TRADITIONAL BELIEVERS AS THE MAINSTAY OF THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH’S POLITICAL POWER IN POST-SOCIALIST SERBIA

As the communist ideology in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia systematically marginalized religiosity under the auspices of the Marxist maxim: “religion is the opium of the people”, the collapse of socialism caused tectonic changes on religious-political grounds. In the socialist era, traditional religions - Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Islam - were “differentia specifica among ethnically, culturally and linguistically closely related and hardly distinguishable ethno-national groups” (Drezgić 2010, 958). In post-socialism, following the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the armed conflicts that emerged in 1990/91, these religions, consequently, became crucial constituents of ethno-national systems. In the whirlwind of nationalist floods, an inversion of socio-religious reality took place, which, until recently, marginalized religious institutions and their officials became important political actors in the process of societal re-traditionalization. Afterwards, the leading political nomenclatures instrumentalized religion for their own political legitimation, while the upper echelons of religious institutions used nationalism to rehabilitate and revitalize public religious life (Drezgić 2010, 957), thus (re)constituting its socio-cultural and political power. By inciting nationalist passions and through their cultural affirmation, ethnic/national identity was (re)identified with religious identity. Religious identity itself figured more as a part of a performance of ethno-national identity rather than truly indicating faith in religious dogma and active participation in a religious community.

In this set of socio-political circumstances (characterized by a crisis of re-examination, manifestation and representation of identity), the growth of religiosity becomes evident, conditioned both by existential difficulties and the cultural affirmation of the “emphasis” on identity. The aforementioned, as well as Orthodoxy’s unbreakable connection with conceptions of tradition, are presented in researchs by Dragana Radosavljević-Giporizović (2006), Christian Cultural Centre (2010/2011) and Lidija Radulović (2012).

The results of this research are summarized in the paper by Mirko Blagojević: Religious-confessional identification and faith in God of the citizens of Serbia (2012). On this occasion, I would like to thank Professor Lidija Radulović for her encouragement and constructive criticism.
As I assume, contemporary Serbian Orthodoxy comprises the following components, crucial for understanding the phenomenon of traditional believers: a) domination of folk Orthodoxy, b) traditional acceptance of religious identity without effective re-examination of dogma and definition of its framework, c) cultural affirmation of Orthodoxy with special emphasis on syncretism of identity policies conditioned by the inversion of socio-religious reality in post-socialism, d) religious monopoly of Orthodoxy and e) inclusiveness of the Serbian Orthodox Church and non-complementary theological theory and practice. I will now present a more detailed summary of the most significant components.

Folk Orthodoxy, as Dušan Bandić defines it, is the interpretation of Orthodoxy found within the practices of the folk population who deviate from church ideas (Batić 2010, 57). Its roots stem from religious practices and beliefs which deviate from Christianity such as pre-Christian and “alternative” religious systems. Folk Orthodoxy is a crucial element of religious discourse in contemporary Serbia, since this (syncretic) system of religious practices is still dominant today. On the other hand, the disunity of theological knowledge in practice, general ignorance of Orthodox teaching among believers, as well as the equating of ethnic/national and religious identity (at a time when religion/religiosity are gaining socio-cultural affirmation), have facilitated identification, without questioning the dogma, its conceptualization of God and the definition of its framework. Also, the communist-conditioned distance between religious institutions and believers was systematic, but not absolute, and religiosity formally functioned outside of the public eye, until the inversion of socio-religious reality in post-socialism when (religiosity) shifts to manifest, emphatic and performative level. Afterwards religiosity received cultural affirmation and became a socially desirable pattern of behavior (Radulović 2012, 116), as well as an indicator of “true Serbness” which was often related to “national[ist]” interests. Furthermore, the Serbian Orthodox Church acquired the status of a religious monopoly, since it gained support and verification from the state leadership, which escalated at the beginning of the 21st century with the introduction of religious education in primary and secondary schools. Although the Serbian Orthodox Church is (and often considered) fundamentalist and conservative, it is paradoxically characterized by a certain inclusiveness and flexibility. This is reflected in its willingness to conced the church-formal version of Orthodoxy (in terms of inconsistency and non-complementarity of theological theory and practice) and deviate from the required Church rules. In addition, its inclusiveness reflects a constant effort to increase the number of believers, hence it can be assumed that the emphasis is placed on a quantitative level, rather than on “the religious quality” of believers. However, this inclusiveness finds its origins, both in the Bible itself or understand them as “symbolic” and “metaphorical”, but not as “genuine” as Orthodox dogma claims. The conceptualization of God, in that sense, is very plural and diverse. Thus, in many respects, traditional believers equate “faith in a force” with “faith in (Orthodox) God”, and similarly equate belief in various religious/demonological entities with Orthodoxy confessional affiliation. Traditional believers project their beliefs onto the dominant religious systems that they have traditionally received as accepted and relevant. Furthermore, by accepting Orthodoxy through the process of inculturation and further socialization, they become “signed” as believers. Thus, the traditionally and culturally acquired religious identity is projected onto those religious practices and systems which are the closest, most accessible, societally affirmed, and in a certain way, culturally “naturalized”.

