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The Role of Religions and Cultures in Conflicts

Abstract.

All major religions claim to call for peace in their messages and to actively contribute to peace in times of conflict. However, it must be noted that the scriptures of all religions also contain texts that can be interpreted as calls to violence. The question arises whether in conflicts such as the Balkan Wars, the Northern Ireland conflicts, Israel/Palestine, or even the Crusades, belonging to a religious community is the basis and trigger for military actions, or whether religious differentiation is only a reinforcing consequence of other conflict-promoting factors.

Research largely works with Vilhelm Aubert's conflict typology, distinguishing between *interest conflicts* (disputes over scarce goods) and *value conflicts* (morality, religion, ideology, rule). Since people are more easily mobilized in *value conflicts* and the willingness to use violence and to be a victim increases, rulers today, as in the past, are striving to ideologically charge *interest conflicts* and transform them into *value conflicts*.

After an extensive treatment of examples (Crusades, Balkan War, Northern Ireland conflict, etc.), this study concludes: Many collective long-lasting conflicts in Europe initially suggest religious causes. However, a differentiated examination shows that it is not the religious origin but rather the differentiation from the other culture and the inherent fear of the foreignness of others that is usually the dominant basis for enmity.

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Examples of worldwide peace initiatives based on religious grounds are listed, which demonstrate that religions are “experts” in processing memories (Healing of Memories) for peacekeeping and for sustainable reconciliation between nations, cultures, and religions.

Keywords: religious conflicts, cultural identity, peacebuilding, interfaith dialogue, reconciliation

Introduction

All major religions claim to be peaceful and to contribute to peace in times of conflict. But what is the reality? Are “religions inherently violent due to their claim to truth... [and] do they, despite all their human appearance, always harbour a totalitarian core, or are religions merely instrumentalized and misused”?²

Now the question arises: “Is religion, or belonging to a religion/confession / religious community, the basis or the trigger for military actions, or is religious differentiation rather a reinforcing consequence of other conflict-promoting factors?”³

To investigate this question, it is helpful to consider which role religions can play in conflicts. And to follow this, it is necessary to understand how conflicts arise and according to which criteria they proceed.

1. Clarification of Interest Conflicts and Value Conflicts

It is first necessary to understand “which conflict mechanisms and internal logics come into play in conflict realities and what consequences this entails”.⁴

² WEINGARTH, Markus A. (2016): *Frieden durch Religion? Das Spannungsverhältnis zwischen Religion und Politik*. Gütersloh, Bertelsmann Stiftung. 8. [All translations of originally non-English texts/quotations are mine throughout the article unless otherwise stated.].

³ BRANDES, Dieter (2026a): *Versöhnung durch Erinnerung – Healing of Memories in Europa an ausgewählten Beispielen*. Book series: Kirche–Konfession–Religion, vol. 89. Goettingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. Chapter: 7.1.3.1. *Die Rolle von Religionen in Konflikten*.

⁴ WEINGARTH 2016, 8.

The term “conflict” originates from the Latin *conflictio* ‘collision’, ‘dispute’ or *confligere* ‘to collide’, ‘clash’, ‘fight’, ‘argue’. It means that “certain intentions or purposes of two or more parties collide with each other”.⁵

The conflict can arise from the fact that the parties involved pursue different goals or that they have the same goals but one side wants to impose itself over the other to achieve the realization of goals more quickly or exclusively.

Research largely follows Vilhelm Aubert’s conflict typology, distinguishing between interest conflicts and value conflicts.⁶ Aubert identifies interest conflicts as those based on the scarcity of goods or power positions that are claimed by various parties alike.⁷

A value conflict, on the other hand, “is based on a dissent regarding the normative status of a social object”.⁸ This can be disagreements over values, positions, and facts, or about hierarchization and the correct application of values.⁹ These different backgrounds of conflict lead “to a specific intensity and dynamics of the resulting conflicts and to their own strategies for resolving or civilizing these conflicts”.¹⁰

a) Interest Conflicts as a Dispute over “Scarce Goods”

Interest conflicts concerning the distribution of scarce goods or the securing of access to them can relate to material resources, such as water or land, or to existential needs of life such as income and future prospects. However, they can also be about security and power positions (e.g. political offices).

⁵ Op. cit. 9.

⁶ AUBERT, Vilhelm (1963): Competition and Dissensus: Two Types of Conflict and of Conflict Resolution. In: *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*. 7, 1(March). Thousand Oaks (California, USA), SAGE Publications, Inc. 27.

⁷ AUBERT, Vilhelm (1972) [German transl.]: Interessenkonflikt und Wertkonflikt: Zwei Typen des Konflikts und der Konfliktlösung. In: Bühl, Walter L. (ed.): *Konflikt und Konfliktstrategie – Ansätze einer soziologischen Konflikttheorie*. Nymphenburger Texte zur Wissenschaft ntw. Munich, Nymphenburger Verlagshandlung. 180, 182.

⁸ Op. cit. 183.

⁹ Op. cit. 184.

¹⁰ WILLEMS, Ullrich (2015): Die Unterscheidung von Interessen- und Wertkonflikten. In: *Wertkonflikte als Herausforderung der Demokratie*. Wiesbaden, Publisher Springer Nature. 11.

Louis Kriesberg identifies the condition for the occurrence of interest conflicts as the fact that “at least one of the parties must feel that the distribution of equally valued goods or positions is unsatisfactory”.¹¹ However, the unsatisfactory distribution must “be attributable to actions of another party or at least not be changeable without disadvantages for other parties”.¹²

According to Markus A. Weingarth, conflicts of interest are generally carried out in three ways:

- the right of the stronger,
 - the strength of the right,
 - communication to reach a compromise.¹³
- (1) The so-called “right of the stronger” is actually not a right but simply the “power of the stronger”.¹⁴ Thus, “conflict parties in political disputes often believe too often that they can force success through military threat and finally violence [...] and only agree to negotiations when a military victory seems unattainable in the face of all expectations”.¹⁵ However, by then, many people have already lost their lives, and cities have been reduced to ruins and ashes.
- (2) According to the “strength of law” as a method of conflict resolution, the parties involved call upon a court to have it decide who is in the right. However, the prerequisite is that:
- courts also ensure the enforcement of this law, in the extreme case by threatening and applying force;
 - there exists a “functioning and universally recognized system of the rule of law”¹⁶ (including independent judges and unhindered access to the courts).

¹¹ KRIESBERG, Louis (1982): Social Conflict Theories and Conflict Resolution. In: *Peace & Change – A Journal of Peace Research*. 8, 2–3. 36. Cincinnati (Ohio), University of Cincinnati.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ WEINGARTH 2016, 9–11.

¹⁴ Op. cit. 10.

¹⁵ Op. cit. 11.

¹⁶ Op. cit. 10.

- (3) The “most constructive form of conflict resolution” is dialogue with the goal of “reaching an agreement on a compromise”.¹⁷

In cases where the opposing interests are not completely opposed, however, a consensus is generally sought in processes of negotiation (bargaining). The central mechanism of civilized solutions to interest conflicts is “a compromise in the form of mutual concessions on parts of the claims initially made”.¹⁸

The tendency to resolve conflicts through compromise is also “encouraged by the fact that other conflict resolution methods, such as court decisions (...), carry the risk of losing everything”.¹⁹

However, even if an interest conflict escalates, for example, “when the strategic positions of the parties are very asymmetrical or the parties simply insist on their positions”,²⁰ there is still the fundamental possibility of reaching a compromise through dialogue in the course of the conflict. Weingarth refers to it as “the advantage of interest conflicts that even after the outbreak of violence, a settlement through compromises, concessions, and interest balancing is still possible”.²¹

On the other hand, this is much more difficult in the case of resolving value conflicts.

b) Value Conflicts and Their Conflict Potential

In value conflicts, the dispute is not about the distribution of scarce goods or securing access to them, about resource access or power positions, but about ethical, moral, religious, cultural, and ideological foundations. It is about worldviews and about models of governance and society.

It is about “values, and thus also about culture, tradition, education – about all that is subjectively important and decisive”, and thus about “identity, which makes a person, group, ethnicity, or nation what they fundamentally are”²² Value conflicts are “irreducible conflicts”, in which “compromises are naturally much more difficult”.²³

¹⁷ Op. cit. 11.

¹⁸ AUBERT 1972, 181.

