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Wars Come and Go, International Society Changes, and Religions Endure: Narratives of Religious Actors on the Ukraine War

Katharina McLarren 

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Abstract In the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, reactions by religious leaders have differed greatly, with the Shia Ayatollah blaming the United States for the war, the Catholic Pope calling the United Nations “impotent,” and the Dalai Lama stating that “war is outdated.” But has there been a change in any of these religious narratives when it comes to war? Does the Ukraine war signify a turning point, or can we observe more of the same? Embedded in an English School framework, this article conducts a narrative analysis to better understand whether and how the primary institutions of war and international law are being (re)interpreted. The article analyses these three religious actors’ narratives on the Ukraine war and compares them to their respective past war narratives. The article examines how these narratives reflect a strengthening and even an expansion or an undermining and thus weakening of international society, with a particular emphasis on the primary institutions of war and international law as well as the secondary institution of the United Nations. The article argues that at least for religious actors in international politics, the Ukraine war does not pose a formative event in global security policy. Instead, these actors may have missed a critical juncture for strengthening or even upholding international law.

Keywords Transnational actors · Syria War · Roman Catholic Church · Primary institutions · English School

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Kriege kommen und gehen, die internationale Gesellschaft ändert sich und Religionen überdauern: Narrative religiöser Akteure zum Ukraine-Krieg

Zusammenfassung Die Reaktionen von Religionsführern infolge des russischen Angriffskriegs auf die Ukraine fielen sehr unterschiedlich aus. Während der schiitische Ayatollah die USA für den Krieg verantwortlich machte, bezeichnete der römisch-katholische Papst die Vereinten Nationen als „impotent“; und der Dalai Lama erklärte, Krieg wäre überholt. Aber hat es seit dem Ukraine-Krieg eine Veränderung der religiösen Narrative gegeben? Handelt es sich bei dem Ukraine-Krieg um formatives Ereignis (eine „Zeitenwende“) oder bleibt alles beim Alten? Die Englische Schule bildet das theoretische Rahmenwerk des Artikels, der mithilfe einer narrativen Analyse untersucht, ob und wie die Primärinstitutionen Krieg und Völkerrecht (neu) interpretiert werden. Die Narrative dieser drei Religionsführer zum Ukraine-Krieg werden mit vergangenen Kriegsnarrativen verglichen. Auf dieser Analyse aufbauend, erforscht der Artikel, inwiefern diese Narrative ein Erstarken oder gar ein Ausweiten oder ein Untergraben und somit eine Schwächung der internationalen Gesellschaft widerspiegelt. Dabei wird ein Schwerpunkt auf die Primärinstitutionen Krieg und Völkerrecht sowie auf die Sekundärinstitution Vereinte Nationen gelegt. Der Artikel argumentiert, dass der Ukraine-Krieg zumindest für religiöse Akteure in der internationalen Politik kein formatives Ereignis für die globale Sicherheitspolitik bedeutet. Im Gegenteil wird argumentiert, dass diese Akteure solch einen Zeitpunkt, um das Völkerrecht zu stärken oder überhaupt aufrechtzuerhalten, womöglich versummt haben.

Schlüsselwörter Transnationale Akteure · Syrien-Krieg · Römisch-katholische Kirche · Primärinstitutionen · Englische Schule

1 Introduction

In the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, reactions by religious leaders have differed greatly, with the Shia Ayatollah accusing the United States of starting the war (Khamenei 2023a), the Catholic Pope calling the United Nations (UN) “impotent” (Vatican 2022), and the Dalai Lama stating that “war is outdated” (Dalai Lama 2022). At first glance, the narratives of these religious leaders appear to vary greatly, as they frame the war very differently. However, when considering the overarching questions of (foreign policy) change tackled in this special issue, the narratives of these religious leaders are not as disparate as they first appear. As Dück and Stahl (2024) discuss in the introduction to this special issue, the Ukraine war is regarded as a critical juncture for German foreign policy, proclaimed by Chancellor Scholz to be a *Zeitenwende*, or turning point. Beyond this immediate purported fundamental change in (German) foreign policy, the Ukraine war is also contextualized in the ongoing shift away from a so-called liberal international order (see Dück and Stahl in this special issue). Notably, the theme of the 77th session of the United Nations General Assembly starting in September 2022 was also a “watershed moment: trans-

formative solutions to interlocking challenges” (United Nations General Assembly 2023).

By studying “religious transnational actors” (Haynes 2012) who arguably also constitute international society, I seek to add another angle to better understand a) whether the Ukraine war poses a critical juncture for international society and b) what the narratives of religious leaders reveal about changing primary institutions, particularly war and international law. In other words, what do religious narratives on war reveal about a changing liberal international order or, in English School terms, a solidarist international society?

In this article I argue that at least for religious actors in international politics, the Ukraine war does not pose a formative event in global security policy. Instead, these actors may have missed a critical juncture for strengthening or even upholding international law. By studying narratives, understood as a form of discursive practice and embedded in an English School framework, this article seeks to show how war and international law as primary institutions and the United Nations as a secondary institution of international society are being (re)interpreted by religious actors. Examples might be narratives calling for a strengthening and even expansion or an undermining and thus weakening of these institutions. By examining narratives not just on one war but rather overarching narratives of war and conflict more generally, this interpretation provides an indication as to how these institutions are changing, particularly in reference to the notion of a liberal international order or a solidarist international society.

