

## DESECULARIZATION OF CONTEMPORARY SERBIAN SOCIETY

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**Abstract:** *For the contemporary Serbian sociology of religion it is evident that the process of desecularization has been present on the social scene of Serbia in the last fifteen years. Sociologists have provided arguments for this claim based on data gathered in Serbia during this period. The religious changes in question have been empirically recorded in all aspects of attachment to religion (mainly Eastern Orthodoxy) and the church (Serbian Orthodox Church), that is, in aspects of religious identification, doctrinal beliefs and religious behavior. Certain political subjects and social scientists feel that social life in Serbia is getting increasingly religious, and that religion and church are exerting influence within social fields they are not supposed to, if Serbia is to become a secular, democratic state. The paper analyzes some major conditions of the clericalization of the Serbian society.*

To be engaged in scientific research of religion in Serbia nowadays, and especially in empirical research of religious changes in Eastern Orthodoxy, does not imply simply researching an exotic spiritual and social phenomenon like thirty years ago, which, according to the public opinion of the time, belonged rather to the past than the present, rather to a "museum of antiquities" than a living social phenomenon, rather to a small group of uneducated, marginalized and committed people than the majority of citizens, propulsive and elite social groups. The situation has drastically changed. To be engaged in the religious phenomenon nowadays, especially in the processes of secularization and desecularization, actually means being modern, at the source of certain important social changes which in the Balkans can by no means be understood outside of the confessional, religious and national contexts. More importantly, it is much more politically acceptable nowadays to be in contact with

religion in accordance with scientific principles and draw conclusions on the religious situation within a particular area without the burden of a politically correct and expected religious scene. It may be argued that the general social settings for religious research have changed significantly. These social settings, among other things, led the privatized, marginalized and stigmatized religion and numerous confessions to emerge from the underground into the light and to start playing important public roles, something that just 15 or 20 years ago could not be foreseen.

Such a situation has opened wide the door for the sociology of religion to study *in vivo* the religious phenomenon with its different aspects in action, that is, the way religions and confessions influence the opinions and behavior of many people who have suddenly found themselves in very difficult, ambivalent war and post-war situations being full of hope, exaltation, fanaticism and unrealistic expectations at first, and then of despair, hopelessness, deprivation, and frustrations of all kinds, ending up in a state of resignation in the past couple of years. Although in the early 1990s it was believed that Serbian sociology of religion would fully take advantage of the newly opened opportunities, now we can only talk about partial success. The few existing Serbian sociologists of religion have done a substantial job, if we bear in mind that they have lacked broad institutionalized support for research, especially empirical research. They had to overcome this lack through originality, enthusiasm, and their personal contacts.

If we make a comparison with the neighboring countries, then Serbian sociology of religion cannot claim systematic and representative empirical evidence on current religious changes. Until five or six years ago, even when there was opportunity to look into conventional and unconventional religiousness on a representative sample, sociologists failed to do it, partly due to the lack of a sense of religion (although religion was an obligatory subject of research for the pioneers of sociology) and mostly because there were not many sociologists who were interested in empirical testing of hypotheses on religiousness in the Serbian confessional area. However, although the situation for religious research in Serbia was highly unfavorable, Serbian sociology of religion nevertheless has had a few strongholds that could be taken as a starting point

for the research of contemporary attachment to the church and religion: in the 1980s this refers to research by Djordjević (D. Djordjević, 1984), in the early 1990s the study undertaken by the present author (Blagojevic, 1995) and later an omnibus study done in 1999 (Radisavljević-Ciparizović, 2002), as well as a large number of other public opinion researches or segmentary researches with modest samples and goals. All these studies can be taken as a basis for monitoring religious changes in Serbia from the seventies up to now.