¹⁹ WILLEMS 2015, 12.

²⁰ AUBERT 1972, 185.

²¹ WEINGARTH 2016, 11.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid. Weingarth gives this example: “The recognition of universal human rights is incompatible with the discrimination of women, blacks, or homosexuals.”

Value conflicts are, “far more frequently than interest conflicts ... aggressively pursued”²⁴ and escalate into acts of violence – because, in value conflicts, it often “comes down to everything”. A defeat could “endanger one’s own identity as a spiritual basis for life and existence”, and “to prevent this, no sacrifice is too great, up to the sacrifice of one’s own life”.²⁵

Weingarth identifies three “severe consequences”²⁶ as follows:

- In value conflicts, people are more easily mobilized and more willing to take action.
- In value conflicts, the readiness for violence increases.
- In value conflicts, the readiness to be a victim increases.

The compromise as a conflict resolution appears less promising in value disagreements. The search for a compromise is often viewed in value conflicts as “not infrequently as illegitimate (cow) trade for moral principles”.²⁷ This is the case when there seems to be only an either–or option and when “compromises are only considered dilution, if not betrayal of the good cause, of the truth”.²⁸ Moreover, conflicts about values and truth also have a public character at all times. Thus, the negotiating parties often act far less autonomously in the search for compromise solutions than in interest conflicts when it comes to exchanging conditions for compromises.²⁹

Vilhelm Aubert points out, however, that dissent over values and truth does not necessarily have to lead to open conflict. This applies, for example, when bearers of opposing values and beliefs live in separate social groups or societies.³⁰ An example can be the ethnic coexistence between the Romanian, Hungarian, and Saxon ethnic groups in Transylvania. There was discrimination against individual groups over the centuries – particularly against the Romanians –, but conflicts were openly expressed only in individual cases, because the ethnic groups largely lived in separate social and societal groups.

²⁴ WILLEMS 2015, 12.

²⁵ WEINGARTH 2016, 11.

²⁶ Op. cit. 13.

²⁷ WILLEMS 2015, 12.

²⁸ WEINGARTH 2016, 12.

²⁹ AUBERT 1972, 183 f.

³⁰ Cf. op. cit. 183.

As another example, the peaceful coexistence of social groups with different religious orientations in the Principality of Moldavia can be mentioned, where the other religious affiliation was respected through religious tolerance (examples: Armenians and Lipovans). Religious tolerance was also realized – with limitations – in Dobrogea as the Sanjak of Tulcea in the Ottoman Empire.

Louis Kriesberg also emphasizes that for violent escalation over value conflicts, the disputed values must also be “incompatible”. This is the case when individuals or groups with different value perspectives are in a social relationship that sets these perspectives in opposition.³¹ This can involve professional or personal social power struggles, but it may also be about power and ownership claims over other ethnic groups as in the wars in Bosnia, Croatia, and Kosovo.

c) Conspiracy Theories and Echo Chambers

An extreme expression of value conflicts can be conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories have existed throughout human history for centuries. They fascinate people time and again and are often a dangerous phenomenon of social dynamics. They often arise in times of social and/or economic uncertainty and fear. When people do not understand or do not want to understand the complexity of the current social, economic, and political reality, they seek simple explanations. Instead of accepting complexity, people look for the explanation in a hidden power, a secret network pulling the strings in the background, or in an ostensibly clear culprit or an ostensibly identifiable guilty group.

Unexplained or threatening events, such as wars, pandemics, or economic crises, generate fear and foster conspiracy theories that no longer make the events seem inexplicable and senseless but rather orchestrated by clearly identifiable actors. Conspiracy theories are associated with a strong need for social belonging. This belonging to a group is connected with perceived similar values, which aim to impose these values as a “wake-up community of like-minded individuals” with a sense of superiority, even over a supposed “manipulated majority”, if necessary, also through violence.

People who adhere to conspiracy theories usually operate in a largely mental and often also physically enclosed space. Cass Sunstein coined the term “echo chamber” to

³¹ KRIESBERG 1982, 33.

describe this phenomenon,³² the term being a metaphor that refers to a physical media space that is shielded from acoustic environmental influences. In the social sciences, this term refers to “a metaphorical space where statements are amplified and interference, such as differing opinions, are swallowed”.³³ In echo chambers, “group-dynamic opinion formation processes occur in personalized information environments”, where “like-minded individuals mutually confirm their own opinions time and again like an echo, while contact with differing opinions diminishes”.³⁴ In this way, the participants develop “the impression of representing a majority opinion that they increasingly articulate from this understanding”.³⁵ The spread of conspiracy theories is facilitated by the functioning of modern media such as the Internet and, in particular, social networks, which allow information to be disseminated unfiltered in media echo chambers, where like-minded individuals reinforce each other. Manipulated algorithms amplify this effect by preferentially showing content that is emotionally stirring, to which conspiracy theories are particularly well suited.

History also shows that echo chambers form in social mega-spaces. The social consequences of conspiracy theories can be significant. Thus, pogroms against certain social or religious groups have always broken out over the centuries when epidemics, wars, or economic hardships have burdened people. Then, there arose hatred and violent attacks against the lives and possessions of religious, national, or ethnic minorities, often with the tolerance or support of state powers.

Conspiracy theories also arise in the ideological-political sphere, as illustrated by accusations in the vicinity of Stalin that the Ukrainian kulaks³⁶ would steal crop yields,

³² SUNSTEIN, Cass R. (2001): *Republic.com*. Princeton – Oxford, Princeton University Press. 252 – under *Current Affairs*, the following is stated: “See only, what you want to see, hear only what you want to hear, read only what you want to read.”

³³ HEIM, Mario (2020): Echokammer. In: Artsiomenka, Katja – Pöttker, Horst (eds.): *Journalistikon – Wörterbuch der Journalistik*. Herbert von Halem. Available at: <https://journalistikon.de/echokammer/> (last accessed on: 24.02.2026).

³⁴ DEUTSCHER BUNDESTAG (WD 10 - 3000 - 007/22) „Echokammern“ und „Filterblasen“ in *digitalen Medien*, Ausarbeitung des Wissenschaftlichen Dienstes WD 10 - 3000 - 007/22. Berlin, Deutscher Bundestag. 8.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ The term “kulak” (from the Russian *кулак* ‘fist’) was originally used in Russian for relatively wealthy farmers. (cf. HILDERMANN, Manfred (1998): *Geschichte der Sowjetunion 1917–1991*.

even though Stalin himself allowed these to be collected in order to use the yields for the necessary foreign currency for his ambitious, gigantic industrialization projects. The result was an unprecedented famine catastrophe that claimed the lives of up to 6 million people throughout the Soviet Union.³⁷

A different example is the long history of discrimination and persecution that preceded the Nazi genocide of the Roma over five centuries in Europe. After the initial tolerance of the Roma following their migration to Europe in the 14th-15th centuries, their political leaders were then suspected of being Ottoman spies during the Ottoman Wars.³⁸ Another accusation was that they would endanger the hereditary health of ordinary citizens.³⁹

And even the easily refutable conspiracy theory that the Roma were allegedly stealing children persisted for centuries.⁴⁰

In the political sphere, conspiracy theories weaken trust in state institutions, science, and the media. If central opposing information sources are seen as “part of a conspiracy”, a rational discourse becomes nearly impossible. In cases of extreme escalation, they lead to violence – as in attacks on government buildings or medical personnel during the COVID-19 pandemic in some African countries. In the religious sphere, conspiracy theories have repeatedly led to the persecution of religious groups, at times culminating in genocidal violence.

Munich, C.H. Beck. 292). During the forced collectivization of agriculture ordered by Joseph Stalin from 1928 to 1933, the term “kulak” was largely extended to all independent farmers. Within the framework of *dekulakization*, and following selection by a “triumvirate committee”, hundreds of thousands were deported as “class enemies” to labour camps, and many of them were shot (op. cit. 393).

³⁷ Extensively reported in the chapter 5.3.5. *Holodomor, der vergessene ukrainische Genozid*, in BRANDES 2026a.

³⁸ Cf. JACOBS, Fabian – RIES, Johannes – STOFFERS, Nina (2007): The Christian Churches and the Roma/Gypsy in Europe. In: Brandes, Dieter (ed.): *Reconciliatio nr. 1 Healing of Memories in Europe – A Study of Reconciliation between Churches, Cultures and Religion*. Leipzig Evangelische Verlagsanstalt. 209.

