

DIFFERENT FORMS OF RELIGIOSITY
AND THE MODERN WORLD

PUBLISHED BY

Institute of Social Sciences, Belgrade
Department of Education and Culture,
Serbian Orthodox Diocese of Braničevo Požarevac

PUBLISHER

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Goran Ilić

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Prepared as part of the project "Social Transformations in the European Integration Process: A Multidisciplinary Approach" supported by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia (III 47010)

ISBN 978-86-7093-228-9

edited volumes

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(Thematic Conference Proceedings of International Significance Held
in Srebrno jezero /Veliko Gradište – Serbia/, April 26 and 27 of 2018)

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What Feminists in Serbia Think About Religiosity?¹

Abstract

This article presents attitudes of feminists, as a distinctive social group in Serbia on religiosity and influence of church in society. Views about church and a relation to traditional religiosity in feminism were conditioned by attitudes that church had towards women in past. A variety of respondents' answers indicate that the question of religiosity is related to other important social facts and basic human rights, such as, women's abortion right and civil individual rights in secular state. Feminist opinions on religiosity can be linked to wider social phenomena - the reading of religion, the influence of church in secular state, the individual rights and religious education in public schools. Based on the qualitative analysis of data obtained through interviews with feminists we have received a wider insight into religiosity in Serbia.

Keywords: religiosity, feminists, attitudes, church, Serbia.

Introduction

■ Sociologists who are exploring religion think that the process of de-secularization has occurred in the past thirty years in Serbia. However, through different historical periods the situation changed. Until the First World War, Serbian Orthodox Church had a privileged position that implied a good state attitude towards the Church; Orthodoxy was an official religion by the Serbian constitution from 1903, religious education was a compulsory subject in schools, etc. Between the two world

¹ This text is a result of research supported by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia. Project title: "Structural, social and historical changes of Serbian society in the context of European integration and globalization". Project reference number: 179039.

wars, the position of the SOC in the society began to change, and after the Second World War, a socialist society and a new social framework emerged in Serbia, which “for religion and church represented unstimulated and, in many ways, the hostile socio-political framework” (Blagojevic, 2015: 108-110). In the socialist Yugoslavia, the SOC had various problems of disorganization, financial and others that were further encouraged by the fact that the socialist government stigmatized religion as a socially undesirable phenomenon. SOC and other religious institutions were socially marginalized through laws, religious education in public schools was abolished, and atheistic education and Marxist education was introduced, etc. This situation was until the middle or late 1980s (Blagojevic, 2015: 110-111).

In the only sociological empirical research of religiosity on the Orthodox confessional space of the Nis region, which was carried out in 1982, it was observed that the process of secularization is very strong and widespread. The social-class status is important as a synthetic factor for accepting or rejecting religious behavior and views. In this research was noticed that religious attitudes were influenced by educational level, occupation, information, material position and political engagement, age, self-management engagement, gender and type of settlement (Đorđević, 1984: 238). Due to the changing social position of women, among other things, under the influence of the feminist movement, it was noticed that religiosity is not only a feature of a woman, and if so, religiosity is more often encountered among women of a low educational level, in rural areas who are primarily active in produce sphere and “are not able to promote socially and culturally in education, professional activity, political activity and other ways”. Due to the circumstances mentioned in this study, it was observed that some religious communities questioned the attitude towards woman because of the loss of a traditional stronghold in the female population and attempted to bring religion closer to the demands of a contemporary woman (Đorđević, 1984: 229).

Braude considers that “as women’s and gender studies developed from the 1970s, its scholars often neglected religion as a pretext for feminism. In women’s movement history and

feminist texts, religion is either absent or treated negatively, as a patriarchal impediment to liberation" (Braude, 2004). In one recent research on attitudes of feminists about religiosity in the UK, British sociologist of religion, Aune concludes that "feminists religious-spiritual approaches should not simply be equated with secularism, secularization, or alternative spiritualities. Instead, feminists forge religious-spiritual lives in complex ways. The spiritual approaches of those I interviewed have had three main characteristics: they are de-churched, are relational, and emphasize practice (...) they see 'spirituality' and 'religion' as analytically distinct, I argue that feminists' spirituality should be conceptualized as 'lived religion'" (Aune, 2015: 128).