This body of research has provided a great deal of argumentation for the three tendencies regarding the processes of secularization and desecularization, that is, the processes of atheization and deatheization in Serbia during the period in question. Up to the mid- or even late eighties of the previous century, it was already obvious that people were displaying a tendency to detach themselves from religion and church. This was usually viewed as the atheization of the socialist society, although the sociologists of religion of the time were inclined to regard this tendency as an indicator of the process of secularization. Shyly at first, in the late 1980s, and quite openly in the early 1990s, the revitalization of religion and church was becoming increasingly obvious, with a large number of people growing close with mostly renowned religious expressions and institutionalized religious organizations; religious pluralism was thriving, as was the case in the geographical and confessional areas of the former Soviet Union. The tendency manifested itself in several ways: as a reaffirmation and a revitalization of the church, as a retraditionalization and a retotalization, as a revival of religion and church and the return of the holy, even as a *reconquista* and a religious renaissance. Sociologists were in favor of terming this tendency "desecularization" of the postsocialist society. At the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the new millennium the tendency from the previous period settled as a relatively stable and steady attachment of people towards religion and the church, and as a very tight intertwining of the religious (ecclesiastical) and the political (social), the process which certain religious and social scientists tend to regard as clericalization of the contemporary Serbian society.

### **Some Indicators of the Desecularization of Serbian Society**

It is generally accepted that the socialist system in former Yugoslavia created non-stimulating and basically hostile social settings for religion and church in general. The first consequence of such a treatment of religion and its institutionalized organizations by the socialist government was not just their cultural and general social demonopolization and marginalization, but particularly their economic demonopolization. Of all religions the separation of the church and the state struck Orthodoxy the hardest, since alienation and separation from the state was directly opposite to the essence of Orthodoxy, which throughout history built a relationship of understanding, cooperation and mutual support (symphony) with the state. This non-stimulating, general social setting and the atheistic, hegemonic cultural pattern of the socialist society proved to be rather maleficent for the actual state of religiousness, its free expression and the general attachment of people towards religion and church. The consequences were perceptible on at least three levels: religion and church definitely lost their social significance, conventional religious beliefs grew weaker, but the greatest decline was noted in the field of religious and church rituals. In this way, Orthodox religiousness in the Yugoslav socialist state could be seen as specific in regard to the religiousness in other monoconfessional and multireligious areas. It comprised continuous low scores of religious subjects in empirical research, then an obvious dissolution of the dogmatic content of faith, and a process of erosion of the conventional religious behavior (D.Djordjević, 1984).

Although at the very beginning of 1980s empirical evidence could not prove beyond doubt that Orthodoxy was coming back to the social scene in the local religious areas, it was during that period, after the events in Kosovo (which was later to become the central social and political problem in former Yugoslavia, Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the state union of Serbia and Montenegro, and finally Serbia today), that Orthodoxy emerged from several decades of isolation and of being on the margins of social and political life in the socialist Yugoslav state, back onto the social and political scene. However, in the late 1980s and early 1990s empirical sociological researchers were already registering an increase in religiousness and a growing attachment of a

large number of people towards religion and church in the entire geographical and confessional area of former Yugoslavia, even an increase in the Orthodox religiousness whose revitalization was coming rather late in comparison with Catholic confessional areas of former Yugoslavia. The bulk of this revitalization of the religion and church was not a result of an eminently religious process in terms of a sincere and deep change in the spiritual life of people, for instance through their return to the long-forgotten God and religious morality, through their aspiration to spiritualize their life and change their behavior (for, the period from the nineties on was marked by an incredible outburst of hate, violence, and suffering in the territory of the former federation). Rather, the revitalization of religion and church in the entire area (and Orthodoxy is no exception) began within major socio-political turbulences that manifested mainly as a product of an obvious and long-lasting social crisis, and in that way as a result (but a cause as well) of the collapse of socialism and of social, territorial, national and confessional homogenization of the population in the republics of former Yugoslavia.