Diez (2017) provides a key point of departure here, arguing that religious actors, and in particular the Roman Catholic Church, have assumed a more prominent role in international politics due to international society becoming increasingly solidarist. This implies a “transformation toward greater responsibilities toward individuals beyond a state’s own territory, the increasing relevance of non-state actors, and a change in diplomatic practices” (Diez 2017, p. 34). Rather than studying religions directly involved or affected by the Ukraine war in particular, I focus on three religious actors who have engaged, and continue to actively engage, with international society. I choose a least-similar case approach, selecting three actors who are similar in one independent variable (transnational religious actors) but dissimilar in all other independent variables (religious doctrine, international representation, approach to international society).

In a first step, I briefly recall the English School understanding of primary and secondary institutions constitutive of international society. I then link this theoretical framework with a narrative analysis, outlining how Wibben’s approach is employed in this article. In a structured, focused comparison, the findings of the narrative analysis are presented in three cases, namely the narratives of Pope Francis, Ayatollah Khamenei, and the Dalai Lama in two cases of war (Ukraine and Syria). The findings are reexamined to identify patterns as to whether the Ukraine war represents a turning point for these actors and to tackle the overarching question of how religious actors are (re)interpreting primary and secondary institutions, possibly signifying a change in international society.

Finally, a few caveats are necessary. The religions were selected to represent both monotheistic as well as nontheistic approaches. The leaders were selected due to the

fact that they each represent religious, transnational, and political entities. Finally, the wars were selected considering that all three religious leaders have been in office since the beginning or during the conflict; they generated international reactions; and mass atrocities were committed. The article is based upon three assumptions: a) religions possess agency in international politics, i.e., they participate in international institutions and contribute to shaping primary and secondary institutions; b) religions offer guidelines on morality on questions of life and death, and thus also on violence, peace, and war; and c) religious narratives are also political and thus should be included in the analysis of narratives on war to better understand its genesis, its legitimation, and its evolution in international society. The hypothesis is that (religious) narratives of war reveal how wars are legitimized, whether and how they should be conducted, and how the storytellers themselves should engage. The central question, as mentioned above, can be stated as follows: What do religious narratives on war reveal about a changing international society?

2 State of the Art and Relevance

The study of religion in international relations has gained prominence in the past years. Nevertheless, while traditional skepticism toward including religion has largely subsided, this field of study remains eclectic. The most relevant work¹ for this article includes the literature on religion and actors in international politics, such as that by Haynes, who introduced the concept of transnational religious actors (2009, 2012); that by McLarren and Stahl, who discuss hybrid state religious actors (2020); and the work on religious nongovernmental organizations (RNGOs) by Baumgart-Ochse and Wolf (2019), Carrette and Miall (2017), and Stensvold (2017). One of the major challenges identified is the self-identification of RNGOs, since there are many that identify as interfaith organizations or as spiritual but not necessarily as religious. An area of research with extensive work is that which examines religion as actor or factor in wars and conflicts, including work by Brown (2020), Fox (2004), Hassner (2016), and Zellman and Fox (2020). This is closely linked with literature from peace and conflict studies, which look closely at the role of religious identity or what active role religions assume during and in the aftermath of conflicts, such as the work by Coward and Smith (2004), Cox et al. (1994), Omer et al. (2015), Vüllers (2019), and Weingardt (2014).

In particular, interdisciplinary work provides helpful insights into the theological and sociological aspects of religions and war, including their approaches to violence and their ideals of peace. Important contributors in this regard include Dorn and Cation (2009), Kitts (2023), Nardin (1996), Popovski et al. (2009), and Zimmermann (2006). The overview chapter by Klocek and Hassner (2020) in “The Oxford Encyclopedia of Politics and Religion” (Djupe et al. 2020) depicts the research gap that remains when it comes to studying religions at an international level in the face of war. This article thus seeks to add a contribution to fill that gap. One recent publication that should be mentioned is “The Routledge Handbook of Religion, Mass

¹ For an extensive literature review on religion in international relations, see McLarren (2022).

Atrocity, and Genocide” (Brown and Smith 2022), which offers concise empirical overviews of the role of religion in a selection of cases and provided a valuable starting point for this research project. There is research on the role of religion in the Ukraine war (cf. Elsner and Köllner 2022; Houston and Mandaville 2022), and this is partly due to the fact that the Russian Orthodox Church has taken a prominent role and has provoked direct reactions from other religious leaders. However, so far there has not been a comparative study, and there has been no conceptualization of religion in general during the Ukraine war and beyond, particularly when it comes to narratives.

3 War and International Law as Changing Primary Institutions in the English School

According to Bull, the questions at the core of international relations include the following: “What is the place of war in international society? [...] Does a member state of international society enjoy a right of intervention in the internal affairs of another, and if so in what circumstances? Are sovereign states the sole members of international society [...]?” (Bull 1966, p. 367). The English School continues to consider such questions, and it does so, *inter alia*, by studying what they term “primary institutions,” which are at the core of every international society and which include war, diplomacy, sovereignty, and international law. Such institutions “are constitutive of both states and international society, in that they define not only the basic character of states but also their patterns of legitimate behaviour in relation to each other, as well as the criteria for membership of international society” (Buzan 2014, p. 17). What is more commonly known as international institutions in international relations is termed “secondary institutions” in the English School. Within the English School there are two different understandings, or ontologies, of institutions identified by Spandler (2015). He suggests that English School scholars distinguish between an “individualist” and an “intersubjectivist” ontology (Spandler 2015, p. 604), as this makes a considerable difference when studying institutional change. The ontology adopted in this article adheres to what Spandler identifies as “intersubjectivist,” and for the sake of brevity only this version is presented here. According to the intersubjectivist ontology, international society is conceived of “as being constituted by intersubjectively shared meanings, such as collective identities, norms, and rules, which emerge from interaction but are autonomous from agents” (Spandler 2015, p. 605). Drawing from social constructivism, Spandler states that “(p)rimaries institutions are institutionalized via learning processes. An important mechanism in these processes is the iteration of practice, especially the repeated uttering of complementary speech acts, which gives them normative character and leads to convergent expectations about behaviour” (Spandler 2015, p. 612).

