

The Christian Orthodox concept of the person and Geert Hofstede's cultural dimension of 'feminity – masculinity': reconsidering the foundations of cultural difference

Abstract

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Introduction

The role of religions and denominations in forming national cultures and mentalities has been brought to awareness in recent decades by scholars and by political events, especially outside of the 'West'. Attention to this factor is growing, along with the realisation of 'post-secular' orientations and movements. Proponents are Samuel P. Huntington,¹ in the field of international politics, and Geert Hofstede² in the field of international economics and culture. After the end of the Cold War, Huntington declared that a multi-polar world was to be expected, in which long-standing religious-cultural formations defined collective identities. He sensitized to the role of religions in shaping cultural differences, values systems and identities. Hofstede explored systematic and measurable dimensions of differences between cultures.

In the following, I will present the thesis that the systematic difference identified by Hofstede, and successors, between Christian Orthodox countries, and Protestant countries, the 'West', have to be attributed to the formative influence of Eastern Orthodox theology of the 'person', and its philosophical basis in the Platonic tradition, as shown by Christos Yannaras, in distinction from the 'Latin' tradition. The importance of such in-depth understanding may be evident from the present 'clash of civilizations', and their spheres of power in the Ukraine. (An understanding of the cultural differences can contribute to a better understanding of systematic differences, and safeguard against a widespread Western presumption of only one legitimate value system, claimed to be 'universal' that impedes conflict resolution by mutual recognition. The present brief presentation thus has an ethical aspect too).^{1,2}

At the background of Huntington's thesis of distinct culturally defined macro-realms, one may discern the concept of 'Kulturkreis' that denotes cultural realms, based not only on technology, language or forms of government, but also on ideas, and thus, on religion. The concept is described in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*: "Kulturkreis,

(German: "culture circle" or "cultural field") plural *Kulturkreise*, location from whence ideas and technology subsequently diffused over large areas of the world. It was the central concept of an early 20th-century German school of anthropology, *Kulturkreislehre*, which was closely related to the Diffusionist approach of British and American anthropology."³

Huntington picks up the concept and writes that the West will remain the most powerful 'kulturkreis' for many years to come. Yet, its power is waning, with regard to other realms. He foretold, in 1996, that non-Western societies, confronted with Western dominance and expansionism, will either try to emulate the West, or to join it – as, arguably, the Ukraine at present – or will strive to preserve their different sets of values, also militarily and economically. Huntington pointed out to the Islamic and Confucian realm.⁴ One may add India, Brazil, and African countries – in view of their position in the present Russian-Ukrainian war, to remain neutral, refusing to join Western sanctions against Russia. This plays out in the political field, where they refuse to be taken in for the Western position of massive political, military, and economic backing of the Ukraine, favouring compromise and negotiations.⁵

The repercussions of the Western sanctions' regime against Russia have accelerated efforts by non-Western countries, to detach trade by non-Western countries from the US-Dollar.⁶ It appears that the present crisis has accelerated the striving to escape Western claim to hegemony, and to establish a multi-polar system. This is in line with Huntington's views. It also pertains to the realm of values and ethical principles, whose specific formations are characteristic for cultures, and mark differences between Western and non-Western cultures. It is thus necessary to understand them – as will be outlined.

³Kulturkreis anthropology" [rev. by: Elizabeth Prine Pauls], In: *Encyclopedia Britannica* [online]. 2023.

⁴Huntington Samuel P. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon & Schuster; 1996.

⁵Klare Michael T. "Goodbye to the American Century, welcome to the 'G-3'". In: *Responsible Statecraft*. 2023.

⁶Clifton Eli. "Dedollarization is here, like it or not. A major driver is Washington's weaponization of its currency via sanctions, covering 29 percent of the global economy". In: *Responsible Statecraft*. 2023.

¹Huntington Samuel P. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon & Schuster; 1996.