³⁹ REICHSGESETZBLATT RGBL 114/1935 *Gesetz zum Schutze der Erbgesundheit des deutschen Volkes (Marriage Health Law)* vom 18.10.1935. p. 1246.

⁴⁰ Extensively reported in chapter 5.3.7. *Der Genozid Porajmos (Verschlingen) an den Roma in Europa*. In: BRANDES 2026a.

2. The Role of Religions and Cultures in Conflicts

a) Causes Underlying the Instrumentalization of Religion in Conflicts

The increased willingness for commitment, violence, and sacrifice in value-based conflicts has been exploited by rulers for centuries. Thus, “[r]ulers today, as then, have been striving to ideologically frame conflicts of interest and transform them into value conflicts.”⁴¹ For this purpose, “secular ideologies such as nationalism, communism, or National Socialism are initially available. They are all capable of inspiring followers towards a higher ideal that transcends material interests and human desires.”⁴²

Then, humanistic aspects such as “well-building and girls’ schools, freedom, human rights, and democracy” are often highlighted, even though it is rather “about geostrategic power politics or economic concerns” and military means are employed, because, “according to the message, it’s about values, not interests”.⁴³

A particularly effective method of transforming conflicts of interest into value-based conflicts is, however, the religious framing. If this succeeds, one achieves a “double effect”, because it is no longer just “about ethical questions of right and wrong” but rather “about a struggle of good against evil, a struggle of the good (‘us’) against the evil (‘the others’)”.⁴⁴ Because “evil must be combated with all strength”, and “this sacred purpose justifies all means”; and thus violence “is not only legitimate, but it is recommended”, and “violence, however brutal and despicable it may be, is considered a form of ‘worship’”.⁴⁵

The instrumentalization of religion for violent conflicts is a recurring phenomenon in world history. In this case, religion is not lived as a spiritual orientation or ethical system but is deliberately used for political, economic, or power-strategic purposes. Religious beliefs, symbols, and identities serve as means for the mobilization, legitimation, and emotionalization of violence.

⁴¹ WEINGARTH 2016, 13.

⁴² Op. cit. 14.

⁴³ Ibid. Weingarth refers to an essay by Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: *Die Geister, die wir riefen*, in *Publik-Forum* 7/2016, p. 16–17. Kennedy writes about the deployment of the American military in Syria.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid. Weingarth adds, “According to this understanding, the highest level of such service to God is to sacrifice one’s own life in a suicide bombing and, in doing so, drag as many followers of evil as possible into death with you.”

The role of religions, often perceived as malevolent in violent conflicts, is “not rooted in any inherent aggressive or violent tendency of religions themselves but in the logic of classical conflict mechanisms”,⁴⁶ namely in the transformation of conflicts of interest into value-based conflicts in the context of power and ownership claims. Religions “prove to be the most effective means in the transformation of interests into value conflicts”.⁴⁷ That is why they are also readily used by violent leaders “to increase their chances of success”.

The instrumentalization of religion functions particularly effectively because religious beliefs are deeply rooted in personal identity. Those who believe they are acting in the name of divine truth often feel their actions are morally justified or even obligatory. This moral absolutism reduces willingness to compromise and increases readiness for violence. At the same time, religious symbolism enables strong emotional mobilization, as it promises meaning, willingness to sacrifice, and community. Historical examples of this are abundant:

The Crusades in the Middle Ages were officially depicted as religiously motivated campaigns for the “liberation” of sacred sites. However, in addition to the religious dimension, particularly political power interests, territorial expansion, and economic motives played a decisive role. Religion served here as a framework for identity formation, morally justifying complex political goals and mobilizing broad segments of population to participate. The most striking example of this is the Fourth Crusade, as termed by Pope Innocent III, which was officially supposed to “reconquer Egypt” but ended with the conquest of the Christian (!) Constantinople.

Another example is the Northern Ireland conflict, which is often described as a dispute between Catholics and Protestants. Although organizations like the Irish Republican Army (IRA) cited confessional affiliations, the core issues were national, social, and political. Religion primarily served as a unifying and dividing factor here, rather than as the actual cause of violence. It acted as an amplifier of collective religious belonging and deepened existing social divisions.

Similarly, the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina can be mentioned here, which is often described as a conflict between Muslims and Orthodox Christians. In reality, it was about power interests of the Serbian side, ideologically framed within the Vidovdan (Kosovo)

⁴⁶ Op. cit. 15.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

myth, according to which the Serbian army would have defended the Western world against the Muslim Ottomans.⁴⁸

And, of course, terrorist organizations such as the so-called Islamic State must be mentioned, which adduce religious texts and traditions to justify violent acts. In doing so, theological contents are selectively interpreted and extracted from their historical and ethical context. The goal is to recruit followers, sharpen enemy images, and religiously legitimate political claims to power. The religious language confers upon actions a seemingly higher authority and at the same time makes a differentiated public debate more difficult.

It is, however, important to distinguish between religion as a system of belief and its political instrumentalization. Since the sacred texts of “all major religions contain individual verses or entire texts in which violence appears to be ordered by God or even carried out by Him”, conflict leaders “can refer to and rely on such traditions of religiously legitimized violence”.⁴⁹ However, the major world religions contain a variety of ethical traditions that emphasize peace, compassion, and justice. Violence usually arises not from religious teachings alone but from their deliberate reinterpretation in the context of social, political, and economic conflict of interests.

b) The Role of Conspiracy Theories in the Instrumentalization of Religion

Religious conspiracy theories have been an integral part of human cultural and religious history for centuries. They arise or are rekindled especially in times of social crises, political upheavals, or cultural uncertainty and exert their influence at the intersections of belief, power, fear, and social insecurity. In their structure, they resemble secular conspiracy theories, but are particularly effective because they are built on deeply rooted spiritual ideas and symbolic interpretation patterns. When traditional belief systems lose authority or fundamental ethical and religious values change, people often turn to “religiously tinted explanations” to interpret complex events in simple categories. Thus, narratives about “hidden powers”, “demonic plans”, or “divine trials” arise, which aim to bring order and meaning to a world perceived as chaotic.⁵⁰ Such stories link religious motifs (sin, redemption, election) with political and social propaganda.

⁴⁸ It was about the *Battle of Kosovo* on 28 June 1389. It is often overlooked that the Battle of Kosovo also involved troops from Bosnia, the present-day North Macedonia with Montenegro, and also from Croatia (see below Chapter 2 c)).

⁴⁹ WEINGARTH 2016, 15 f.

⁵⁰ A classic example is the medieval antisemitic conspiracy myths mentioned above.

Particularly grotesque examples of this are the accusations of deicide, ritual murder legends, and allegations of host desecration against Jews. Although, for example, Emperor Frederick II already established a theological commission in 1244 to weaken the ritual murder legend, the conspiracy accusations continued for centuries. The accusations or subsequent convictions of affected Jews often served to enrich others at the expense of the convicted individuals' property and possessions.⁵¹

The effect of religious conspiracy theories is multifaceted. On the one hand, they foster a sense of community and identity. On the other hand, they unleash destructive forces: They promote intolerance, fear, and violence, weaken trust in institutions, and deepen social divisions.

Internally, religious conspiracy narratives mainly promote polarization. They construct a dualistic worldview: here the "Believers" or "Initiated", there the "Corrupted", "Unbelievers", or "Tools of Dark Powers". This dynamic can weaken democratic institutions. If state courts, parliaments, or media are depicted as part of an anti-religious or anti-national conspiracy, trust in legal procedures diminishes.

Between cultures and nations, religious conspiracy theories can also exacerbate conflicts. Historically, religious minorities have often been smeared as "foreign agents" or "internal enemies". And external political tensions can then be easily interpreted as part of a "holy war", in which one's own nation appears as the defender of the true faith.

*c) The Role of Myths and Ideologies in the Instrumentalization of
Cultural Identity in Conflicts*

Memory "shapes the personality and stabilizes the identity of the [individual] person".⁵² Memory also grounds the identity of "groups, societies, and states ... [and] aids in recalling ... a common history and culture".⁵³ For this, the term "collective memory"

⁵¹ Extensively reported in the chapter 5.3.6.1 *Antisemitismus als europäisches Phänomen* a) Gottesmord-Vorwurf, Ritualmordlegende, Hostienfrevl-Anschuldigung :Denunziation über zwei Jahrtausende, in: BRANDES 2026a.

