

Confessional Belonging and National Identity: A Case Study of Serbia, Croatia, and Germany

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It is difficult to comprehend that at the dawn of the twenty-first century wars are still being fought over religious, or confessional, identity and yet, despite economical, technological, and cultural progress, as well as the advancements achieved through ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, the trouble generated by religious conflicts has actually increased and is still a significant concern.¹ In this chapter, I wish to examine the relationship between the confessional and national identity by analyzing the conditions surrounding one particular conflict: the war fought in Croatia from 1991 until 1995. Since the aim of this chapter is to present a theological perspective on elements of this particular war, no general explanation of other religiously fueled, violent conflicts in the world can be offered.

The Croatian war of the late twentieth century is certainly not unique for this kind of inter-confessional conflict,² although it is the most recent of a string of centuries-long events. The French Wars of Religion (1562–

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1598), the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), and the conflict in Northern Ireland (1968–1998) have all erupted due to the pressure of trying to conform confessional uniformity onto evolving national identity. The so-called Good Friday Agreement marked the beginning of the end of the worst excesses of this conflict in 1998, although in Ireland painful divisions remain to this day.³ The war in Croatia therefore is a useful case study, as a contemporaneous, confessional-fueled war that has relevance to our own time.

Furthermore, the war in Croatia's distinctiveness from the other Yugoslav wars demands further query because of its character as an inter-confessional conflict.⁴ The war in Slovenia was not religiously motivated; it lasted only for ten days and it had a relatively small number of casualties.⁵ The war in Bosnia, fought in 1992–1995 between Bosniaks united with the Bosnian Croats against the local Serbs, was without a doubt motivated by religious reasons,⁶ but these reasons were more inter-religious than inter-confessional in their nature, which makes this conflict only partly relevant for our topic.⁷ Last, the war fought in Kosovo (1998–1999) was unrelated to religious belonging and was instead a war between two separate nations, the Serbs and Kosovo-Albanians.

There are two main questions I am seeking to address in this chapter. The first relates directly to the Croatian war: how do two traditionally Christian nations such as the Croats and Serbs justify mutual hatred and commit barbaric acts of violence against each other? The second invites speculation into conflicting confessional effects: how do some other nations, like the Germans, who are also divided across confessional lines, manage to maintain respect and tolerance? The Germans offer a complementary contrast to the Serbs and Croatians, on the grounds that both former Yugoslavia and Germany were conceptualized as nation-states. Furthermore the citizenship, for both countries, was based on the *ius soli* and national belonging on the *ius sanguinis* principle.⁸ Throughout most of the twentieth century, both Yugoslavia and Germany had similar percentages of confessional diversity, yet they managed their confessional diversity differently: Yugoslavia broke apart in a violent conflict, and Germany reunited, functioning until today as a stable democratic country.⁹ A brief look at the history of the Serbian-Croatian conflict provides part of the explanation for such different outcomes for the two countries.