²Hofstede, Geert. *Culture's Consequences. International Differences in Work-Related Values*. London: Sage Pub; 1984.

Huntington described Russia and neighbouring predominantly Christian Orthodox countries as a distinct 'kulturkreis'. About the Ukraine he wrote, that, culturally, it is a divided country, with a 'fault line' running between the western and the eastern Ukraine, shaped by their different political histories, of (Roman-Catholic) Polish-Lithuanian, then Austro-Hungarian rule in the west, and (Orthodox) Russian rule in the east.⁷ He thus affirms the importance of religious (denominational) influences for the sets of values, even where a common national language and statehood exists, as in the Ukraine.^{3,4}

The other important author here, is Geert Hofstede. From 1965 on, he researched cultural differences, based on a collection of interviews with over 100 000 employees of IBM worldwide. He identified four, then six dimensions, where values, social mores, rules and meanings of behaviour, differ significantly between cultures.⁸ It became a life-work,⁹ that inspired further research. Hofstede recognised the role of religions in the shaping of such value systems.¹⁰ Some, like 'power distance' and 'insecurity avoidance' appear as self-evident. The dimension of 'femininity versus masculinity' is less so.

This dimension is depicted as follows

"The Masculinity/Femininity dimension is about what values are considered more important in a society. The Masculine side of this dimension represents a preference in society for achievement, heroism, assertiveness and material rewards for success. Society at large is more competitive. Its opposite, femininity, stands for a preference for cooperation, modesty, caring for the weak and quality of life."¹¹

Remarkably, Russia – and other Orthodox countries – score rather high on 'femininity' in an index of this dimension. A sample found results of 55 in Russia, equal about to Greece.¹² This is significantly lower, than scores for Germany, Great Britain or Switzerland that are above 74 points. Given the markedly 'masculine' values, and the emphasis on gender differences, with powerful female role models, in cultural history and present,¹³ this begs explanation. Discussions on the issue have not come up with conclusive explanations. Therefore, it is to be assumed, that some other factors account for these results that do not fit the gendered category of 'masculinity' or 'femininity'. G. Hofstede was aware of its limitations and acknowledged cultural influences here.¹⁴

Therefore, I propose, that the values of the Christian Orthodox Church – that is dominant in both Russia and Greece, since Christianization - are causative here. Orthodox Christianity has interacted with specific folk traditions and ethnic value systems,¹⁵

accounting for specific differences between Orthodox societies – but the overall agreement between them, as reflected in similar scores on this dimension, indicate that the Orthodox value system is probably decisive here.⁵⁻⁷

Considering that this dimension indicates, how much people mind about each other – apart from their interest in status or achievement, that are considered 'masculine', as reflected in Russia's or Greece's high scores for 'power distance', compared to the egalitarianism of historically Protestant societies – it is to be assumed, that what is conceptualised as 'feminine' in Hofstede's dimension, actually reflects something else.^{8,9}

The influential dissertation of the Greek philosopher, Christos Yannaras,¹⁶ may provide a lead. He proposed the thesis that the Orthodox concept of 'person' is strongly different from that of the Latin (Roman Catholic and Protestant) tradition (– including the largely secularised societies that developed in this realm). He shows that the Greek word and concept of 'person' – 'prosōpon' – denotes a 'relational' understanding of personhood.¹⁷ He indicates that this understanding derives from the Platonic tradition, by explaining that the 'person' – that is encountered, 'manifests' itself in the interpersonal relation.¹⁸ The priority, of understanding a person 'in relation' was adopted into Christian Orthodox metaphysics in the 4th century, and thus integrated theologically.¹⁹ By applying this concept to the Divine Holy Trinity, the notion of unity and identity of a 'person in relation' was given iconic authority.^{10,11}