⁵² EKLKOFER, Volker (2017): *Erkenntnisse der Gedächtnisforschung*. In: *Erkenntnisse der Gedächtnisforschung*. Bayern 2 / *radio Wissen* / Soziale und politische Bildung 09.02.2017. Available at: <https://www.br.de/radio/bayern2/sendungen/radiowissen/soziale-politische-bildung/gedaechtnisforschung-kollektiv-100.html> (last accessed on: 20.06.2020).

⁵³ MOLLER, Sabine (2010): Das kollektive Gedächtnis. In: Gudehus, Christian – Eichenberg, Ariane – Welzer, Harald (eds.): *Gedächtnis und Erinnerung – Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch*. Stuttgart, Metzler-Poeschel. 86.

was developed by Maurice Halbwachs.⁵⁴ Individual memory and collective memory are interrelated.

Individual memory shapes the uniqueness of each individual through personal experiences. The collective memory forms the positive binding force and identity in the family and in the cultural, religious, social, and national group.⁵⁵

This applies to both the ethical-moral and cultural reference group. And so it also applies particularly to the religious bond. For example, the sacred elements that are significant for Christian identity, such as the sacraments of baptism and communion, are justified through the collective memory that Jesus Christ established them. And so, for instance, the Christian teachings of loving one's neighbour and mercy, the commandments of peace and reconciliation, etc. are also based on the belief that God established them through Jesus Christ.

But collective memory is not a networked computer memory that stores real historical events, but it rather “rests on common rituals, symbols, and stories”.⁵⁶ Thus, a special part of collective memory consists of myths.

The term “myth” originates from the ancient Greek *μῦθος* (Latin: *mythus*). It “means something like narrative, speech, or legendary story”, but it is “not to be confused with legends, fairy tales, or myths”.⁵⁷ Myths are considered to be meaningful and explain the world in some way. This means they are designed to give (events or things) a meaning. Myths “can be understood as a practical guide, as they convey a comprehensive worldview”.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ HALBWACHS, Maurice (1991): *Das kollektives Gedächtnis* New Edition. Frankfurt am Main, Fischer Wissenschaft.

⁵⁵ Even though this seems to give precedence to collective memory over individuality, Sabine Moller reminds us that the “subject of memory and recollection (...) always remains the individual [because] there will never be two people who occupy identical positions in the same groups” (MOLLER 2010, 86).

⁵⁶ ASSMANN, Aleida (2013): *Das neue Unbehagen an der Erinnerungskultur – eine Intervention*. Munich, C.H. Beck. 17.

⁵⁷ DETZEL, Alina (2023): *Mythos: Eine einfache Definition*. Focus online. Munich. 17.03.2023. Available at: https://www.focus.de/wissen/begriffe/mythos-eine-einfache-definition_409d9b01-dbd7-43d8-a810-0ce8f65b496e.html (last accessed on: 20.02.2026).

⁵⁸ Ibid.

Myths are stories that usually relate to a real or assumed historical event. However, a myth is not identical with the history behind it, but it is rather formed around the meaning attributed to an event.

So was the story of Moses's people crossing the Red Sea initially a neutrally remembered event. It was passed down from generation to generation as a story of deliverance from the Egyptian army, and it was eventually written down (Exodus 14:27–28). Along this path, this narrative was finally identified in Israel as the founding myth of the people of Israel, ethnically, religiously, and culturally.⁵⁹

Another example is the myth of the Rütli Oath as the founding myth of Switzerland. Myths are reinforced in religious communities as well as in cultures and nations. They are community-forming (also for cultures and nations) and, together with the rituals and symbols associated with them, are important for the preservation of religious communities.

Myths and ideologies correspond to each other. This applies especially to political ideology, described by Yves Bizeul as a “belief complex oriented towards action”, in which symbols, myths, ideals, and doctrines form a substrate.⁶⁰

Aleida Assmann warns of the danger when *myths* replace history and become ideology, namely when totalitarian states claim a “monopoly on the past ... to silence independent historical writing”⁶¹ and combine *ideology* and *myth* for the purpose of maintaining power. Thus, “demagogues and dictatorships shape the past according to the image of their respective power interests”.⁶² Therefore, Reinhart Koselleck warns against *political myth-makers*⁶³ and the danger of a *uniform historical perspective*.

⁵⁹ The fact that this founding myth already early on connected the people of Israel with each other is shown, for example, by the Song of Miriam in Exodus 15:20–21, which many Old Testament scholars regard as the oldest written source and which already presupposes this founding myth: “And Miriam, the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women followed her out with timbrels dancing around. And Miriam sang to them: ‘Let us sing to the LORD, for He has done a wonderful deed; He has thrown the enemy into the sea with His horses and with His chariots.’”

⁶⁰ BIZEUL, Yves (2006): Politische Mythen, Ideologien und Utopien. In: Tepe, Peter (ed.): *Mythos. Fächerübergreifendes Forum für Mythosforschung*. Vol. 2: *Politische Mythen*. Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann. 10.

⁶¹ ASSMANN 2013, 22 f.

⁶² Op. cit. 20.

⁶³ KOSELLECK, Reinhart (2003): *Gibt es ein kollektives Gedächtnis?* Tape recording of a lecture on 6 December 2003 in Sofia at the conference *Pierre Nora. Erinnerungsorte und Konstruktion der Gegenwart*, qtd. from ASSMANN 2013, 18.

As a special example from more recent history, Yugoslavia should be mentioned. In former Yugoslavia, ideological myths played a special role. The myth of defending Christian Europe in the Battle of Kosovo on 28 June 1389 was emphasized by Slobodan Milošević, President of the Socialist Republic of Serbia, on the 600th anniversary on 28 June 1989 during a rally for the Vidovdan Memorial Day in front of more than one million Serbs, Kosovo Serbs, and Montenegrins. He invoked “a return to earlier national [Serbian] greatness”⁶⁴ and emphasized, with reference to the myth of Kosovo field, that only the Serbs had defended the West. He did not fail to mention that troops from Bosnia, the present-day North Macedonia with Montenegro,⁶⁵ and also from Croatia were involved in the battle, but interpreted their early withdrawal from a battle already lost as a betrayal of the Serbs.⁶⁶

This myth of the Battle of Kosovo, interpreted so differently by the nations involved, played a special role in five acts of commemoration in the 20th century:

- 1914 – on the 525th anniversary, Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria was shot by the Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip (it served as the immediate trigger for World War I);
- 1921 – the so-called Vidovdan Constitution of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes was adopted;

⁶⁴ CALIC Marie-Janine (2008): Kosovo: der jüngste Staat in Europa. In: *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte Jugoslawien, Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (APUZ 32/2008)*. Bonn. Available at: <https://www.bpb.de/apuz/31048/kosovo-der-juengste-staat-in-europa?p=0> (last accessed on: 10.08.2020). 2.

⁶⁵ Following the defeat at the Battle of Maritsa, the final fragmentation of the empire into North Serbia (largely identical to today's Serbia, but without Vojvodina) and South Serbia (including today's North Macedonia and large parts of Montenegro) had become evident by 26 September 1371.

⁶⁶ In the Battle of Kosovo on 28 June 1989, in addition to the (north-) Serbian troops, troops from Bosnia with King Stepan Tvrtko I. Kotromanić, troops from today's North Macedonia and Montenegro led by Prince Vuk Brankovići, and (probably) troops under Abbot Ivanovci Paližna from Croatia were also involved, i.e. virtually the entire later Yugoslav area, without Vojvodina and Slovenia. Vuk Brankovići is portrayed as a traitor in the later Serbian heroic epic because he “abandoned the Serbs”. However, neutral historians emphasize that only the (north-) Serbian troops were decisively defeated by the Ottomans, and that the Bosnian, southern Serbian, and (possibly) Croatian troops retreated unscathed.

- 1989 – more than one million Serbs, Kosovo Serbs, and Montenegrins came to Kosovo Polje⁶⁷ for the rally on the 600th anniversary of Vidovdan Commemoration Day to hear the speech of the newly appointed Serbian president Slobodan Milošević;⁶⁸
- 2001 – Milošević was extradited by Serbian authorities to the UN War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague;
- 2008 – an illegitimate separate parliament was founded by the Serbs in Kosovo.

