

UPF Tbilisi, Georgia Partner Hosts Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations (CFBO)

Elmar Kuhn
February 17, 2023



Tbilisi, Georgia - The president of the Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations in Central Europe gave the keynote address at a two-day international conference.

The conference, "Eternal Values and the Constantly Changing World," was held February 16 and 17, 2023, at the Radisson Iveria hotel in Tbilisi, Georgia.

The event was held in honor of the 90th birthday of Georgian Patriarch Ilia II and his now 45 years as spiritual leader of the Georgian Orthodox Church. It was organized by the Georgian National Academy of Sciences and the International Centre for Christian Studies at the Orthodox Church of Georgia.

The president of the Georgian National Academy of Sciences, Dr. Giorgi Kvesitadze, opened the symposium and welcomed the guests.

The keynote address, "Eternal Values in Hostile Cultures," was given by Professor Dr. Elmar Kuhn. In addition to being the secretary general of the NGO Christians in Need, Dr. Kuhn is the president of the Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations in Central Europe (coalitionfbo.eu).

UPF International Chair Dr. Thomas G. Walsh is also the co-chair of the Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations.

In his speech, Dr. Kuhn spoke of his experiences at Christians in Need, ranging from famine revolts due to lack of grain supplies to Egypt (and many other African countries) to persecution, expulsion and murder of believers in about 80 percent of all countries on earth - according to the renowned Pew Institute (Pew Research Center, 2019 Sept. 30).

"We live in a tumultuous world and dark times!" Dr. Kuhn stated. "It is our mandate (as religions) to participate in shaping society, to contribute to interfaith understanding and to reject anti-life positions, including in the political sphere."

The best way to do this, he said, is through education, which must be based on values and communicated in a credible manner.

Ceremonial Reception at the End of the Symposium Confirms the Interreligious Mission

In the course of the February 18 ceremony, Professor Dr. Roin Metreveli, vice president of the Georgian National Academy of Sciences, gave a presentation on the life and work of Patriarch Ilia II. He referred to Dr. Kuhn's keynote address, saying, "Everybody listened to Professor Kuhn's lecture and paid attention to this significant speech."



The director of the Azerbaijan National Academy of Science, Professor Dr. Eynulla Madatli, emphasized the importance of interreligious dialogue, especially in the midst of an increasingly secularized global society. Dr. Kuhn established intensive relations with Dr. Madatli, including the question of the humanitarian catastrophe in Nagorno-Karabakh, a conversation that was completely denied by the Embassy of Azerbaijan to Austria on February 8 during a discussion in Vienna.

Commitment to Interreligious Dialogue

All in all, the international conference with participants from all over the world has become an interreligious commitment to the preservation of eternal values even in secular society and to fruitful dialogue with all cultures. How this dialogue can be implemented and secured between religions, the next steps must show.

Dr. Kuhn said: "In the projects of Christians in Need, however, we are already having very good experiences with interreligious education projects. This always strengthens respect and the positive perception of Christian minorities by the respective majority religion. There was no way around dialogue and education."

[Click here to read the address by Dr. Kuhn.](#)

Eternal Values in Hostile Cultures
Presented at the International Conference
“Eternal Values and the Constantly Changing World”
February 16, 2023
Tbilisi, Georgia

War crisis, hunger crisis, migration crisis, energy crisis, financial crisis—we live in a tumbling world of fear and darkness. This lecture is not dedicated to the positive elements of our constantly changing world. It refers to the other side of the medal: where eternal values are ignored, neglected or in the worst case persecuted. Today that’s the reality in most of the countries of our world¹. So the main question for the survival of dignity, humanity and spirituality is: How can eternal values also be integrated into hostile cultures?

1) What are hostile cultures?

Vladimir Putin would say: All Western liberal cultures. Boko Haram, part of the Islamic State, writes on its flags: All Western cultures and books are evil. The resulting incipient genocide of Christians in Nigeria is as familiar to me, as secretary general of the NGO Christians in Need (www.cin.international), as the discrimination and rape, expulsion and murder of Christians in Pakistan, Haiti, Egypt, Sri Lanka and many other countries of the world.

But for our understanding, hostile cultures are not necessarily corporal violent ones. Even a culture of discrimination would do violence to the free exercise of religion. In Britain, for example, even decidedly Catholic doctors are required in their training to

¹ Pew Research Center, 2019 September 30, “Globally, Social Hostilities Related to Religion Decline in 2019: Governments in more than 80% of countries in each region harassed religious groups in some way in 2019”

take an active part in abortions. Those who refuse to do so on grounds of conscience are not licensed to practice medicine and are deprived of the right to practice their profession. The Vienna-based Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians (www.intoleranceagainstchristians.eu) lists a large number of similar cases and presents a shameful picture of cultural discrimination against Christian beliefs in Europe.