The position of an increasingly evident social significance, as the most important characteristic of the revitalized Orthodoxy and other confessions in the territory of former Yugoslavia, implied the emergence of religion and church from the marginality and social excommunication, and their transformation into one of the most important social institutions with numerous public roles in the forthcoming social events burdened with serious conflicts. Therefore, in the early 1980s and especially during the 1990s, Orthodoxy became the most important, maybe even the key factor in revived Serbian collective identity as a continuous and the only reliable guardian of tradition and historical memory. The Serbian Orthodox Church then took on the role of beacon in the protection and homogenization of Serbian national entity, with its social relevance and institutionalized spiritual centralism, in the conditions of socialism still present at the time, constantly growing. Such centralism became even more evident after the fall of socialism, when it was absolutely necessary to take under protection and homogenize the Serbian national body in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and from the late 1990s onwards, in Kosovo and Metohija as well. Therefore, during the period of general politicization of culture in the entire territory

of former Yugoslavia, Orthodoxy was also politicized, in a positive way, as one of the most efficient spiritual resources in the national homogenization of the population and their political mobilization for the conflicts to come and during the conflicts themselves. So the collapse of socialism (communism) and the civil, international war served as the most general social setting in which Orthodoxy was to regain its cultural domination and institutionalized significance and influence it used to have. There could have been no revival of Serbian national identity and the Serbian state without the revival of Orthodoxy. The Serbian Orthodox Church is not only a religious institution, but a national one as well, and probably the only institution that had never betrayed Serbian people throughout history (Radić, 955:V; XVII-XVIII).

Religious changes in Orthodoxy in the last fifteen years have been empirically documented in all aspects of attachment to Orthodoxy and the Serbian Orthodox Church, namely the aspects of religious identification, doctrinal beliefs and religious ritual behavior. During the previous decade the willingness of people to identify themselves in religious terms, to reveal their confessional belonging and to believe in God has grown. Likewise, changes in religious consciousness had certain practical consequences for the religious behavior and beliefs among a great number of people in Orthodox and multi-religious areas of Serbia. Although only slight changes were detected in the traditional attitude towards religion and church, which was considered the most stable in the previous decades, certain changes were obvious in the essentially important actual religious behavior in fulfilling religious commitments such as liturgy, church attendance, fasting etc. Fundamental religious beliefs of Orthodoxy have also been revitalized, mostly those that were far from being eschatological in character. The following tables indicate that religious changes in Serbia were following the direction of desecularization of the Serbian society.

**TABLE 1**

**Certain indicators of religiousness in Serbia in the last twenty years (%)**

| Indicators/year of research          | 1982 | 1993 | 1999 |
|--------------------------------------|------|------|------|
| Positive confessional identification | 88.0 | 96.7 | 93.5 |
| Self-declared classic religiousness  | 23.8 | 71.3 | 59.3 |
| Child baptism                        | 59.3 | 84.4 | 83.9 |

|                                     |      |      |      |
|-------------------------------------|------|------|------|
| Celebration of religious holidays   | 57.9 | 93.3 | 86.6 |
| Church burial                       | -    | 92.4 | 86.1 |
| Liturgy (all intensities)           | 6.8  | 26.3 | 48.1 |
| Church attendance (all intensities) | 25.5 | 70.5 | 74.8 |
| Praying (all intensities)           | 24.4 | 77.7 | 69.7 |
| Fasting                             | 24.2 | 58.4 | 58.5 |
| Believing in God                    | 17.6 | 46.3 | -    |
| Believing in Jesus Christ           | 15.4 | 56.7 | -    |
| Believing in life after death       | 5.4  | 28.2 | -    |

Ref: For 1982 Djordjević's research of religiousness in the predominantly Orthodox region of Niš (D.Djordjević, 1984); for 1993 Blagojević's research of the predominantly Orthodox region of Branicevo

(Blagojević, 1995); for 1999 the research made by the Institute for Sociological Research of the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade on a sample representative for Serbia without Kosovo and Metohija (Radisavljević-Ciparizović, 2005)