However, Croatia also has its own special myths. Comparable to the Serbian Amsfeld myth, the myth surrounding the victories at Dubica in 1513 and Jajce in 1518 emerged in Croatia. Accordingly, Croats claim that it was actually they who successfully defended Western Europe against the Ottomans through these two victorious battles. Both myths played an ideological role in the particularly brutal double Serbian–Croatian civil war over Krajina in 1992 and 1995.

Further, the myth of the Battle of Sisak on 22 June 1593 played a special role in the Croatian–Bosnian civil war, because in this battle the troops of the Bosnian Paschalik (Bosna Eyâleti),⁶⁹ which had been Ottoman for 130 years, were soundly defeated by the Croats under the leadership of Telli Hassan Pasha. The Bosniaks are accused of the betrayal of their Slavic brothers, as the Croats could have otherwise defended southern Europe against the Islamic–Bosnian troops of the Ottomans.

Therefore, while collective memories on the one hand constitute an important cohesive force for cultural, social, state, and also ethical-moral reference groups, on the other hand, a consciously ideologized interpretation of myths and symbols can lead to an externally imposed synchronization of historical perspectives.

⁶⁷ Kosovo Polje is called *Field of the Blackbirds* in translation. Therefore, the Battle of Kosovo is also known as the *Battle on the Field of the Blackbirds*.

⁶⁸ On Vidovdan Remembrance Day, 28 June 1989, 600 years after the (lost) battle of Kosovo against the Ottomans, Slobodan Milošević delivered a nationalistic inciting speech at the memorial site of Gazimestan. Many historians consider his speech to be one of the triggers for the subsequent Yugoslav wars, with formulations such as: “Wherever Serbian remains are buried, it is Serbian territory, wherever Serbian blood has been shed, it is the land of Serbian heritage.” (NAIMARK, Norman M. (2009): *Flammender Hass – Ethnische Säuberungen im 20. Jahrhundert*. Bonn, Bundeszentrale für die politische Bildung bpb. 223).

⁶⁹ The Eyâlet of Bosnia encompassed approximately the entire present-day Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slavonia, and Southern Dalmatia.

*d) The Question of the Role of Religions as
a Cause or Instrument in Current Conflicts*

In conflict situations, there is a religious ambivalence: on the one hand, religion, with its forms of expression in worship, prayer, and the distribution of sacraments, offers a confirmation of security and safety. On the other hand, however, it can also be used to reinforce one's own religious identity to legitimize violence against enemies in (civil) wars.

In the following, we address the question of whether religious certainty functions as a cause or an effect of warfare and other forms of violence, especially when opponents are particularly perceived in terms of their distinct religious-cultural identities.

To put it differently: Does belonging to a religious community serve as the basis and trigger for acts of war and other forms of violence, or is religious differentiation merely a reinforcing consequence of other conflict-promoting factors?

This question will be addressed in this chapter, with a particular focus on former Yugoslavia and on Romania, as both are characterized by a unique combination of Eastern and Western European religious and cultural influences, and, also, by a four-hundred-year-old special confrontation with Islam during the Ottoman period.

Let us first take a look at Transylvania in Romania:

Although there were brief “intense clashes” with Habsburg troops during the fierce re-Catholicization under Empress Maria Theresa, when Orthodox believers resisted forced conversion to the Unia (Greek Catholic), this brief “faith struggle” was also “the only one in Romanian history[!]”.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ ANDREI, Mirela (2011): Die Geschichte der Kirchen Siebenbürgens – Überblick für den Zeitraum 1740–1848. In: Brandes, Dieter – Lukács, Olga (eds.) (2011): *Reconciliatio nr. 2.2. Die Geschichte der christlichen Kirchen aufarbeiten – Healing of Memories zwischen Kirchen, Kulturen und Religionen – Ein Versöhnungsprojekt der Kirchen in Rumänien*. Leipzig, Evangelische Verlagsanstalt. 93.; LUKÁCS, Olga (2008): Das Versöhnungsprojekt „Healing of Memories“ in Rumänien und die Beziehungen zwischen den Konfessionen aus Siebenbürgen in den 16–17. Jahrhunderten. In: *Ökumene der Zukunft. Hermeneutische Perspektiven und die Suche nach Identität*, eds. Stephen Lakkis, Stefan Höschele, Stefanie Schardien, Frankfurt am Main, Verlag Otto Lembeck. 200–218.; LUKÁCS, Olga (2007): Healing of Memories in Romania. A Protestant Approach to Church. In: *Healing of Memories in Europe. A Study of Reconciliation between Churches, Cultures and Religion*, ed. Dieter Brandes, Leipzig, Evangelische Verlagsanstalt. 86–101.

Also, between Protestants (or their princes) and the Orthodox, there were no religious wars despite reform efforts among the Orthodox Romanians. This also applies to the relationship between Protestants and Catholics, although Protestant princes prevented the appointment of a Catholic bishop for a long time. Similarly, the devastating Thirty Years' War in the Habsburg part of Hungary did not spread to Transylvania.⁷¹

Further, the brief intermezzo with Despot Vodă Heraclid cannot be called a religious war, either, in the context of the attempted reform in the Principality of Moldavia from 1561 to 1563.⁷²

Conclusion: Apart from minor exceptions, there were no notable religious conflicts in Romania between the various denominations.

Now let us look at the national conflicts in former Yugoslavia and see whether or not they can be considered religious wars. The focus should be on the national conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina:

The assumption that there was a religious conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina could be supported by the fact that religious affiliation in this country largely corresponds to ethnic affiliation. Thus, the majority of Catholics identify as Croats, the Orthodox as Serbs, and Muslims as Bosnians, and vice versa. However, looking at it as a religious war contradicts the fact that the unification of the Yugoslav nation at the beginning of the 20th century was supported – and created – by all major ethnic groups: Slovenians, Croats, Serbs, Bosnians, and Macedonians.

For a look back at religious conflicts between Orthodox Christians and Muslims, the memory of the advance of Serbian Orthodox rebels against the Ottomans in 1689 towards Sarajevo and Skopje is particularly illustrative, for consequently, large “parts of the Orthodox population, led by the Serbian Patriarch Arsenije III. Crnojević from Fiume, fled

⁷¹ The decisive factor was that this time it was not the Habsburgs but the Ottomans who held the suzerainty.

⁷² The brief peasant uprising was fuelled, among other things, by the fact that Despot Voda angered his subjects “by paying his mercenaries with stolen gold and silver casing of relics and icons, as well as chalices for the Eucharist (cf. VICOVAN, Ion (2011): *Die Geschichte der Kirche in der Moldau von 1000 bis 1650*. In: BRANDES-LUKACS 2011, 156).

to the Habsburg Empire out of fear of retaliation [by the Ottomans]”,⁷³ to Vojvodina, in order “to found the [new] seat of the Serbian Patriarch in Karlowitz in 1713”.⁷⁴

On the other hand, for example, in 1567, the Islamic Grand Vizier Sokullu Mehmed-Pascha confirmed the monk Makarije Sokolovic as the Orthodox Bishop of Peć and with him (re-)established the Patriarchate in Peć.

Thus, can it be stated, with reference to the absence of any major religious oppression or conflict with Holm Sundhausen, that there is no basis for speaking of a “Muslim–Christian religious war, ... within the Ottoman Empire until the beginning of the 19th century, ... [especially since] a widespread forced Islamization ... was not present in the European provinces of the Ottoman Empire”.⁷⁵

The situation regarding genocides in 20th-century Europe may, however, be assessed differently. Accordingly, when it comes to genocides, one cannot simply speak of religious conflicts, as violence is exerted only by one side.

Yet, it is a bold thesis to suggest that, in the case of the genocide of Jews, Armenians, and others, fear of groups living according to a markedly different worldview played a particularly significant role.

Thus, transcultural-religious reconciliation initiatives are particularly challenged by generational perceptions of ‘otherness’. This way, even in communities where different religious cultures and religions have coexisted in mutual tolerance over long periods, long-standing friendships could break and turn into mutual destruction.

As in Srebrenica, in extreme situations where no sustainable forms of cultural transitions have been established, violent acts, including pogroms, can erupt out between people of different cultures and religions.