As this indicates, English School scholars often focus on the transformation of international society, which is mostly depicted on a spectrum between “pluralist” and “solidarist” poles (cf. Knudsen 2016). An international society characterized by pluralism in this context means that the international order takes center stage, with a pluralism of states coexisting and strongly upholding the primary institutions of

sovereignty, territorial integrity, or the balance of power. A more solidarist international society, by contrast, has a stronger sense of justice at its core, in this context implying that “the values that states need to pursue are not only related to their own continued existence but to individuals outside their territories” (Diez 2017, p. 33). In other words, such an international society demonstrates solidarity with individuals beyond states’ borders. Diez (2017) argues that the international society was in a process, albeit a contested one, of transformation toward becoming more solidarist and thus allowing for both state as well as nonstate actors to contribute to shaping such a society, building bridges between an international society and a world society. As mentioned previously, this article seeks to shed light on how the primary institutions of war and international law are being (re)interpreted and how this might signal a change in international society. It therefore examines the discursive practice in the shape of narratives of three religious actors in the context of the Ukraine war and beyond.

4 Narrative Analysis

According to Wibben (2011), narratives are political, particularly if their function is understood as enabling and limiting representation. Wibben (ibid.) also demonstrates that narrative analyses are by no means limited to literary studies but can and have been adopted in other fields, including political science and, more specifically, feminist studies.

The narrative analysis conducted here is a simplified adaptation of the structuralist approach presented by Wibben (2011) and following Bal (1997). It is based upon a three-step or “layer” analysis, studying “text (medium), story (presentation), and fabula (content)” (Wibben 2011, p. 46). The first layer focuses on what might be termed the parameters of the narrative, i.e., what is being presented with which means. This can include scope, duration, location, etc. The second step considers how the content is presented. Which elements are included, how are they ordered, and which ones are given priority? Finally, the third layer looks at the content of what is being presented. This third step is arguably the most extensive but also the most challenging. “As a product of imagination, the fabula, although most obvious to a reader, is the least accessible layer from the viewpoint of narrative theory. Nonetheless, a narrative is produced to convey a fabula” (Wibben 2011, p. 50). The overarching aim of these three steps is to trace or grasp how meaning or the interpretation of experience is created. “As such, the analysis cannot provide ultimate truth or decide on quality or value. It can only provide insights into how certain mechanisms are used to encourage one or another meaning” (Wibben 2011, p. 46).

In the following, three narratives on the Ukraine war are presented as a structured, focused comparison, using a least-similar cases design (George 1979; George and Bennett 2005). The narratives are then respectively embedded in a greater narrative on war and conflict by comparing the current narratives with those on the Syria war. The selected cases are similar in one independent variable, namely that of being transnational religious actors, as indicated in Table 1. All three actors address au-

Table 1 Overview of least-similar cases

Case	Similar independent variable: transnational religious actor	Dissimilar independent variable: religious doctrine	Dissimilar independent variable: representation at United Nations (UN)	Dissimilar independent variable: approach to international society
<i>Pope Francis</i>	Addresses worldwide audience; online archive in all UN languages (except Russian), plus additional languages	Roman Catholic Church (monotheistic)	Holy See as permanent observer	Ambiguous; strong advocate of global solidarity; at the same time, strong defender of sovereignty
<i>Ayatollah Khamenei</i>	Addresses worldwide audience; online archive in all UN languages (except Chinese), plus additional languages	Twelver Shi'ism (monotheistic)	Iran as member state	Pluralist; contests institutions of international society; seeks Islamic revolution
<i>Dalai Lama</i>	Addresses worldwide audience; online archive in all UN languages (except Arabic), plus additional languages	Tibetan Buddhism (nontheistic)	No representation	Solidarist; peace as bridge between international and world society

diences worldwide, transcending state borders. They are, however, dissimilar when it comes to their religious doctrine. While the Pope and the Ayatollah represent differing monotheistic approaches, the Dalai Lama represents a nontheistic religion. A second dissimilar independent variable is that of their representation in international society, in particular in secondary institutions such as the United Nations. This variable also covers a range of state, hybrid, and purely religious constitutions. The Ayatollah holds both the role of head of state and spiritual leader of Iran. This means he is the highest representative of the state of Iran, a full member state of the United Nations, but is only one among other Twelver Shia clerics, albeit the most influential one within Iran. The Pope is the religious leader of the Roman Catholic Church and *ex officio* also the head of the Holy See, which can be grasped as the government of the Catholic Church. It is therefore the Holy See that is officially represented as a permanent observer at the United Nations. The Dalai Lama, however, is purely a religious leader, representing Tibetan Buddhism. He no longer holds a political role, such as advocating the rights of Tibetans. Following Diez's observation that the international society is currently characterized more by solidarism than by pluralism, I consider all three actors to be members of this international society, as in such a society, territorial integrity is not decisive. Diez also indicates that the solidarist international society is contested (arguably by scholars and international political actors alike), and thus the third dissimilar independent variable included here is that of the approaches to international society by the three actors. These approaches differ greatly. While the Dalai Lama is a strong proponent of a solidarist international society, building a bridge to world society, the Ayatollah understands himself as a revolutionary and seeks a wholly different international society. The Pope is ambiguous here, as the self-perception of the Catholic Church is that of a peacemaker and one who calls for expressions of solidarity. At the same time, the Catholic Church is a strong defender of primary institutions such as sovereignty. The dependent variable is how these actors position themselves toward international law, as the narratives on war shall indicate and as is presented in the findings.