What do we say as Christians? We prefer to speak of culture rather than society, because in European society we have different cultures, such as Western secularism, Russian imperialism, and condemnation of Western values, Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Muslim, Jewish, urban and rural cultures.

For centuries, churches have sought to communicate with emerging urban and secular cultures by defining values as a natural law evident to all people. In this climate of discussion, the values of humanism (Erasmus of Rotterdam) and secularism (for example, in the "theology of reason" of Immanuel Kant) gave orientation and direction through the Christian image of humans and the biblical dignity and responsibility of the individual.

The Gospel shows us very clearly the personal responsibility for our actions and forbids the excuse of orders from the state or a religion. This is also the root of Jesus of Nazareth's controversy with the ruling class of the Sadducees as well as with the legal scholars of Pharisees. Never is the totality of society meant in such discussions; it is always the question of the cultural environment of the discussants. Society is a diverse entity of different cultures and religious groups.

In secular Europe, it remains on the ground of reasonable jurisprudence and abstains from basic religious decisions.

Therefore, secular society is the ideal partner for Christianity, which, under the protection of the state, can freely bring its eternal values to the whole of society. Austria, in particular, has a worldwide model function for the peaceful coexistence of different denominations and religions in the whole of the state.

One danger for this protective function of the state in society is the momentum that currently is beginning to show itself in European societies. *When the protection of cultural groups and minorities is abused by a very vocal group that tries to make its own idea the only cultural idea of a society through media and public pressure, the road to violent conflict is not far because of this narrowing.*² *"Thus, we are currently experiencing a demonstrative intolerance with the increasing diversity in our society. ... A factually constructive discourse no longer takes place."*³

- One example is the rampant LGBTQ+ movement, which wants to make its libertarian set of values the basic order for all others, thus bringing it into conflict with cultures that respect basic family values. *Regardless of the hate speech that also affects these groups themselves, we must warn against the latent propensity to violence of some groups in this movement. Dialogue is urgently needed precisely because of the differences.*⁴

² See Thomas Hribar, *Hate Speech und die Grenzen der Meinungsfreiheit*, Diploma thesis Johannes Kepler Universität Linz, 2021, Page 19: The consequences of a statement, i.e., actual or potential (frowned upon) consequences for the individual, groups of people or society, can also be included in the consideration. In addition to violence, this also includes the creation of an atmosphere conducive to violence and the disturbance of public peace and order. The consequences to be taken into account also include the mere spreading and fomenting of hatred, without which further more serious consequences are identifiable. This alone disturbs the maintenance of and respect for fundamental democratic values in a pluralistic society, such as equality and tolerance, which is where the particular danger of hate speech lies.

³ Safiye Sahin, Hate Speech or Free Speech? *Grenzen der Meinungsfreiheit im Gesellschaftlichen Wandel*, 256, "Thus, with the increasing diversity in our society, we are currently experiencing a demonstrative intolerance. ... A factually constructive discourse is ... no longer taking place." in: KJ *Kritische Justiz*, Vol. 53 (2020) Issue 2, Pages 256 - 269

⁴ So an LGBT slogan was drawn on a pillar of the Saint Clément church in Nantes during the night of 21-22 July (<https://www.intoleranceagainstchristians.eu/index.php?id=12&case=6501>); In the run-up to the March for Life, three different pro-life Evangelical centers have been vandalized in two different cities, Zürich and Emmenbrücke (Lucerne). The perpetrators threw paint and vandalized the offices of the SWISS EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE (<https://www.intoleranceagainstchristians.eu/index.php?id=12&case=4948>).

- The increasingly aggressive exploitation of alleged civil liberties by Islamic groups is also on the rise.⁵ In Cologne, a muezzin will call for prayer from a mosque in the future—in the midst of a majority non-Islamic city, this also can be seen as a way of forced proselytization.
- In some districts of Vienna, the intolerant demand for the Islamic headscarf (which cannot even be justified by the Quran) already has led to even Christian women being mobbed if they do not wear a headscarf. How must it then be within the Islamic cultural groups toward their own sisters in faith?
- In the non-religious sphere, the vegetarian and vegan movement also is beginning to take on pseudo-religious features of intolerance.

Therefore, it is clear: In a secular state, one culture cannot determine all other cultures. However, the free space must always be shaped according to the majority. Church bells in a Christian majority culture are not an imposition on the Muslim minority. A majority feeling must be worth protecting as long as it does not destroy the individual freedom of another. The same right, however, cannot be enforced by a minority culture against a majority culture. The magic word is “inclusion” without leading into assimilation.