⁷³ SUNDHAUSEN, Holm (2008): Streiflichter aus der Geschichte Serbiens. In: Renovabis (ed.): *Ost-West Europäische Perspektiven OWEP 4/2008*. Freising. Available at: <https://www.owep.de/artikel/64-streiflichter-aus-geschichte-serbiens> (last accessed on: 20.08.2020).

⁷⁴ They founded in “1713 ... in Karlowitz the [new] seat of the Serbian Patriarch”. (BECKER, Uwe (2006): *Vom Vasallen zum Raya*. Nürnberg. Available at: <https://www.osmanischesreich.de/geschichte/13-15-jahrhundert/das-amselfeld-ii/> (last accessed on: 14.09.2020)).

⁷⁵ SUNDHAUSEN 2008.

This section should be concluded with the following thesis:

Many long-lasting conflicts in Europe initially appear to have religious causes. However, a more differentiated consideration shows that the distinction from the other culture and the inherent fear of the foreignness of others are the dominant basis for enmity.

e) Cultural Identity and Boundary-Making vis-à-vis the Foreignness in the 'Other' in the Emergence of Long-Standing Conflicts⁷⁶

Besides the phenomenon of building boundaries against / dreading the foreignness of the other, the phenomenon of transference also plays a significant role in the behaviour of people in emerging conflicts, especially in the case of genocide. The concept of transference, coined by Sigmund Freud, as a process by which (often repressed) feelings, wishes, experiences, and affections from an earlier time, particularly childhood, are transferred and reactivated in new encounters and social relationships, seems to have played a particular role in the genocide against the Jews and the Roma. Initially, the phenomenon of transference is a helpful process in human psychology that helps us to react very quickly to dangerous situations if necessary. Past experiences are transferred to similar situations. In particular, “complex early childhood relationship experiences and their experiential content, which challenged and shaped the child’s attitudes and reactions”,⁷⁷ are transferred to later life situations. These transfers can extend far into the personal future, which is at first normal and not necessarily problematic.

If supposed or actual negative experiences of previous generations with groups not perceived as foreign are transferred without reflection, these transfers can lead to significant problems and tensions in later relationships. This can include transfers from parents and siblings, as well as from teachers and other caregivers. People “often do not recognize that their reactions in certain situations, their possibly unrealistic or exaggerated

⁷⁶ This section is an English translation of Chapter 7.1.3.2. *Kulturelle Identität und die Abgrenzung gegenüber der Fremdheit der Anderen in ihrer Bedeutung für die Entstehung von kollektiven Long-Last-Konflikten, sowie Ansätze zu deren Überwindung*. In: BRANDES 2026a.

⁷⁷ BEHRMANN, Irene (2002): *Zurück ins Leben. Erfahrungen mit der ambulanten Regressionstherapie*. Berlin, Mattes-Verlag. 77.

fear and expectations of catastrophe, and their unconscious fear and flight responses... are based on transfers... [and] that their individual components, often separated from each other, are preserved and used for comparison”.⁷⁸

The Romanian sociologist and Roma researcher Vasile Burtea describes the following as a significant characteristic of Roma groups' life philosophy: “Roma identity ... revolves around the verb TO BE, in the sense of existing, and not around the verb TO HAVE, in the sense of accumulating.”⁷⁹ From this develops a seemingly paradoxical Roma life philosophy: “Live only for today and then see what comes; we will see if we get there.” For people living in socially unstable conditions or those who fear falling into such conditions, it can be frightening when others, such as the Roma, seem to place little importance on the (existential) security and the continuity of cultures inherent in both Western and Eastern European life philosophies. From this, *conspiracy theories* have also emerged, such as the claim that Roma steal children to sustain their livelihood.⁸⁰

Despite this, no more conspiracy theories about ritual murders and the desecration of the host were raised against Jews in the 19th and 20th centuries; instead, other conspiracy myths had taken their place, such as the myth of the Jews' alleged desire for world domination and the myth of the superiority of the German race.

In transcultural/transreligious societies, it is therefore necessary that people of different cultural-religious identities personally encounter each other in the face of the foreignness of the other and respect their cultural-religious identities. The fact that this has only occurred in a very limited form over centuries, such as in the time of liberalism at the end of the 19th century between Jews and Christians, has been passed down as a distance to the foreignness of the other over extended periods.

A significant step in processes of intercultural understanding is therefore the mutual familiarization with the meaning and importance of different cultural-religious actions and rituals.

⁷⁸ Op. cit. 78.

⁷⁹ BURTEA, Vasile (2011): Die Religiosität der Roma in Rumänien und ihre Beziehungen zu den Kirchen. In: BRANDES-LUKACS 2011, 297.

⁸⁰ A conspiracy myth that the author himself heard in Germany back in the 1950s.

While, for example, in Transylvania the distinction between languages and cultures never led to larger cultural conflicts, the cultural distinction in Yugoslavia strengthened the nationalist propaganda of the rulers after the Tito era and ultimately led to the phase of civil wars. Eventually, the unprocessed cultural/ethnic distinctions prevailed over the aspiration of a West Slavic United Union. Although there is also a religious distinction between Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats, and Islamic Bosniaks,⁸¹ the author maintains that it was not religion that ultimately determined the conflicts, but rather the failure to complete historical processes of conflict resolution.

This does not exclude the possibility that there were emboldened combatants on all sides for whom the religious alterity of the other merely served as a pretext for construing war as a religious conflict. However, such a fanatical orientation is rather to be interpreted as a result of an *identity imbalance*,⁸² from which a supposed or real loss or the (perceived) threat to cultural identity may lead to the overemphasis of another identity – here the religious one. The religious fanaticism that is presumably also prevalent in some parts is rather to be understood as a reaction to the perceived cultural disadvantage, as in the case of Bosnians and Croats, or as a fear of the loss of cultural identity, as in the case of Serbs.

⁸¹ HASEČIĆ, Maida – BRKIĆ, Marko-Antonio (2010): The Influence of Religion and Ethical Identity of the Development of Values in Culture and Society of Bosnia Herzegovina. In: Grăjdian, Vasile – Lukács, Olga (eds.): *Reconciliatio nr. 4*. 167: “The overwhelming majority of Catholics identify as Croats, the Orthodox as Serbs, and the Muslims as Bosniaks.”

⁸² The human identity “moves in a cycle of interpersonal, intercultural, religious, and socio-economic contexts”. This construct is a “delicate balance structure that can be destabilized by political events such as expulsion and exile, persecution... or other forms of subtle or open oppression”. An “identity imbalance” can arise, which can lead to “various reactions... such as personal depression or specific fundamentalism and overemphasis of a certain identity aspect (e.g. through fanatical political commitment)”. (BRANDES, Dieter (2010): Human Identity and “Healing of Memories between Churches, Cultures and Religion”. In: Grăjdian, Vasile – Lukács, Olga (eds.): *Reconciliatio nr. 4*. 67 f.

3. Religiously Motivated Peace Initiatives

a) *Examples of Religiously Motivated Peace Initiatives*⁸³

The “most famous peacebuilders in the world to date, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King”, were “remarkably ... not only highly political actors but also deeply religious figures”.⁸⁴ Yet they are “the best-known – but by no means the only examples of – peacebuilders motivated by religion”.⁸⁵

The following are examples of globally based peace initiatives with religious foundations:

In the civil war in *Mozambique*, the Catholic lay movement Sant’Egídio, in cooperation with local bishops, mediated a durable peace agreement in 1992.

After 27 years of civil war in *Angola* with over 500,000 deaths, the Angolan Christian Council Conselho de Igrejas Cristas em Angola CICA mediated a lasting peace agreement and comprehensive social measures for the suffering population.

During the *Rwandan* genocide in 1994, in which Christian (!) Hutu militias and involved Hutu residents slaughtered more than 800,000 Christian (!) Tutsis in just 3 months, Rwandan Muslims resisted and defended fugitive Tutsis in mosques.

After the reign of terror by the Khmer Rouge in *Cambodia*, which resulted in at least two million victims, the Buddhist monk Maha Ghosananda started in 1979, despite significant death threats, “a peace and reconciliation movement that has developed into an important force and a loud voice in politics and society”.⁸⁶

In *Nicaragua*, *El Salvador*, and *Guatemala*, “individual Catholic bishops, as well as the World Council of Churches (WCC), the Lutheran World Federation, and Mennonite mediators played a diverse and decisive role in overcoming violent conflicts”.⁸⁷

⁸³ The following examples are particularly relevant to WEINGARTH 2016, 21 ff as well as to BRANDES 2026a, chapter *Der Weg der Healing of Memories Versöhnungsarbeit durch Afrika und transkontinental* and chapter 6.2. *Ausgewählte Beispiele für Versöhnung in Europa nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg*. The references are not individually marked, but direct quotes are named.