The material analyzed encompasses all official texts made available in English and published online by the respective religious actors. In the case of the Ukraine war, the time period chosen is the 2 years since the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. In the case of the Syria war, the entire period since the outbreak of the civil war in 2011 was considered. In the case of Pope Francis, the material analyzed begins in 2013 when he was elected. Due to the limited scope of this article, only a few quotes per narrative are presented. However, they were selected based on their quality of being indicative of the overall narrative analyzed in the preparation of this article. In other words, all are representative of the ongoing narratives of the three respective storytellers, i.e., Pope Francis, Ayatollah Khamenei, and the Dalai Lama. The narratives are analyzed consecutively, following the three-layer approach presented above. The aim is to establish what "meaning structures" are being reproduced and what new interpretations are offered. While the storytellers were selected to represent different religions, they have one central aspect in common: They have the agency and legitimacy to address secondary institutions. This is significant because "(t)he constitutive character of specific rules—or secondary institutions—is rooted in the acknowledgement by the actors that their

identity as a member of the international community is dependent on their acceptance of the rules, and visible in the need of the actors to justify their behavior” (Spandler 2015, p. 608).

5 Three Narratives on War

5.1 Pope Francis

Since the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the texts in which Pope Francis has presented his narrative have mainly been embedded in the context of his regular prayers and general audiences. The former take place Sundays at noon and are public, as the Pope addresses the believers assembled at St. Peter’s Square in Rome (Vatican City). The latter also take place on a weekly basis within the confines of the Vatican. Neither of the two settings is limited to Roman Catholic believers, and often the Pope will specifically mention groups currently visiting the Vatican during the general audience. While the target audience is Roman Catholic believers, the texts are not only communicated by the Pope in this immediate setting but are also broadcast and published on the Vatican’s website. In other words, these texts are made available to a public that extends far beyond the Roman Catholic congregation. Other texts in which Pope Francis has told his narrative on the Ukraine war include a letter directly addressed to the “People of Ukraine” (Pope Francis 2022b), as well as speeches held at special occasions such as World Peace Day. Finally, the Pope regularly addresses members of the diplomatic corps, be it during the annual new year’s greetings at the Holy See or when meeting with delegations during his visits abroad.

When looking at the story, i.e., how the narrative is presented, the narrative on the Ukraine war rarely takes center stage. In other words, bar some very few exceptions, the narrative is told in half-sentences, as an anecdote, as an afterthought, or in fragments as when listed together with other conflicts. In other words, unless the Ukraine war is the reason for a gathering or speech, it is not given any priority. The fabula that emerges from these fragments and also from the texts that are slightly lengthier and focus on the Ukraine war has four prominent elements: suffering, in particular of the innocent; peace as the ultimate goal; a failing international society; and competing great powers. These elements are closely interwoven, as the Roman Catholic Church has traditionally viewed the United Nations as “the supreme forum of peace and justice” (Pope John Paul II 1979), thereby inextricably linking peace and the role of the international community. When creating the fabula of a world in which peace should reign but the international community is failing to uphold international law, these elements become intertwined. The same goes for the role of the great powers.

One of the most prominent elements in the fabula in the narrative on the Ukraine war is that of great suffering, especially by the innocent. Without naming an aggressor, the Pope speaks in more general terms of the cruelty of war, of “a war, which sows death, destruction and misery” (Pope Francis 2022a). He observes how “skies have been hammered by bombs, as a shower of missiles has caused death,

destruction and sorrow, hunger, thirst and freezing cold” (Pope Francis 2022b) and how “great streams of blood and tears flow daily” (ibid.). This fabula can also be linked to the overarching Roman Catholic narrative that identifies the source of the war and the evil behind it as stemming “from within the human heart corrupted by sin” (Holy See 2023).

The other element of the fabula is the wish for peace. Pope Francis repeatedly calls for “peace for martyred Ukraine” and “the ardent desire for peace” and has urged “pray (...) for peace every day,” “the only way out is peace,” “may the skies be always and only skies of peace,” and “let us not grow accustomed to war” (Vatican News 2023). However, Pope Francis also adds the element of the failing international community. The central quote relevant for this element was expressed during a general audience held in April 2022, i.e., just 2 months after the Russian invasion. Pope Francis stated that “in the current war in Ukraine, we are witnessing the impotence of the Organizations of the United Nations” (Vatican 2022). This is a fabula that is not only found in the Pope’s narrative but is an overarching Roman Catholic fabula, as can be seen, for example, in the speech held by the representative of the Holy See at the United Nations 1 year after the invasion. He speaks of a “significant dysfunction present in this organization’s security architecture and that of the entire multilateral system” (Holy See 2023).