Thus, today's secular democracy must find new ways to deal with religious cultures in a positive and differentiated way. Here I agree with Charles Taylor, who writes, "If democracy is to

⁵ Five years ago, the men paraded through Wuppertal at night wearing vests with the inscription "Sharia Police." They wanted to address young Muslims and discourage them from visiting gambling halls, restaurants or brothels as well as from drinking alcohol. ... Their action had been suitable to achieve a "suggestive-militant effect." The men had been aware of this. They had deliberately created a reference to the Sharia police, a militant group known from the Middle East, which carries out acts of violence. ... The defendants (were) found guilty by the Wuppertal Regional Court (<https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/wuppertal-gericht-spricht-scharia-polizei-schuldig-a-1269527.html>).

meet the challenges of our time, it must no longer see the secularist order as a bulwark against religion."⁶

2) Are different cultures the enemy of society?

Quite the opposite. All successful societies in history have evolved through encounters with other cultures, often incorporating a variety of other cultures into their own. Our entire European journey from feudalism to democracy is the result of an ongoing learning process of cultural integration.

Where Jewish religious communities were tolerated in the Middle Ages, the economy flourished. In Muslim Andalusia, an almost modern social order celebrated great religious respect and artistic awakening until 1492. It is a pity that in the Ottoman Empire a completely contrary path has marked the face of Islam and has fixed it until today. The mixture of Protestantism and Catholicism has produced an incredible progress of technology, industry and prosperity throughout Europe after the Second World War.

But how must a society deal with cultures? In our world today, which is characterized by such endless changes, this is the central question of a social and political bracket in which these changes must be made fruitful for society.

The modern state, I believe, therefore must observe two basic rules. The first one is:

Accepting other minds instead of judging

However, with this tolerance, the state must be defensible enough to oppose any disproportionate dictatorship of a minority. For us as Christians, this means being always ready

⁶ Charles Taylor, "For a New Secularism," in *TRANSIT: European Review 2010/39, Rethinking Secularism*, p.26.

to clearly demonstrate what our convictions are, even in public discourse. We must put these fundamental values of our faith up for discussion and demand this discussion from other cultures in society as well. As in any discussion, however, this also means allowing injuries and not falling into the mistake of retreating into our own castle of faith.

The second basic rule is called:

In search for a common sense with other cultures, religions and confessions

This includes the call for tolerance and respect. Under no circumstances must it become a search for the lowest common denominator. The tension for values that take unpleasant positions in the secular mania for indifference must be endured. Examples where every openness and tolerance of the society toward other cultures is being fought against with extreme harshness are Putin together with Patriarch Kirill or Erdogan's Turkey in association with the Islamic imams. Both positions are retreats in the midst of a world that is constantly changing and can only generate peaceful coexistence from the sum of its cultures.

3) What are eternal values?

The Böckenförde Dilemma gives us a first idea: "*The liberal, secular state lives on preconditions which it cannot guarantee itself.*"⁷

Eternal values therefore cannot be something that a state or a group determines by decree or by majority vote. That would be

⁷ Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde: "The Emergence of the State as a Process of Secularization" In: *Law, State, Freedom*. 2006, p. 112

the dictatorship of the spirit from human *hubris*. Every new power could then change this in its own sense.

Therefore, Christianity⁸ developed the doctrine of *lex naturalis*, natural law, in the Middle Ages. This is understood as the participation in divine law, which can be derived from reason and is accessible to all people on the basis of the use of rationality.

The laws which are not subjected to human arbitrariness and which cannot be modified at will ultimately can be rooted only in an unavailable Nomos which is withdrawn from human despotisms. All religions know such divine laws. Thus, it would be helpful to compile a lowest common denominator of divine laws from all world religions. This would be a first step. The example of human dignity, however, already shows the limits of such a lowest common denominator: The Islamic Quran itself already knows different views of the dignity of women, which can hardly be brought into harmony with the Christian concept of women's dignity.

But Christianity itself is the guarantor of a divine self-revelation in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, which goes beyond all other religions. In no other religion can we see so much credibility as religion given. Between Scylla and Charybdis, the incarnate Son of God points the way to the Father. Scylla would then be the pure philosophy of reason, which cannot create an eternal criterion for values. Hedonism, utilitarianism or spartanism, fascism or communism—what humans philosophically conceive ends in the limits of the human way of thinking, which can stand only in each case for itself, but never for all humans.