**TABLE 2**  
**Traditional attachment to religion and church in Serbia (%)**

| Attachment/year of research | 1993 | 1999 |
|-----------------------------|------|------|
| Total attachment            | 68.7 | 74.6 |
| Partial attachment          | 30.8 | 25.1 |
| Total unattachment          | 0.5  | 0.3  |

Ref: Blagojević, 1995; Radisavljević-Ciparizović, 2005

**TABLE 3**  
**Actual attachment to religion and church in Serbia (%)**

| Attachment/year of research | 1993 | 1999 |
|-----------------------------|------|------|
| Total attachment            | 0.2  | 36.4 |
| Partial attachment          | 85.2 | 43.5 |
| Total unattachment          | 14.6 | 20.1 |

Ref: Blagojević, 1995; Radisavljević-Ciparizović, 2005

By generalizing these and other empirical data which were not stated in this text (see Blagojević, 2005), it is possible to draw several relevant conclusions that could be used to describe the current process of religious changes in Serbian society:

1. By the 1990s, religiousness in all confessional and national groups in the territory of former Yugoslavia was growing, although not at the same level, with the lowest number of religious people being recorded among the Orthodox, the trend which was later proved by the cited studies. However, an evident change in the religiousness of population was detected in the Orthodox confession as well, which was neither

accidental nor subject to greater fluctuations. The increase of religiousness and the increased willingness of people to identify themselves in confessional terms, although already high, were closely related to broader social, that is, eminently non-religious processes such as the collapse of socialism as a social system and the territorial and national homogenization at the time of disintegration of the federal state and the creation of separate national states. The analysis of quantitative data revealed that it was through the religiousness of young generations that the significant religious changes occurred, especially within the Orthodox civilization. Another conclusion drawn from the research made in the late 1980s and early 1990s pointed to a stable trend of religious restructuring. The number of atheistically orientated people has been drastically reduced. During the nineties the willingness of people to identify themselves in religious terms, to reveal their confessional belonging and to believe in God increased. It was clear that religion was revitalizing in some components of the so-called religious consciousness.

2. During the nineties changes in the religious consciousness of the population had practical consequences for religious behavior and beliefs among a large number of people. The traditional attitude towards religion and the church, which had been least controversial even before, spread even more, so in the nineties there was a vast majority of people in the homogenized Orthodox territories who were traditionally attached to religion and the church. Some essentially important religious behaviors such as praying, liturgy, and fasting during major religious holidays were also revitalized. Nowadays the homogenized Orthodox area can no longer be considered as an area with largely eroded rituals of religious nature and with the population "running away" from religion and the church. Fundamental religious beliefs in Orthodoxy were also revitalized, primarily those that were far from being eschatological in character.

3. In view of these religious changes, the portrait of a typical believer at the end of the 1990s is very different from that of a typical believer in the eighties. A typical believer used to be a woman, a farmer or a worker or an elderly person, living in the country, not very educated and belonging to a socially marginalized or underprivileged social

group. Today, a typical believer can be from either rural or urban background, either elderly or young, either male or female, either uneducated or highly educated. The changed portrait of typical believer displays all the relevant elements of the sociological analysis of major religious changes in contemporary Serbian society.

### **Desecularization or Clericalization of Serbian Society**

Before the 1990s, in the entire territory of socialist Yugoslavia, and in Serbia as well, it was unthinkable for the law to allow religious services in schools, hospitals, military and police institutions, kindergartens and prisons. Churches were not regarded as public institutions and organizations nor were they allowed to establish institutions such as non-theological schools, kindergartens, general secondary schools, other trade and art schools or universities enjoying complete autonomy and government support in terms of being equal with the state-owned institutions providing their users public health protection, student standards and other benefits identical with those in public schools. These benefits and many others are now enjoyed by churches and religious communities registered as legal entities rather than civil associations, as they used to be before the recent adoption of the Law on Church and Religious Communities. According to the law, religious communities may engage in trade and other activities in accordance with legal regulations, that is, they are allowed to establish profitable enterprises that they may run autonomously, radio and TV stations and other institutions of religious and non-religious character. This completely changed way of handling relations between the state and religious organizations, and the obvious influence of religion and the Serbian Orthodox Church on public life in Serbia in recent years, provoked a reaction of some political subjects and social scientists who have argued that public life in Serbia is getting increasingly clericalized and that the church and religion are exerting influence in the areas where they shouldn't if Serbia is to become a secular, democratic country.