Finally, Pope Francis adds a realist language by speaking of great powers and their role in the Ukraine war. A month after the Russian full-scale invasion, the Pope explains, for example, that the Ukraine war “is the fruit of the old logic of power that still dominates so-called geopolitics” (Vatican News 2022) and that “the world continues to be governed as a ‘chessboard’, where the powerful study the moves to extend their dominance to the detriment of others” (ibid.). One month later, during the general audience in which he laments the impotence of the United Nations, Pope Francis also observes that “[a]fter World War II, an attempt was made to lay the foundations of a new era of peace. But, unfortunately—we never learn—the old story of competition between the greater powers continued” (Vatican 2022).

The elements of great suffering, the goal of peace, the failing of the United Nations, and the ongoing struggle between great powers thus dominate the fabula of the narrative on the Ukraine war.

When examining the narrative on the war in Syria, and thus in trying to establish an overarching war narrative, the first element of the fabula is also prominent, such as when on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the outbreak of the war he speaks of “[a]n untold number of dead and wounded, millions of refugees, thousands missing, destruction, violence of all kinds and immense suffering for the entire population, especially the most vulnerable, such as children, women and the elderly” (Pope Francis 2021). This element of the suffering innocent is, again, linked with the wish for peace, for example in the representative statements provided, again, during an Angelus prayer in 2013: “[W]e want a peaceful world, we want to be men and women of peace, and we want in our society, torn apart by divisions and conflict, that peace break out! War never again! Never again war! Peace is a precious gift, which must be promoted and protected” (Pope Francis 2013). With the exclamation of “Never again war,” Pope Francis directly quotes Pope Paul VI’s speech held before the General Assembly in 1965, as the first pope to address the United Nations. In

other words, the call for peace is also an overarching element of the fabula when it comes to the Roman Catholic Church's narrative on war.

When it comes to a failing international community, or the United Nations in need of reform, or the element of great powers, these are not prominent elements. Pope Francis calls for "more steadfast and effective engagement on the part of the international community" (2020a), but he does not express direct criticism or identify a clear failure to act. In his narrative on the war in Syria, Pope Francis instead appeals to the international community for humanitarian aid and for enabling a dialogue for achieving peace (see Vatican 2013a; Pope Francis 2014; 2021). The element of great powers also does not feature in the narrative on the war in Syria, though the Pope did address a letter to President Putin on the occasion of the G20 meeting that took place in St. Petersburg in 2013. He specifically focuses on the war in Syria and "one-sided interests" and appeals "to the leaders present, to each and every one of them, (...) for them to help find ways to overcome the conflicting positions and to lay aside the futile pursuit of a military solution" (Vatican 2013b).

To summarize, while the narrative on the Ukraine war contains four prominent elements in its fabula, these cannot all be found in Pope Francis's narrative on the war in Syria. Only the elements of the strong priority of peace through dialogue to overcome the suffering of the innocent appear here. One final point deserves attention, as it cannot be identified as an articulated element, but rather must be treated as an absence, which becomes clear when studying present and past narratives: Pope Francis and other popes before him are hesitant, if not unwilling, to name aggressors in wars (see Christian 2014; Horowitz 2017; McLaren 2023).

5.2 Ayatollah Khamenei

Ayatollah Khamenei has presented his narrative of the Ukraine war mainly in statements and speeches held in front of religious, political, and even academic audiences. As is the case with Pope Francis, the texts may be directed at that audience present on the one hand (be it politicians, university students, or religious followers), but they are also documented for a broader audience by being translated and made available online. The texts include televised statements given on the occasion of religious celebrations that are held every year; one-on-one conversations with state leaders; and public speeches held at universities.

Moving from the first layer of analysis, i.e., the text (or medium), to the second layer, the story (or how the narrative is presented), the Ayatollah has not dedicated entire speeches to the Ukraine war. Similar to the narrative of Pope Francis, the Ayatollah's narrative of the Ukraine war is to be found in fragments of speeches and statements, i.e., the Ukraine war is listed among other wars or conflicts or is referred to with a few sentences in a different context. The fabula, i.e., the content of the narrative, reveals three prominent elements: a changing world order, the United States's (and the West's) ulterior motives paired with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) expansionist policies, and the suffering and sacrificing of ordinary people. The elements are closely interlinked, as the Ayatollah at times underlines the weakness and decline of the United States and the West and at times

points to the great threat they pose; in either case, this has an impact on the world order. Those who suffer because of it are the ordinary people.

Two months after the Russian attack, in April 2022, Ayatollah Khamenei gave a speech addressing university students, emphasizing the significance of the (Islamic) revolution, how it lives on, and how the students can contribute to upholding its ideals. He uses the example of the Ukraine war to underline that “[t]oday the world is on the verge of a new international order, and this order is forming after the era of the bipolar order in the world, and after the theory of unipolar world order, which in this era the U.S. grew weaker day by day” (Office of the Supreme Leader 2022a). He thus directly links the Ukraine war with such a fundamental shift. “We should view the recent Ukraine war deeper and within the frame of the formation of a new world order, which will probably lead to the formation of a complicated and difficult process” (ibid.). This changing world order also demands that “the Islamic Republic (...) be present (...) in the new order, to provide security and take benefit and not to be neglected” (ibid).