⁸ cf. S. Th. I.11, 91, 2: *lex naturalis nihil aliud est quam participatio legis aeternae in rationali creatura*. Comprehensive in I.11. 90-97 as well as *De ente et essentia* and *De principiis naturae*.

Charybdis would then be the magical world of wizards, the attempt to seize the divine by breaking the laws of nature, as for example until today in voodoo, which thinks to be able to turn people into zombies (although this is only one aspect of a syncretic religion which is fascinating for me as a religious scientist).

Both the Scylla of philosophy and the Charybdis of a magical worldview lead people into dependence on another person's ideas and concepts. Eternal values? Certainly not like that!

But in Jesus the Christ a way between Scylla and Charybdis is opened, the way to the Father in human knowledge. A God for the world, but not of this world⁹. Eternal values are rooted in Christian basics, determined by the Holy Scriptures as revelation of God. Thus, these are not dependent on changing human majority decisions. It is important that these eternal values appeal to reason and not only have dogmatic legitimation, otherwise they would not be communicable beyond the religious dogmatics.

4) What eternal values do we need to bring into public discussion even in hostile cultures?

I will take the liberty of giving only a summary here, without going into detail. The respective inner-cultural justifications from our Christian history and anchoring in eternal values would lead too far here. But the discussion about this is urgently necessary.

As eternal values, we demand the value of life, the value of family, the value of freedom and individual responsibility, the commitment to life after death, to Christ as Savior and Healer,

⁹ See John 8:23

to the integrity of creation. It is the value of our mission to participate in shaping society, to promote interreligious understanding, and to reject positions that destroy life, including in the political sphere. This includes the rejection of any attempt to claim a right of the strongest or at least the loudest.

5) How can we implement these values in society?

The central point is education. Therefore, it must be urged that:

- 1) Education is based on values (ethics, religions);
- 2) Education needs a teacher-student relationship characterized by trust;
- 3) Education is followed by a real dialogue, because without dialogue there is no mutual understanding;
- 4) Education is accompanied by integrated actions (practical relevance in concrete life);
- 5) Education is followed by socio-political actions (intertwining of education with the civil society).

Is it still credible for Christian religions to provide this education?

Let us first talk about two serious obstacles for Christianity in our time.

1. The Catholic Church, along with its moral credibility, is sinking into the abyss of spiritual, physical and sexual abuse, institutionalized and covered up for decades, in a current of shamelessness.¹⁰
2. The Orthodox world is suffering from President Putin's un-Christian policy, which is willingly supported by Patriarch

¹⁰ See H.-J. Sander, *Die Unverschämtheit im sexuellen Missbrauch*, in: *Stimmen der Zeit*, Issue 2 Februar 2019, 83-92.

Kirill—who is trying hard to convince the Orthodox world of this un-Christian policy of conquest as well. *For the first time since the Thirty Years War, 1618 to 1648, Christians are again at war against Christians on the background of a religiously motivated war.* Even more: Orthodox Christians against Orthodox Christians. The damage is the credibility of the biblical message, which is being trampled underfoot.

And what about the credibility of other religions in comparison?

- Sunni Muslims see themselves betrayed by the Islamic State's interpretation of Islam—which is completely Koran-implicit, albeit shamelessly bent, and which denies non-Sunnis and all controversial Sunnis the right to exist.
- Shiite Muslims are desperately searching for their self-image between, on the one hand, the tight leadership of ayatollahs and revolutionary brigades and, on the other hand, the mood of a freedom-seeking people who see themselves as loyal to the Shiite form of Islam.
- China's communist-draped Confucians tolerate no dissent and see non-compliant Catholics, free church members and Muslims who think and criticize independently as the “number one” enemies of the state.
- Indian Hindu nationalists are trying to turn back the wheel of plurality and democracy and make life hell for Muslims and Christians alike.
- Iraq is disintegrating along its sectarian fault lines, this time between Shiites and Sunnis. Druze, Christians and Yazidis are always the losers. Hope has given way to speechless horror.

This inventory at the beginning of the 21st century could be continued at will. We are stumbling into a disoriented, fearful and hopeless global system. The more distressing the world situation is, the more hope the world needs. For the people of our world, religions have always been a source of hope to overcome fear, egoism and resignation. They are an inspiration for a social life in solidarity. Under these assumptions what is the role of religions? All religious communities need critical self-reflection and efforts at self-deepening and renewal to regain their often justly lost credibility and moral authority. Inner reform and theological memory of history are part of the hope we need.¹¹ Interfaith harmony is essential for the ability and credibility of religions to strengthen peace in our world.