Sociologist Bozidar Jakšić has registered continuous attempts and aspirations for the clericalization of Serbian society, and not just through the endeavors of certain political subjects and some high-ranking members of the Serbian Orthodox Church, but

some renowned democrat intellectuals as well (Svetozar Stojanović, for example). His claim that the process is not finished, that it is not even dominant, but rather bi-directional, confusing and contradictory, is of crucial sociological significance. In some occasions it is a useful tool for solving political crises in daily politics and in others it is about fundamental, mortal endangerment of Serbian people that no other system nor spiritual institution but the Serbian Orthodox Church can salvage from disaster (Jakšić, 2001). Clericalization of public life was not initiated solely from clerical circles, but it often presents a blatant or hidden instrumentalization of religion and the church whose final outcome does not serve the interests of the church but the interests of various political groups instead. There are numerous examples of the return of the church and religion into public life, but not all of them prove the process of clericalization: for instance, the introduction of religious education, first compulsory and then optional, into primary and secondary schools; promotion of religion and the church in the media through coverage of religious events but also secular events accompanied by religious iconography; high regard for the opinions of highly ranked church officials and practicing believers on purely secular problems and issues; aspirations of the members of church hierarchy to connect with the political subjects in power in order to infiltrate into political circles, etc. And vice versa: members of the political power elite are not indifferent towards the church, especially towards the Serbian Orthodox Church, and they willingly meet the demands of the church hierarchy. In that way the distance between the state and the church is getting smaller, which is, as Milan Vukomanović points out, clearly leading towards the clericalization of the Serbian society (Karabeg, 2004).

The conquest of the public domain in the (re)distribution of political, military and economic power by the church and its attempt to arbitrate in socially relevant issues were most systematically criticized by the sociologist of religion Mirko Djordjević (M. Djordjević, 2005a; 2005b) who cites many examples of forced clericalization. Describing the influence of the church on the public life of Serbian society as a “wave of clericalization”, he feels that the process “has gone really far” and that there is a kind of consensus on the Serbian Orthodox Church “being the only

integrative factor” and thus claiming the leading role in society. “The Serbian Orthodox Church has long been a part of public government and the constitutional regulations on the separation of the church and the state are of little significance.” (M. Djordjević, 2005a). Although we agree with this author on many comments about the attempts of the church hierarchy and political and social groups to clericalize the Serbian society, it is more than necessary to raise a purely sociological question regarding terminological precision. Using in his analyses of church and social life the term “desecularization,” he transfers the meaning of another term, the term *countersecularization*, since it is precisely the latter term, rather than “desecularization”, that is opposite to “secularization”. If secularization is an irreversible process, then a re-creation of class society with a medieval role for gentry and clergy is beyond assumption, but desecularization as a process and a “middle” term is not, since the influence of the church and religion on the society may increase or reduce throughout history. Therefore, this term is not on the verge of delusion or utopia, as Mirko Djordjević suggested, but can be used quite legitimately in sociological issues, it can even be operationalized through indicators that may be presented both qualitatively and quantitatively.

Terminological problems, therefore, do not present a purely academic taste for pinpoint accuracy. Even sociological arguments lack a clear definition of basic terms at the beginning. It is often a cause of unnecessary misunderstandings. What is clericalism really, and along with it, the process of clericalization of a society? If we define this phenomenon as an aspiration of certain political circles to make the church and clergy superior in the political and cultural lives of a country or society, that is to place the interests of the church above all others in the society so that church can impose its interests on the society, the intention which has realistic political and economic grounds, then it cannot be argued that clericalization of Serbia is an uncontroversial phenomenon. Contemporary Serbian historian Slobodan Marković thoroughly analyzed the conditions of clericalization of a democratic society and concluded that contemporary Serbian society was not clericalized (Marković, 2005). Instead, it was actually another process in action in the history of modern Serbia

(during the last two hundred years): the process of *caesaropapism*.