This element of a changing world order is intertwined with the element of the fabula regarding America’s ambitions around the world. Ayatollah Khamenei’s narrative on the Ukraine war is dominated by this element, when he says, “The main problem in the case of Ukraine is that the Westerners are trying to expand NATO and will not hesitate wherever they see a chance of expanding penetration” (Office of the Supreme Leader 2022b). This notion can be found in variations; for example, “[i]f the road is open to NATO, it knows no boundaries, and if it were not stopped in Ukraine, it would have started the same war sometime later under the pretext of Crimea” (Office of the Supreme Leader 2022c), and “America started the war in Ukraine to expand NATO to the east” (Khamenei 2023a). And beyond that, “We need to be watchful of the issues and take care as Americans and Westerners are always trying to expand their sphere of penetration in different regions (...) and undermine the independence and sovereignty of nations” (Office of the Supreme Leader 2022b).

The third element, that of the suffering Ukrainian people, is presented as a direct consequence of these aforementioned ambitions. “Now, while the people of Ukraine are trapped and suffering, America and its weapons factories are profiting the most from the war, and for this reason, they are hindering what is required to end the war” (Khamenei 2023a). But the Ayatollah goes a step further and speaks not only of the suffering but also of a sacrifice that is being made: “The people of Ukraine are being sacrificed because the interests of Western arms-manufacturing and -selling corporations are concealed within the ongoing war in Ukraine” (Office of the Supreme Leader 2023b).

Two contradictions can be found in the narrative—on the one hand, the United States is accused of having started the war; however, in a meeting with Russian President Putin, the Ayatollah speaks of Russia’s initiative, framing it in the following way: “War is a harsh and challenging category, and the Islamic Republic is not at all happy that ordinary people suffer from it, but in the case of Ukraine, if you did not take the initiative, the other side would have caused the war with its own initiative” (Office of the Supreme Leader 2022c). The other contradiction can be found in the threat that the United States, the West, and NATO pose based on their

expansionist ambitions; however, a weakening of America's power and position in the world is also observed, particularly in the Ukraine war: "America launched the war in Ukraine, but this war has led to a rift between the country and its European allies, who are actually taking the brunt of the war while America benefits from it" (Office of the Supreme Leader 2023a).

These three elements of the fabula (changing world order, U.S. and Western expansionist ambitions, suffering people) can be found in other narratives on war as well, as the example of the Syria war below indicates. The fact that a changing order can be found in other wars as well is striking, however, since this would indicate that every war poses a rupture or change in the international order. This point is revisited in the discussion of the findings.

A quote taken from the text of a speech the Ayatollah presented to Iranian military officers in April 2023 is representative of an overarching war narrative: "Now, for example, in Europe today, Ukraine is involved in a war. Who started that war? Who plans and designs these [wars]? It is the same in Syria, Libya, Sudan, and in other places" (Khamenei 2023b). The answer to this question is the United States or the West in general, which he refers to as "the Arrogant Powers" (ibid.). Or, as he elaborates, "those villainous, aggressive, international forces that always want more and are never satisfied with what they have. They observe, make plans, and see that they need to create a conflict in one place in order to profit in some other place" (ibid.). This role of the United States is the dominant recurring element in the narrative on the Syria (civil!) war, for they "recognize no nation as an independent nation" (Office of the Supreme Leader 2012) and "treat all countries in instrumental way" (ibid.). The war is therefore not portrayed as a civil war; rather, "Syria, with its people's persistence and unity, managed to stand strong against a big coalition of the U.S., Europe and their allies in the region and victoriously come out of it" (Khamenei 2019). As early as 2012, Ayatollah Khamenei spoke of a critical juncture. The following quote should be read while keeping in mind the Ayatollah's warning of America not recognizing sovereign states: "The most important issue at the current critical juncture for the region is that independent nations make correct decisions" (Office of the Supreme Leader 2012).

To summarize, the three elements found in the narrative on the Ukraine war can also be found in the narrative on the Syria war; however, the second element of America's ambitions clearly dominate. Here, as is the case with Pope Francis, another observation should be added. While the Ayatollah makes a point of identifying perpetrators and whom is to be held responsible, he is also hesitant in explicitly naming those directly responsible for committing crimes against humanity. And, while not an element of the fabula on the narratives analyzed here, in the context of Myanmar, the Ayatollah has also expressed his disdain for the United Nations when referring to "[t]hese farcical conferences and organizations advocating for human rights, defending peace" (Khamenei 2017). The understanding of secondary institutions is followed up on in the conclusion.

5.3 Dalai Lama

Similar to Pope Francis and Ayatollah Khamenei, the Dalai Lama also addresses varied audiences, and the texts are documented and made available to a much broader public beyond the immediate religious followers, political leaders, or interviewer he is currently addressing. What the three religious leaders also have in common is that their online texts are presented in at least all six United Nations languages (with the exception of the Ayatollah, whose websites are not translated into Chinese). Regarding the text of the narrative on the Ukraine war, the Dalai Lama has only once dedicated an entire message to the Ukraine war (Dalai Lama 2022). For the story, this means that the Ukraine war does not feature prominently in his speeches, prayers, or interviews. However, when it comes to the fabula, the issue of overcoming war and establishing peace is perhaps the most dominant issue in all of the Dalai Lama's texts. In other words, while the Dalai Lama only rarely mentions the Ukraine war explicitly, the fabula of his narrative is dominated by two elements: the appeal to dialogue (between conflicting parties but also among the international community) and the belief that war is outdated.