There is no question that politics and economics have an impact on our world. But that religions would disappear was one of the great misinterpretations of philosophy since the French Revolution. Even in 2012, biopsychologist Nigel Barber noted that atheism is growing primarily in developed countries. According to his study, religion as such will disappear completely by 2041.¹²

However, away from revolutionary reveries, the well-known Pew Research Center stated that "the religiously unaffiliated population is projected to shrink as a percentage of the global population. ... In 2015, there were slightly fewer than 1.2 billion atheists, agnostics and people who did not identify with any particular religion around the world. By 2060, the unaffiliated population is expected to reach 1.2 billion. But as a share of all

¹¹ Compare: Tomáš Halík, Annette Schavan, Paul M. Zulehner, *Religionen – Hoffnung für eine taumelnde Welt. Ein Aufruf* (14.9.2022)

¹² See N. Barber, *Why Atheism Will Replace Religion: The Triumph of Earthly Pleasure over Pie in the Sky*, Kindle Edition, Birmingham 2012.

people in the world, religious 'nones' are projected to decline from 16 percent of the total population in 2015 to 13 percent in 2060."¹³

Former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, in her book *The Mighty and the Almighty: Reflections on America, God, and World Affairs*, speaks of the importance of religion in world affairs, citing both the positive and destructive sides of religion. Religion is "probably the most important force in shaping the human conscience," she writes, but on the other hand it is also "an eternal source of hatred and conflict." At the same time, she notes that the real danger in religion is religious illiteracy.¹⁴ Where religion does not answer to reason and is not learned in education, half-truths and self-constructed pseudo-definitions of faith result.

It is now up to us to bring the positive power of our faith actively and courageously into society. Education is our most powerful tool. The resistance of many hostile cultures should encourage rather than discourage us. We may draw much strength and conviction from the fact that Christianity in particular, with its eternal values that are also accessible to reason, has a deep and spiritual credibility. As believers, we must preserve this credibility.

It is a gift to celebrate the 90th birthday of Patriarch Ilia II in Tbilisi in 2023. He is a religious leader who stands on the side of his faith and faithfully proclaims the message of the Gospel. But on the ground, in schools and educational institutions, believers must bear this witness anew every day. It is our duty to become the salt of the earth, even in hostile cultures. Where

¹³ Pew Research Center, April 5, 2017, "The Changing Global Religious Landscape," 9f

¹⁴ Madeleine Albright, *Der Mächtige und der Allmächtige: Gott, Amerika und die Weltpolitik*, Munich 2006 (Engl.: *The Mighty and the Almighty: Reflections on America, God, and World Affairs*, New York 2006)

else, if not in educational outreach, can we carry forward this heritage of our faith? Role models of faith are what our societies need. Our Christian culture is the most valuable asset for this.

But keep in mind: There will never be a perfect Christian culture in this world. Nevertheless, the theological concept of the "eschatological reservation" teaches us to trust that we are all pilgrims on the way. We are always called to self-criticism and lifelong learning. This should also be part of any educational system.

The proclamation of our eternal values of Christian conviction can be the salt of our societies. We need not shy away from confrontation with hostile cultures. The ammunition we bring to the contest of cultures are our eternal values, mediated in schools, universities, and other educational fields. But the weapon, however, is the word of the Apostle Paul: *"And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love"* (1 Corinthians 13:13).

There is one person among us, who throughout his lifetime taught and witnessed the eternal values of our faith. In Soviet times, he was undaunted in confessing the truth. With the freedom and independence of Georgia he accompanied the way to the self-responsible future, and with education and spirituality he anchored anew the foundations of one of the first Christian nations of the world into Georgian society and culture. For this, his Holiness Ilia II, Catholicos Patriarch of All Georgia, is appointed as Doctor of Theology Honoris Causa by

our Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi Christian University. My congratulations.

Elmar Kuhn (Austria) studied in Munich, Buenos Aires, Vienna and Salzburg and specialized in religious studies. In 2022 he was appointed as professor of religious studies and head of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi Christian University in the United States. Since 2021 he has been the president of the Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations - Central Europe. He is a founding member of the European Academy of Religions. As secretary general of Christians in Need (www.cin.international), he organizes help programs for persecuted believers of religions all over the world. He has been a keynote speaker at symposia about interreligious dialogue, education and hate speech in Cologne, Enugu, Frankfurt, Geneva, Ljubljana, Lugano, Osaka, Rome, Seoul, Skopje, Tiflis, Tokyo, Vienna, Warsaw and others. From 2010 to 2019 he was dean of Class VII World Religions in direct succession to the late Professor Eugen Biser.