and ethnoreligiosity. The three tomes in question are Vladimir Solovyov's *Justification of the Good* (1918 [1899]), a soaring, career-crowning moral philosophy treatise on the foundation of the social order, Nikolai Berdyaev's *Philosophy of Inequality* (2012 [1923]), a dark, bitter, and uncharacteristically resentful philosophical denunciation of the Russian Revolution (later repudiated by its author), and Ivan Ilyin's *Our Tasks* (2011 [1956]), a sprawling collection of vehemently nationalist articles dictating the line for a future "national Russia."

Given its space limitations, this chapter will not even begin to detail these volumes' contents and ambitions, their place in the authors' oeuvres, and the three philosophers' intellectual biographies. Suffice to say that Solovyov and Berdyaev are part of the global philosophical canon: belonging to two consecutive generations and epochs, they both embody a distinctly "humanist" and freethinking positionality within Russia's Christian conservative thought. The staunch reactionary Ilyin, though a less important thinker, has received a great deal of attention as Putin's "favorite philosopher" (Snyder 2018). While some commentators have tended to treat Putin's putative literary sources as an entryway into his worldview, here we will not speculate on the extent to which these thinkers may have shaped the Russian president's psyche. Rather, we will dwell on the public significance of Russia's leader "injecting" Christian philosophy into the machineries of the state. To do so, it is helpful to briefly consider what Solovyov, Berdyaev, and Ilyin's distinct and autonomous brands of Christian philosophy have in common.

1) An "asecular" positionality: While theologically and ontologically engaged with Russian Orthodoxy, these books do not emanate from an ecclesiastic

institution, and indeed, despite being committed and vocal Christians, none of their authors is a man of the cloth. These texts can be considered "asecular," inhabiting an intermediate space between Church and state, committed to, supportive of, yet independent of both. Turning to the authority of these volumes is not quite the same as turning directly to explicitly "religious" literature. Without formally repudiating "modern" secularity (which might have happened had the head of state started circulating Bibles or patristic treatises across the country's administrative machinery), Putin's gift moves beyond the secular, ethically pluralist playing field of the "modern" liberal-democratic state.

2) A parochial "ethnic ecclesial consciousness": To different extents, in different ways, and with different degrees of subtlety, these books – and their authors' oeuvres more generally – articulate an apologetics of the extraordinary character of the "Russian idea" and the "God-bearing Russian people," with its unique, divinely decreed destiny. This mystically tinged ethnocentrism lends support to a narrative about Russia's historical mission of global import, key to the Putin regime's civilizational chauvinism.

3) A rationale for violence: Albeit in different ways, these volumes include moral and religious justifications for inequality, coercion, and political force at the hands of the state, including warmaking and specifically imperial warmaking. They can therefore be mined by authoritarian actors for retrospective legitimization of a muscular, illiberal approach to both domestic and foreign policy.

4) A rationale for great-power sovereignty: With varying degrees of directness, these volumes outline historical, geographic, and civilizational justifications for political control over vast and heterogeneous territories, singling out a supposedly "organic" primacy of the Russian element over its Eurasian neighbors, Slavic and non-Slavic alike.

5) A Divine ontological baseline: Asecular philosophical literature operates on the grounds of an intellectual intimacy with God, mediated by reasoning, intuition, and knowledge (of historical and societal phenomena, of the way of the world, and of the "Russian soul") rather than by Church authority and tradition. Russia's exceptionalism, state violence, and sovereignty are ultimately justified in this literature's insights into God's plan for Russia as it grapples with modernity.