Its consequence is, that interpersonal relations receive high attention in Christian Orthodox cultures. Thus E. Roberts explains in a brief ethnographic study of Russian values: "The Russians prize the quality of 'soul' (dusha) above all others. (...) They have a tendency to 'open their soul' to complete strangers, telling everything about themselves even if the other person doesn't particularly want to know."²⁰

She writes here, perceptibly, with regard to the cultural differences in attitudes about interest in private matters, between Anglo-Saxons and Russians. The Russian will expect profound interest in the 'personal' realm, including the inner life, the 'soul', and esteem for such disclosures. The Anglo-Saxon may feel embarrassed by so much confidentiality, and annoyed about having to take interest. This reflects an attitude focussed on the 'objective' issues of common dealings, interests, and issues to be dealt with. In short, a more 'masculine' attitude, in Hofstede's dimensions. Yannaras developed a fundamental critique of Western civilisation and its values, based on this philosophy of 'person-hood as revealing itself in relations'. This, he claims, also extends to the relation to 'nature', which is also 'personal' in Platonic and Orthodox thought. Thus, Yannaras criticises Western attitudes, and their philosophical basis: "If understanding of the world is not realised by 'personal' relation, not assuming any 'essence' of things, nor taking interest in it, then (...) understanding of nature serves technique ... the criterion of utility transforms the world to an impersonal object..."²¹ [my transl.].

Even if this may be rejected as overdrawn, considering the Western tradition of natural sciences as exploration of nature as a scholarly purpose in itself, Yannaras' critique of a utilitarian attitude to personal

⁷Huntington Samuel P. Clash of Civilizations – Reshaping World Politics in the 21st Century. Europa-Verlag. Munich; 1997;264.

⁸Nickerson Charlotte. "Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory". In: *Simply Psychology*. 2023.

⁹Hofstede Geert. Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values. 2nd ed, CA: Sage Pub; 1984.

¹⁰Hofstede Geert. Culture's Consequences: comparing values, behaviors, institutions, and organizations across nations. 2nd ed, CA: Thousand Oaks; 2001.

¹¹De Bruin Lars. Cross Cultural Management - Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions". In: *Business 2 You*. 2017.

¹²Naumov Alexander I, Puffer Sheila. "Measuring Russian Culture using Hofstede's Dimensions". In: *International Association for Applied Psychology: An International Review*. 2000;49(4):709–718.

¹³Fedotov Georgi P. The Russian Religious Mind. 1946;1:21.

¹⁴Hofstede Geert. Culture's Consequences: comparing values, behaviours, institutions, and organizations across nations. 2nd ed, CA: Thousand Oaks; 2001. 280 p.

¹⁵Fedotov Georgi P. The Russian Religious Mind. 1946;1:21.

¹⁶Yannaras Christos. Person und Eros. *Göttingen*. 1982. 16 p.

¹⁷Ibidem. 21 p.

¹⁸Ibidem. 19 p.

¹⁹Ibidem. 24 p.

²⁰Roberts Elizabeth. The Xenophobe's Guide to the Russians. London: Ravette Books. 1993. 10 p.

²¹Yannaras Christos. Person und Eros. *Göttingen*. 1982. 104 p.

relations – including those to 'nature' – the inner and outer nature of people and environment, does identify a difference in attitudes to interpersonal relations, that any visitor to Orthodox countries can experience. Its relevance for the field of negotiations and interpersonal dealings – Hofstede's practical concern – is obvious.¹²

In conclusion, it may be worthwhile to explore the formative effects of the Christian Orthodox theology and philosophy of 'personhood' to arrive at a deeper understanding of the foundations of measurable cultural differences – mal-appropriately called 'feminine' by Hofstede – despite his awareness of the cultural limitations to this dimension. It might be time to review the name of this dimension, in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of the systematic cultural differences, manifest in mores, and social attitudes to '(inter-)personal interest', in Orthodox societies, that set them apart from those in countries of 'Western' tradition. Its relevance for inter-cultural negotiations, and dealings at all levels, is obvious.

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