⁸⁴ WEINGARTH 2016. 22.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Op. cit. 24.

⁸⁷ Op. cit. 25.

In *Canada*, since 1975, a “Coalition of Canadian Churches in partnership with Indigenous peoples and community organizations in the Aboriginal Rights Coalition” has been working together and trying to “forge alliances in the fight for justice for the Indigenous peoples in Canada and to advocate reconciliation between the Indigenous peoples, the Christian community, and the Canadian society”.⁸⁸ The United Church of Canada made a “public apology on behalf of the Anglican Church of Canada”⁸⁹ on 6 August 1993.

In *Australia*, in the face of a terrible genocide against the indigenous Aborigines, with up to 600,000 victims, a joint initiative by the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) and the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC) under the title *Cannot be Told Before its Time (CTBT)* has begun to address the violent acts in the Residential Schools, the forced adoptions, and the genocide itself.

In *Bosnia and Herzegovina*, the Inter-religious Council IRC-BiH has drafted a bill on religious freedom, which all three ethnic groups finally agreed to adopt as a law in 2004.

In *Germany*, shortly after the end of the war in 1945, the *pastoral letter* of the German Catholic Bishops’⁹⁰ Conference and the *Stuttgart Confession of Guilt*⁹¹ by Protestant church representatives began to clearly pave the way back into the global community of states for political representatives.

⁸⁸ LUTHERISCHER WELTBUND (ed.) (2002): *Der kanadische Kontext*, Studienbuch zur Zehnten Vollversammlung des Lutherischen Weltbundes *Zur Heilung der Welt*. Geneva. 27.

⁸⁹ Cited from: ENRIGHT, Travis (2010): *Canada Background of Reconciliation Process in Canada: Indian Residential Schools*. In: Gräjdian, Vasile – Lukács, Olga (eds.): *Reconciliatio nr. 4*. 111. Archbishop Michael Peers: “I accept and confess before God and you our failure in the boarding schools. ... We have forsaken God.”

⁹⁰ “We deeply regret: Many Germans, including some from our ranks, have been seduced by the false teachings of National Socialism, (...) many have themselves become criminals.” (DENZLER, Georg – FABRICIUS, Volker (1984): *Die Kirchen im Dritten Reich. Christen und Nazis Hand in Hand?* Vol. 2. Frankfurt, Fischer-Taschenbuch. 58).

⁹¹ “We reproach ourselves that we were not more courageous in speaking out, not more faithful in prayer, not happier in believing, and not more passionate in loving [in the face of the national socialist regime of violence.” (BESIER, Gerhard – SAUTER, Gerhard (1985): *Wie Christen ihre Schuld bekennen: Die Stuttgarter Erklärung 1945*. Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. 62).

In 1965, the *East Memorandum* of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD)⁹² and the correspondence between Polish and German Catholic bishops⁹³ paved the way for reconciliation with Poland.

And also the protest movement against the Communist regime in the GDR “could hardly have developed without the involvement of the Evangelical churches, and the ‘peaceful revolution’ of 1989 would probably not have remained peaceful for long”.⁹⁴

The list of examples could be continued. They show that conflicts can be “repressed through the intervention of religion-based actors” and “violence can overcome and reconciliation can be practised”.⁹⁵ Although, “of course, religiously motivated men and women were not the only actors involved”, they still made such “indispensable contributions to de-escalation that no one else was able or willing to make”.⁹⁶

b) Characteristics of Successful Inter-religious Peace Actors

According to Weingarth, some of the special characteristics for religious peacebuilders are as follows:⁹⁷

⁹² A “refusal to reconcile contradictory legal claims” is described as “fruitless, indeed a danger to the peace between the two peoples”. Since “at this level ... the conflict cannot be resolved [therefore] it is necessary to seek a compromise that establishes a new order between Germans and Poles”. (EKD – EVANGELISCHE KIRCHE IN DEUTSCHLAND (ed.) (1965): *Die Lage der Vertriebenen und das Verhältnis des deutschen Volkes zu seinen östlichen Nachbarn. Eine evangelische Denkschrift*. Hannover. Section IV. *Völkerrechtliche Fragen*. Available at: https://www.ekd.de/lage_der_vertriebenen_0.htm, (last accessed on: 10.01.2020).

⁹³ The Polish bishops demanded, “in this almost hopelessly desperate situation [there] must not be another Cold War.” Instead, it was time for “the beginning of a dialogue”. And the German bishops accepted “the offered hands with brotherly reverence” and prayed to God, “that the demon of hatred may never again separate our hands”. (DEUTSCHE BISCHOFSKONFERENZ (ed.) (1995): *Dialog, Versöhnung und Brüderlichkeit, Gemeinsames Wort der Deutschen und der Polnischen Bischofskonferenz vom 13. Dezember 1995*. Press release. Bonn. 9 f.).

⁹⁴ WEINGARTH 2016, 23.

⁹⁵ Op. cit. 26.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Op. cit. 29–30.

- Conflict-based *professional qualifications* with “a good knowledge of the conflict in its breadth and depth and at the same time competence in methods of constructive, nonviolent conflict resolution”;⁹⁸
- *Credibility* of the actors and “alignment of word and deed, of theological claims and peace policy effectiveness”;⁹⁹
- *Emotional conflict competence* of the peacebuilders so that the affected people “feel that a peacebuilder truly and deeply understands their situation, their needs, and their suffering”.¹⁰⁰

However, religious actors often enjoy a “trust premium” compared to political actors, even across religious boundaries, and this can be seen as a “key to successful conflict mediation... literally open doors... enable contacts, and thereby open up spaces for action or negotiation”.¹⁰¹ Moreover, “religious feelings can mobilize people faster than any other level of their identity” and “can represent a valuable potential for promoting non-violence, reconciliation, and peacebuilding in societies and communities torn apart by conflict”.¹⁰²

4. Religions and Healing of Memories

Conflicts between cultures and religions have various forms of remembrance as a fundamental background:

⁹⁸ Op. cit. 29.

⁹⁹ Op. cit. 30.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Op. cit. 30–31.

¹⁰² JUSIĆ, Muhammed (2012): Challenges of Facing the Past. Healing of Memories in Bosnia and Religious Communities – With Special Reference to the Islamic Community and Tradition. In: Kurian, Manoj – Brandes, Dieter – Lukács Olga – Grăjdian, Vasile (eds.): *Reconciliatio nr. 7. Reconciliation between Peoples, Cultures and Religions. Reconciliation in Bosnia-Herzegovina Compared to European-Wide Experiences – The European Interreligious Consultation on “Healing of Memories” Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, 3–6 May 2010*. Bonn – Sibiu, Schiller. 206.; BARTA, Zoltán (2025): Az iszlámról más megközelítésben: ellentmondások, polémikák, antimóniák a Koránban, imatípusok, szentkultusz. In: *Teológiai Fórum*. 2025/2. 127–157.

- real memories of suffered injustices;
- traditional memories as a distinction from others;
- founding myths concerning liberation from other cultures;
- discrimination myths against other peoples, races, and religions;
- traditional memories of deportations, war, torture, and genocide.

Therefore, for long-term peace and reconciliation work, it is necessary

- a) to mutually process memories, including, if applicable, the recognition of mutual guilt over history;
- b) to reflect on one's own potential for peace, reconciliation, and love of neighbour, which, again, is based on memories.

*a) Mutual Processing of Memories and, if Applicable, Recognition of
Mutual Guilt Regarding History*

Religions are “experts” in processing memories and thus responsible for healing them.

Healing of Memories is a methodology to help overcoming frozen history and “hi-stories” (story telling) by putting emphasis on voices that were not heard, ignored, or not acknowledged so far. *Healing of Memories* is a process to deal with current injuries in the wake of oppression, violence, wars, and genocide, as well as to overcome centuries-old, passed down injuries between peoples and cultures. In this way, HoM is an interdisciplinary approach to deal with deeply rooted, painful, frozen history on the cultural, religious, and ethnic level and within personal relationships.¹⁰³

Central elements in Healing of Memories processes are storytelling in a protected space, as well as understanding story listening. Particular attention is paid to a strictly applied dialogue technique,¹⁰⁴ with special regard for radical respect and unrestricted conversation.