In isolating these common threads running through Solovyov, Berdyaev, and Ilyin – both the 2014 gift volumes and their oeuvres more generally – this contribution does not pass intellectual judgment on their philosophies. Instead, it seeks to cast light on what may make their books meaningful and valuable for an exercise of symbolic statecraft. Applying the interpretive framework of ethnoreligiosity, it can be argued that their resonance lies in a legitimating power that is not only intellectual and "cultural" in a secular sense, that is, based on their authors' stature as thinkers, but is also, and more fundamentally, *metaphysical*. These are not just pieces of political theory that can inspire public servants in their duty: these are glimpses of a Divine will that justifies the Putin regime's distinctively ruthless approach to statecraft, in turn endowed with a unique (and normative) understanding of God, history, and Russia's mission. Invested with prerogatives and rights that exceed those of "normal" countries because they are ultimately mandated by God, the Russian

state, and in particular the *imperial* state, becomes conceivable as an intermediate body between the universal Divine order and the worldly social sphere, turning into the power that is capable of deploying force to save humankind from the Satanic lures of Western liberal modernity. Where a sober and faithful reading of Solovyov and Berdyaev, and perhaps even Ilyin, might find only an exhortation – however ethnocentric – for morally sound statecraft, an ethnoreligiosic interpretation of these texts would not need to try very hard to extract a parochial justification of ethnic warcraft in the name of Christianity's universal principles.

Conclusion

During the dissolution of socialist systems that had previously guaranteed stability, there was a moment in both former Yugoslavia and the East Slavic region when democratic processes seemed possible, only to be shut down in a violent deflagration (the Balkans) or devolve into an increasingly assertive and aggressive authoritarianism (the Russian Federation). The development of post-communist societies toward nationalism and imperism may be seen as an ideological defense against the traumatic disorientation and loss of political ground, with the newly formed and nationalizing post-socialist societies embarking on turbulent journeys of self-discovery: "Who are we, and where do we belong?"

As regards the Yugoslav case, the conflict accompanying socialist breakdown boiled down to a ruthless power struggle between opposed ethnonationalist projects (Popović 2010, 70–74). Democracy alone was insufficient: something more robust, tangible, and definitive was evoked to terrible and still-unfolding consequences (See, Čolović 2008, 202, 2021). In the Balkan region, the elevation of communal belonging to sacred status resulted in an ethnototalitarian and ethnoclericalist form of ethnoreligiosity. Externally, ethnototalitarianism indicates the pursuit of ethnically homogeneous states (Jović 2001), at the cost of destabilizing the integrity of other states where members of the same ethnic group reside as citizens. Internally, it describes the consolidation of authority through intense psychological and physical mobilization to enforce ideological unanimity. In the Croatian and Serbian contexts specifically, ethnototalitarian ideology in its external dimension aligned with the aspirations of Greater Serbia and Greater Croatia or their remnants, such as Republika Srpska (de jure) and Herzeg-Bosnia (de facto). Internally, it mirrored the criminal agenda of the Ustasha and Dragoljub Mihailović's Chetnik-monarchist movement.

Aligned with ethnototalitarianism, ethnoclericalism represents, according to historian Vjekoslav Perica (2002, 214–15), a unique Southeast European contribution to contemporary religious fundamentalism. Seeking to enshrine religious institutions' role in preserving ethnic polities, ethnonationalist churches saw themselves not only as shepherds of their spiritual communities but also as integral components of the ethnopolitical construct of the nation-state. It can be observed that the Catholic Church in Croatia, as well as the Serbian Orthodox Church, primarily in Serbia and Republika Srpska, have partially achieved these objectives, having become de facto state-adjacent entities endowed with notable influence on public

opinion and, to an extent, political decision-makers. As regards the Ustasha and Chetnik-monarchist movement, these ideologies are not openly endorsed by religious institutions nor uniformly shared within communities. However, segments of these groups have tacitly supported the historical revisionism which downplays the criminal nature of 1990s nationalist warfare. As a result, the criticism is primarily aimed at the methods used to carry out the idea rather than the idea itself (Đureinović 2021; Goldstein 2018, 2023; Perica 2021, 111–21).