One of the central quotes that represents how the Dalai Lama communicates in the context of the Ukraine war, and which also reflects his overall narrative of war and international politics, is part of his message he published just 4 days after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022: "The 20th century was a century of war and bloodshed. The 21st century must be a century of dialogue" (Dalai Lama 2022). Similar to the other two religious leaders, he places the Ukraine war in a greater context, speaking of an interdependent world (*ibid.*). There is no question to him that "[w]ar is out-dated—non-violence is the only way" (*ibid.*). And the solution to ending the Ukraine war is dialogue, for "[p]roblems and disagreements are best resolved through dialogue. Genuine peace comes about through mutual understanding and respect for each other's wellbeing" (Dalai Lama 2022; see also BNN 2022).

These elements of war as outdated and dialogue as the way to achieving peace can be found in the overarching narrative on war, such as in the narrative on the Syria war. "Syria is full of hate. The only [solution] is dialogue. It is the only way" (Tibet Sun 2013). This appeal appears in variations over the years of the ongoing war: "The troubles in Iraq and Syria are symptoms of past mistakes and will be difficult to resolve. However, these are human problems that need to be solved by taking a human approach, by employing dialogue" (Dalai Lama 2014). In 2016 he called for "dialogue with Islamic State extremists to end bloodshed in Syria and Iraq, [arguing] that religion is never a justification for killing" (AP 2016).

An undated, more lengthy text by the Dalai Lama on "The Reality of War" further develops his narrative on war. The fact that it is not dated also indicates that this can be understood as an overarching narrative, not one that is focused on just one war, which fits into the overall pattern that there is not just one narrative on either the Ukraine war or the Syria war. The story presented here is that of how humanity is caught between glorifying war on the one hand and, on the other hand, suffering greatly because of it. As the Dalai Lama observes, "[W]ar and the large military establishments are the greatest sources of violence in the world" (Dalai Lama *n.d.*).

Table 2 Overview of findings on religious positions and international law

Dependent variable: position on international law in war narratives			
Case	Ukraine	Syria	Overarching
Pope Francis	Suffering, in particular of the innocent; peace as the ultimate goal; failing international society; competing great powers	Suffering, in particular of the innocent; peace as the ultimate goal; failing international society instead: call for humanitarian aid from the international community; competing great powers instead: one-sided interests	→ Ukraine and Syria: Pope Francis and other popes before him are hesitant, if not unwilling, to name aggressors in wars
Ayatollah Khamenei	A changing world order; the United States' (and the West's) ulterior motives paired with NATO's expansionist policies; suffering and sacrificing of ordinary people	A changing world order; U.S. and Western expansionist ambitions; suffering and sacrificing of ordinary people	→ Overarching pattern: Ayatollah identifies perpetrators but does not identify those responsible for committing crimes against humanity; also criticizes international institutions
Dalai Lama	Appeal to dialogue (between conflicting parties and also among the international community); belief that war is outdated	Appeal to dialogue (between conflicting parties and also among the international community); belief that war is outdated	→ Additional overarching narrative (not in Ukraine and Syria narrative): destructive power of militaries

Unlike in his narratives on the Ukraine war and the Syria war, here the Dalai Lama clearly points to the destructive power of militaries. “It is not only during times of war that military establishments are destructive. By their very design, they were the single greatest violators of human rights, and it is the soldiers themselves who suffer most consistently from their abuse” (ibid.). In this vein, he goes on to point out that “once an army has become a powerful force, there is every risk that it will destroy the happiness of its own country” (ibid.).

To summarize, neither of the two elements found in the fabula in the narratives on the Ukraine war and the Syria war (dialogue to end war, war as out of date) is found here, and thus these elements cannot be said to be part of an overarching narrative on war; however, two further observations can be made. The Dalai Lama states, “Since armies are legal, we feel that war is acceptable; in general, nobody feels that war is criminal or that accepting it is criminal attitude” (Dalai Lama [n.d.](#)). He also underlines that he is not an advocate of appeasement: “It is often necessary to take a strong stand to counter unjust aggression” (ibid.). However, “we can only judge whether or not a conflict was vindicated on moral grounds with hindsight” (ibid.).

6 Findings and Conclusion

When comparing these narrative analyses as presented in Table 2, five patterns emerge, which also give an indication as to a) whether—at least when regarding these religious actors—the Ukraine war can be viewed as a critical juncture, and b) how these religious actors are (re)interpreting the primary institutions of war and international law and the secondary institution of the United Nations, thus possibly contributing to a shift in international society.

The first pattern found among all three religious actors is that of a realist language employed in their narratives, with at least two referring to the Cold War.² Both the Ayatollah and the Pope even have it as an element in their fabula. The most prominent example is the Ayatollah, who speaks not only of a bipolar and unipolar world but also of expansionist powers. Pope Francis also speaks of great powers and views the international stage as a chessboard. The Dalai Lama, who usually employs a more liberal language, speaking of the need for dialogue to build trust, also includes realist elements, warning of the risk of upsetting a balance of power.

The second pattern is that wars are rarely viewed on their own but are listed among other conflicts or challenges facing humanity. In other words, both the Ukraine war and the Syria war are rarely considered on their own but are usually listed among other wars. One common example is when religious leaders offer prayers and then pray not just for the suffering people of Ukraine but at the same time for victims of other wars. But the wars are not only listed together with other wars or conflicts but frequently also appear in a list with other challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or climate change. This goes hand in hand with the pattern of how the

² While not specifically analyzed in this article, examples can be found in Office of the Supreme Leader (2022c) and Dalai Lama ([n.d.](#)).

wars are framed, usually placing them in a greater context—for example, of great power expansionism, interdependence, human sin, or human conditioning.