For the process of clericalization to be effective in Serbia, Marković cites three conditions that have to be met: the number of institutionalized, practicing believers must considerably exceed half of the total population; there must be a tradition of strong clerical spirit; and the church and clergy must possess enough economic and political power to impose themselves as an equal or even senior partner on the state. The first condition is not met in contemporary Serbia, and it is debatable if it has ever been. That is, according to the 2002 census and sociological and public opinion surveys in the last 15 years, it is obvious that the number of declared believers in Serbia is large, even up to 95%, 85% of whom are of Orthodox religion. But of all indicators of attachment to religion and the church this one is the weakest. How many believers are there in Serbia today who are closely and ardently connected to the church? There are definitely a lot less of them than confessionally declared believers, and that is a weak potential for the effective clericalization of a society.

In the recent history of Serbia, Marković feels, there hasn't been a tradition of clerical spirit that modern clericalism could build on successfully. Before the first Serbian uprising, a part of the population had left Serbia with patriarch Arsenije III Carnojević during the Great Migrations in 1690 and settled in the Hungarian part of the Habsburg monarchy, where Serbs and their church were tolerated as a minority, so there could have been no clericalization under those conditions. The Serbian people and the Patriarchate of Peć had to put up with the Turkish power that always used to have a caesaropapist attitude towards Christian churches and never had any restraints to kill any bishop that might stand in their way. After the Serbian revolution in 1804, during the 19th century, it was evident that the state was trying to interfere in church affairs and had a caesaropapist attitude towards the church. The overt interference of the government, the non-canonic appointments of the highest church officials and even their physical elimination (Milos Obrenović had the first Serbian bishop Milentije Nikšić strangled) are evidence enough that there could have been no clericalization under such circumstances, but only more or less obvious state interference in church affairs and a strong, "Constantinian embrace" that the church could not escape even

after World War II. Therefore, it could be said that state interference in church affairs and exploitation of the church for the promotion of secular, partial political interests have never really stopped, except for a short period of time before the World War II when the Serbian Orthodox Church was the only one with enough power to challenge the state. Not even clerical political movements, founded in the twentieth century, have ever had serious voter support, so they have been kept aside in the political life of the country. In socialist Yugoslavia the political capital of the church was extremely low, since religion and the church were stigmatized and marginalized, not only politically but also economically. Thus, in the last sixty years the Serbian Orthodox Church has never been a significant economic factor in Serbia. Marković argues that no conditions that could indicate clericalization of Serbian society have been met, but there are certain indications that the caesaropapist attitude towards the church is becoming weaker and it is time the church itself finally broke free of the state or the political elite in power.

It is true that if the state returned to the churches, and especially the Serbian Orthodox Church, the property confiscated after World War II, economic empowerment of the church would become realistic. This is supported by the fact that the contemporary Serbian state is far more generous in financing and supporting the construction of new churches and restoration of the old churches in Serbia than twenty years ago. Along with the increased public, and even political influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Serbian society today, elements of the process of clericalization would not be so disputable as they may seem now. Therefore, there are elements that suggest a much tighter connection between the church and the state in Serbia today than in the past. The church has become one of the basic institutions of contemporary Serbian society, and the Orthodox religion has become an absolute fact and the leading spiritual guidance in the search of the Serbian people for their lost identity. To be terminologically correct, the increased influence that the church has been exercising on society in the last decade and a half, and a stronger commitment to religion and church, are at this moment better termed as a process of desecularization. Namely, the clericalization of the society pushed to its limits would actually present a countersecularization of the society that would be hard to conceive not only in Europe

but in post-Milosević Serbia as well.

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