The lesson from the Yugoslav case is a deeply disturbing one, inasmuch as the politics of ethnic cleansing and genocide have ultimately paid off. Post-Yugoslav territories have largely been ethnically cleansed of the "others," while war criminals, war profiteers, and economic criminals have become objects of nostalgia in the remnants of these formerly multiethnic societies. The role of the religious institutions in this phenomenon is sadly undeniable, as they have lent their "spiritual support" to violent ethnonationalist agendas (Vrcan 2001; Perica 2002; Sekulić 2024).

To an extent, this lesson from two decades ago applies to the conflict now unfolding between the Russian Federation and Ukraine, in the sense that the political void left by socialism has been filled by projects relying on the sacralization of *ethnos* and the ethnicization of religious themes and feelings, ultimately culminating in all-out war after a long buildup. Under Vladimir Putin's tenure, especially from his third term on, and, in particular, starting from the 2014 annexation of Crimea, the country switched to a cultural war footing against the "collective West" and the "rules-based" international order that the latter claimed to represent (whether with good reason or not is open to discussion). However, there are differences between the Yugoslav and the Russian scenarios.

Rather than ethnototalitarianism, based on absolute homogeneity, the Putin regime's discursive repertoires embrace a form of civilizational chauvinism in which ethnic differences are allowed, albeit ranked within a hierarchy presided over by the "state-forming" Russian *ethnos*. Being a national church catering to a certain ethnic majority, the Russian Orthodox Church may be subjected to ethnoclericalist impulses. On the other hand, however, its imperial legacy means that its jurisdiction extends to non-Russians both within and beyond the Russian Federation (Kryashens, Ossetians, Chuvash, Belarusians, Moldovans . . .), while its alignment with the Kremlin's neo-imperial ambitions means that it continues to stake claims on Ukraine. As a result, this chapter argues that the form of ethnoreligiosity associated with wartime Putinism can be described as imperist. Both in terms of its domestic and its foreign policy ramifications, an imperist political ontology is proving no less destructive than its ethnonationalist predecessor. Within Russia, critical citizenship is stigmatized as betrayal and disloyalty, and even priests who fail to toe the institutional line on the holiness of the aggression of Ukraine face the risk of being defrocked (Sorochinskaia 2024). In the international arena, Russia's holy war has brought about the most significant European conflict since World War II, emboldened the global far right, wrought havoc on the international order with as-yet unpredictable implications, and escalated the risk of a nuclear confrontation between superpowers.

What the Yugoslav Wars, whose legacy remains, and the Russo-Ukrainian conflict have in common is that they exemplify the dangers of transition societies "converting" to ethnoreligiosity – where the idiom of conversion is applied to societal shifts in dominant political ontologies rather than the individual embrace of a spiritual truth. While we have focused on the former Eastern Bloc, it is vital we end this contribution by stressing that the perils of ethnoreligiosity are far from confined to former socialist societies, as the rise of Christian nationalism in the United States and across the European Union testifies. Around the globe, the responses of religious communities and institutions to the challenges of our time will reveal what remains of them in an ethical, and evangelical, sense.

Notes

1 In keeping with Sekulić's previous uses of the term, we use this adjective to mean "pertaining to ethnoreligiosity," hence not as synonymous with the more generic "ethnoreligious" ("pertaining to ethnicity and religion").
2 In advancing the notion of imperist ethnoreligiosity, we are not proposing a general theory of imperial policymaking nor attempting to opine about the degree to which historical empires, including Muscovy, the Russian Empire, and/or the Soviet "Empire," achieved sustainable forms of multiethnic coexistence.
3 The sacralization of the ethnic community has resonances with primordialist and perennialist conceptions of ethnic and confessional affiliation. Primordialism casts ethnicity as a semi-biological phenomenon manifesting in an innate connection between individuals, community, ancestry, and place geographies (Shnirelman 1996; Anderson, Arzyutov, and Alimov 2019). Perennialism reinforces this bias by projecting ethnic affiliation – framed as a fundamental basis of social existence throughout human history – onto a revitalized past, erasing a distinction between the modern conceit of nationality and ancestral ethnic ties.

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