¹⁰³ BRANDES, Dieter (2016): Reconciliation through Remembering. An Overview about the Methodology of Healing of Memories. In: *Revista Teologică 2/2016, Serie Nouă*. XXVI, 98. 276–277. Publicație Oficială Mitropoliei Aredalului, Sibiu. Available at: <https://www.revistateologica.ro/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/REVDRD1.pdf>.

¹⁰⁴ Extensively reported by HARTKEMEYER, Martina (2003): Das Geheimnis des Dialogs. In: Egner, Helga (ed.): *Heilung und Heil*. Düsseldorf – Zürich, Walter-Verlag. 11–39.

Healing of Memories as a person-centred *counselling process* began in South Africa after the end of the apartheid regime as an accompaniment to the *Truth and Reconciliation Commissions* (TRC). In 1998, the Institute for *Healing of Memories* was founded in Cape Town with Bishop Tutu as the founder and Michael Lapsley as the leader.¹⁰⁵ *Healing of Memories* was then implemented in other regions of Africa, such as Angola, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Rwanda, Uganda, Kenya, and Ethiopia,¹⁰⁶ and subsequently also in Australia, South and North America, Asia, and finally also in Europe.¹⁰⁷

Thus, the churches acted as advocates against revenge on the tormentors of the previous decades after 4½ decades of apartheid in South Africa. In cooperation with Nelson Mandela, who himself spent 27 years in prison, under the leadership of Bishop Desmond Tutu, the churches began to address the past as a foundation for peace and reconciliation. And for this purpose, they developed a *three-step system*.¹⁰⁸

- (1) *Joint Journey through History*
- (2) *Share in the Pain of Others*
- (3) *Shape the Future Together*

¹⁰⁵ Extensively reported by BOTMAN, Hayman Russel – PETERSEN, Robin M. (1996) (eds.): *To Remember and to Heal*. Kapstadt – Pretoria – Johannesburg, Verlag Human & Rousseau. Also reported by TUTU, Desmond – OMAR, Dullah (2000) (eds.): *Wahrheits- und Versöhnungskommission Südafrika – Das Schweigen ist gebrochen. „Out of the Shadows“. Geschichte – Anhörungen – Perspektiven*. Frankfurt am Main, Brandes & Apel.

¹⁰⁶ A summary description for the path of Healing of Memories in Africa can be found in: BRANDES, Dieter (2023): *Healing of Memories. An African Approach to Reconciliation Takes Its Course*. In: Sauer, Karin Elinor – Brandes, Dieter – Uwimbabazi, Penine – Nzambimana, Onésime – Ndemo, Mumbere Mbasu (eds.): *Healing through Remembering – Sharing Grassroots Experiences of Peace, Reconciliation and Healing in the Great Lakes Region of Africa, Edition Centaurus – Perspektiven Sozialer Arbeit in Theorie und Praxis* (ECPSATP). Wiesbaden – Villingen-Schwenningen, Springer. 4–5.

¹⁰⁷ *Healing of Memories* on its intercontinental journey to Europe is described, for example, in: BRANDES, Dieter (2013): *Heilende Erinnerung – Die Initiative Healing of Memories (HoM) weltweit*. In: *Materialdienst MD des Konfessionskundlichen Instituts* 05/2013. 92–93. Bensheim.

¹⁰⁸ The system will not be discussed in detail herein. It has become the subject of many publications, for example in BRANDES 2016.

In Europe, this process was initially taken up in Northern Ireland¹⁰⁹ and Norway (Church of Norway and Sámi).¹¹⁰ The Healing of Memories between Churches, Cultures, and Religions finally also found its way to Southeast Europe. In Southeast Europe, Healing of Memories was first used in an ecumenical interdisciplinary reconciliation process in Romania.¹¹¹

The fundamental principle of work in Healing of Memories processes is as follows: The path to reconciliation does not (!) begin with the “dispute over the ‘correct memory’, but it begins with respect for the individual and collective religious, cultural, and social identity formed by the ‘collective and individual memory’ of the other”.

b) Contemplation of One’s Own Potential for Peace, Reconciliation, and Neighbourliness, Which Itself Is Based on Memories

As noted above, all major world religions possess diverse, also textually anchored traditions that not only emphasize peace, mercy, and justice but also urge their active promotion and to take responsibility for leading the processes of non-violent conflict resolution themselves.

Finally, some scriptural quotes from the three Abrahamic religions should be listed.

¹⁰⁹ Extensively described are the reconciliation processes in Northern Ireland in: FALCONER, Alan D. – LIECHTY, Joseph (1998) (eds.): *Reconciling Memories*. Dublin, The Columba Press.

¹¹⁰ How the process with the three steps described below could develop was documented for the first time in *Healing of Memories in Norway*, an unpublished document of the commission *Churches in Dialogue* of the *World Council of Churches* (WCC) in Geneva in 2002. The process itself is described in detail in STEFFENSEN, Rolf (2012): *The Difficult Talks – Experiences from [the] Reconciliation Process of Norway*. In: Kurian, Manoj – Brandes, Dieter – Lukács Olga – Gräjdian, Vasile (eds.) (2012): *Reconciliatio nr. 7. Reconciliation between Peoples, Cultures and Religions. Reconciliation in Bosnia-Herzegovina Compared to European-Wide Experiences – The European Interreligious Consultation on “Healing of Memories” Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, 3–6 May 2010*. Bonn – Sibiu, Schiller. 54–58.

¹¹¹ Extensively described in the chapter *Healing of Memories Prozesse in Rumänien als Beispiel für Wege zu versöhnter Verschiedenheit zwischen Kulturen und Religionen*. In: BRANDES, Dieter (2026b): *Nationen, Kulturen und Religionen in Rumänien – Konfliktgeschichte und versöhnte kulturell-religiöse Verschiedenheit*. Deutsch-Rumänische Theologischen Bibliothek/DRThB. Sibiu – Bonn, Schiller.

Judaism:

- “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the children of your people. You shall love your neighbour as yourself; I am the Lord.” (Leviticus 19:18)
- “The Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur, according to Leviticus 23) frees from sins against God, but from sins against a neighbour only after the harmed person has asked for forgiveness.” (Talmud – Mas. Yoma 85b; in Talmud – Mas. Yoma, 2a–88a)
- “Exile consists of a long duration of forgetting. But in remembrance lies the secret of redemption.” (Israel Ben Eliezer/Baal Shem Tov, 1698–1760, founder of the Polish devotional movement of Hasidism)

Christianity:

- “For if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.” (Matthew 5:23–24)
- “It was God who reconciled us to himself through Christ ... and entrusted to us the ministry of reconciliation.” (2 Corinthians 5:18–19)
- “It is therefore through us, ambassadors for Christ.” (2 Cor. 5:20)
- “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” (Matthew 5:43–45)

Islam:

- “Then their prophet said to them, ‘Indeed, the sign of his kingship is that the chest will come to you, in which there is tranquillity from your Lord and a remnant of what the family of Moses and the family of Aaron left behind; the angels will carry it. Surely in that is a sign for you, if you are believers.’” (Qur’an, Surah 2:248)
- “And if you punish, then punish with an equivalent of that with which you were harmed. But if you are patient, it is truly better for those who are patient.” (Qur’an, Surah 16:126)
- “Do not incite mutual hatred among yourselves. Do not be jealous of one another. Do not turn away from one another, but be servants of Allah, as brothers to each other. It is not permissible for a Muslim to shun his brother for more than three days.” (Hadith No. 6065)

5. Conclusions

Religion is often not the primary cause of violent conflicts but rather a factor that intensifies them and provides legitimacy. Many so-called religious conflicts are actually rooted in cultural, national, or political tensions, while religious identity and authority are strategically used by political leaders to support secular interests. To prevent such misuse, critical education, interfaith dialogue, and a clear separation between political power and religious authority are essential.

The *Charta Oecumenica* emphasizes the importance of reconciliation, peacebuilding, and cooperation between churches, cultures, and religions. It calls for overcoming historical hostility among Christian churches, promoting peace between peoples, opposing antisemitism, strengthening dialogue with Jewish communities, encouraging respectful Christian–Muslim relations, and defending religious freedom and open dialogue with people of all beliefs.

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