1. The information was collected through informal, unstructured conversations with people from different cultural backgrounds and orientations from 2016 to 2021, which is why I call them interlocutors.
3. With the act of “christening”, the believer becomes a member of the Church. In accordance with traditional perceptions of Orthodoxy, believers are christened when they are children, since unchristened children, in the case of death, can not be entombed according to Christian customs. Thus, a child is christened before they have the ability to decide whether or not to belong to Orthodoxy. Hence, the act of christening represents the traditional beginning in receiving religious/religiosity (more in Radulovič Uldja, 2021).
The acceptance of the moral principles. This confessional factor is perhaps the most problematic point of religious discourse. Generally, the acceptance of the moral principles is selective and usually does not imply corrective measures when deviating from them (the sacraments of confession and repentance, redemption, epitimia, etc.). The special problem arises from the conceptualization of sin, according to which almost every believer sins several times a day. Even though sin is scalable, and the severity of sin and its frequency are crucial, sin is almost quotidian, and most believers are not familiar with all acts that fall under its domain.1

Living religion in society. If we assume that this confessional factor constitutes the broadest (umbrella) category, it also represents a certain shortcoming of this categorization, precisely because of its breadth. Understood in this way, it can be said that it is explained to all other confessional factors. However, in general, it can be said that living the religion in society, when it comes to traditional believers, is usually periodic, culturally conditioned and/or performative. It is also important to note that the dominant form of Orthodoxy, i.e. folk Orthodoxy leaves space for many individual variations of beliefs within the collectivist religious system (Bandić 2010, 61).

The acceptance of church structures. The criticism of religious officials in public discourse is nowhere near as scathing as it is on an informal level. While it is unacceptable for some to criticize religious officials (because they are “God’s people”), others do not hesitate to call them “thieves”, “scum”, “the mafia”, etc. At the time, this was mainly in reference to the economic activity of church officials and the misuse of their own authority; interlocutors frequently stated that religious officials consider their vocation more as a business, they do their job mechanically and do not behave in a (proper) “God-pleasing” way. Thus, due to the “bad image” that some of their representatives emanate, church structures, in spite of the supposed cultural imperative, are often rejected at the level of continuous pastoral-believer relationships. However, simultaneously, the situation is the opposite on (special) occasions (religious celebrations, christenings, weddings, funerals, etc.). Thus, it can be said that the cultural/traditional imperative of Orthodoxy, in these cases, has primacy. On the other hand, some traditional believers reject the “spatial definition of religiosity”, stating that “God is everywhere, not just in the church”, and that the rhythm and pace of modern life does not leave much space for religious affiliations stricto sensu.

Believers in the narrowest sense (“ideal believers”) accept the entire entity of Orthodoxy. This stands in contrast to traditional believers, whose faith is fragmented, intertwined with other religious systems, culturally adopted, often selectively and conditionally accepted, and they do not value all of the Church’s initiatives (such as the ban on abortion). For this reason, non-omens and “things” should be called by their real names.

REFERENCES:

CONCLUSION: NOMEN NON EST OMEN AND THE QUANTITATIVE PROBLEM OF CONFESSIONALITY

Traditional believers within the framework of the Serbian Orthodox Church make up a dominant majority.2 I assume that this dominant majority is much larger if we take into account the problematic nature of the confessional factors, dimensions of religiosity, parameters and variables that are taken as operational in the research of religiosity. Dealing with religion and religiosity itself is often extremely problematic and extremely ungrateful, both due to the fact that they intrude on human intimacy, and due to the systematization of the collection of material, since it usually contains very diverse conceptualizations. Even if we focus only on previous research, we see that traditional believers - although considered a “pastoral problem” by the Church, hindering its mission of total Christianization of the Serbian population - are the mainstay of the Church’s political power. The Serbian Orthodox Church’s mechanisms of political power are based on the elements of Orthodoxy’s religious discourse explained in the paper. Those that maintain it are traditional believers, whose number and declaration (as Orthodox believers) gives the Church socio-political integrity. In reflection, if Orthodoxy were to be exclusive, separate from ethnic and national identity, and accessible only to “ideal believers”, i.e. to believers in the narrowest sense (who reject all non- and pseudo-Christian religious systems), the number of religious members would be radically reduced. Thus, the religious monopoly of the Church would be challenged, and its socio-cultural and political power would be severely diminished, or even excluded from public political discourse. As this paper set out to prove, quantifying believers is problematic.

REFERENCES:

1 Conventions and mechanisms of atonement for sin fall under its domain.
2 As shown by research from the Christian Cultural Center (Belgrade) in 2010 and 2011.