A third pattern, which can be observed only in the narratives of Pope Francis and the Dalai Lama, is that of a strong emphasis on peace, which is juxtaposed with the realist language employed. Both religious actors have a self-perception of being peacemakers, and the prayers that they offer are ones for peace. While they point to the great suffering caused by war and violence, they wish for peace, calling for dialogue. By contrast, Ayatollah Khamenei is also referred to as “Leader of the Islamic Revolution” (Office of the Supreme Leader 2023c) and is not known to present himself as a peacemaker.

The fourth pattern is that none of the three religious actors identify or explicitly mention perpetrators who have violated international law, even if this has been established by international institutions such as the International Court of Justice. They either remain vague and generally condemn violence or show solidarity with innocent victims (Pope Francis, Dalai Lama), or they distract from the parties who have been proven to have breached international law by accusing other actors of wrongdoings (Ayatollah Khamenei).

Finally, and closely linked to the fourth pattern, none of these actors offer clear guidelines as to how the warring parties should behave—be it in accordance with the United Nations Charter or in accordance with their own convictions. Here, as well, the three religious actors remain vague, which is surprising, given that they are all religious and thus also epistemic authorities on moral codices. Calling for dialogue (Pope Francis, Dalai Lama) or for defeating the enemy (Ayatollah Khamenei) can hardly be deemed to be policy recommendations only they could give.

What, then, do these patterns reveal about how these religious actors interpret war and international law as primary institutions of international society? The realist language would point to a rather pluralist approach to international society of these actors, i.e., upholding sovereignty as the central institution to maintain order (and some form of peace). However, the peace framing (pattern three) as demonstrated in the narratives of Pope Francis and the Dalai Lama indicate a more solidarist understanding, i.e., striving for justice and the protection of innocent lives. What is striking, however, is that none of these religious transnational actors actively appeal to secondary institutions (e.g., the United Nations and its various organs or suborganizations) or actors (e.g., warring parties, Security Council members, regional partners) to adhere to laws of war or international humanitarian law, to take steps to uphold it, or to reinstall it. When these wars are violated (and even once this has been confirmed by international institutions such as the International Court of Justice), these actors do not name the perpetrators. Both of these patterns can be read as the actors’ having lost faith in primary and secondary institutions to either maintain or restore peace. Or these patterns in the narratives can also be understood to mean that these actors do not perceive themselves to be fully part of the international society and thus either do not fully accept these primary institutions for themselves or do not believe themselves to be in a position to be able to admonish other actors. There are other interpretations, but these patterns all indicate that neither these two primary institutions nor the United Nations as a secondary institution are being actively strengthened and legitimized by these religious actors. This is

remarkable, considering the strong emphasis on the destruction and suffering caused by these wars in all of the narratives. And because these are not one-off elements of the fabula found in the narratives on the Ukraine war but rather patterns that have emerged, it appears that these are enduring interpretations of international society.

This leads me to the answer of the first question, namely whether the Ukraine war poses a *Zeitenwende* or watershed moment for how religious actors interpret the foundations of international society or the international liberal order. Taken together, these patterns would indicate that this is not the case. The Dalai Lama's overarching narrative on war and his lack of focus on the Ukraine war point to an ongoing conviction that peace should be the one primary institution of international society. This has not, so far, been identified as one by scholars of the English School. The Ayatollah, by contrast, repeatedly speaks of critical junctures, be it in the case of the Ukraine war or the Syria war. Such a narrative of constant fundamental change is unsurprisingly characteristic for a revolutionary. However, no clear cut can be seen in his narrative on war, so at an analytical level the Ukraine war cannot be said to pose a watershed moment for this religious actor. Finally, in the case of Pope Francis, the answer is more nuanced and possibly deserves more research. Traditionally, and in past narratives on war, the Holy See has regarded the United Nations as a pivotal secondary institution in upholding the primary institutions of international society, especially international law. The narrative of a failing United Nations and a dysfunctional international system has appeared as a new element in the narrative and can thus, indeed, be viewed as a fundamental shift. Although the Catholic Church calls for reforms, it does not actively offer proposals on what these reforms might look like. In other words, this is a clear break with the approach pursued by Pope Paul VI (1965), who proclaimed that the Catholic Church viewed itself as a servant of the international community, especially in active support of the principles of the United Nations. This was upheld by all popes, including Pope Francis (2015) in his speech addressing the United Nations General Assembly and his Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti* (Pope Francis 2020b), until the Ukraine war.

To conclude, studying the narratives on war by three religious actors has revealed that none of the actors actively employ elements that would legitimize, strengthen, or even only uphold the primary and secondary institutions examined here. The Ukraine war can be said to pose a turning point in the Pope's narrative, though this does not apply to the other two actors. Strikingly, Pope Francis is the only actor who demonstrates an ambiguous approach to the international society, whereas this is clear for both the Ayatollah (who seeks a strong pluralist society, if any society at all) and the Dalai Lama (who wishes for a solidarist society, possibly even in transformation toward a world society), as listed in the overview of variables. This could mean that the Pope—and the Roman Catholic Church he represents—is now realizing that there are fundamental changes underway in the international society and that an ambiguous positioning has not served the international society in maintaining peace, as previous popes sought to do. If this division among religious transnational actors is anything to go by, to come back to Diez (2017), this development could be read as an indication that there is an overall deep divide within international society as to whether it should move toward the pluralist or the solidarist pole. The former would clearly mean a change away from the liberal international order. This could

also mean that the critical juncture for when such nonstate transnational actors could have become active to prevent such a change has passed.

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