For instance, in empirical research conducted at the beginning of 2000, regarding women's movement in Serbia and Montenegro, it was shown that "50% of activists considered themselves as religious, just over a fifth are not defined, but almost 30% declare themselves as atheists. In short, we could say that the relationship of religious and irreligious is equal, which is the result that could be expected when it comes to activists. Namely, in relation to religion, the strong individuality of the respondents is shown. Their attitude towards religion is almost entirely attributable to either socialization in the family, or a self-built viewpoint, while the influence of the existing social opportunities - a suddenly aroused interest in religion, which is characteristic of the attitude of the majority towards religion, is practically negligible here. Therefore, fostering a religious attitude is obviously a personal choice of respondents, which is not subject to past experiences or present challenges" (Milić, 2002: 60-61).

Since the beginning of the 1990s, there have been significant changes in relation to religion in Serbian society, and these changes are expressed through increased readiness of people to identify themselves in religious terms, to the emergence of increased religiosity among young people who in the past were the most irreligious generation and a reduced number of people who declare themselves as atheists. Thus, in the 1990s, there were changes in the religious awareness of the population and the spread of traditional attitudes towards religion and the church. Considering the change in the social context and the

resulting changes in relation to religion, sociologists of religion find that the image of a typical believer differs from the image of a typical believer in the eighties. Today, a typical believer is from both rural and urban environments, lower and higher education, a member of both the elder and the youngest generation, the male and female (Blagojević, 2015: 123-124).

Research findings

Semi structured interviews were conducted with a sample of 27 participants in Serbia. Interviewees were between 30 and 80 years of age when surveyed (2011-2012). Participants were asked questions: *Are you religious? Do you believe in God?* and *What is your attitude towards the church?*

Findings from my research show that feminists, in majority, declare themselves as atheists. Most respondents believe that Serbian Orthodox Church has a great influence in Serbian society, and that influence is too strong since Serbia is a secular state. Few respondents stated that they do not believe in God but believe that there is a certain cosmic energy that influences human activity and that their belief can't relate to traditional religion and church affiliation.

I will quote few characteristic responses of feminists who declare themselves as atheists: "No, I'm an atheist, so I declare, I defend an atheist position, I do not need 'to swear'." (age 65, anarchist feminism). "No, I'm an atheist, one hundred percent, and against any Church, for me all churches are the same, these are the institutions that manipulate a human need for faith, especially with that faith in life after death" (age 72, a Marxist with sympathies towards anarchism). "No, I am an atheist. I respect every religion and all commitments, regardless of whether they are Buddhists or Orthodox, Catholics ... I believe that religious commitment is a matter of personal choice and that it should remain in that domain, that spirituality is not exclusive related to religion, spirituality can be developed through some other forms of thinking." (age 33, liberal feminism). "No, I am not religious. I think that religious institutions have inflicted

enormous damage to women and lesbians. So, I do not enter any religious institution, but it is also natural for every woman to determine what she will believe in, that is something else." (age 57, radical feminism).

One participant who makes a distinction between faith in God and a relationship with the church says: "I do not know what to say about religion, I have respect for people who are religious, I am not a religious person, can say that I am atheist, but I have absolute respect for someone who believes in God and that's all I care about. One of the reasons why, maybe I would say that I don't believe in church rather than I do not believe in God. I have a problem with a church and a church's attitude towards women, and somehow, I cannot accept it, that I'm regular in the manner of speaking, to attend weddings and listen repeatedly, but I basically appreciate and respect anyone who is religious. Perhaps I would appreciate the church more when it would be transformed in the direction of these ecumenical principles" (age 40 years, does not choose a feminist orientation).

Although most participants believe that faith in God is one of human rights, some of them have no sympathy for the SOC, this is one characteristic answer: "As far as the church is concerned, I'm not religious, I respect a religiousness of others, before I was less tolerant about that. However, I really think that we cannot push people to any facet of their identity and that some things are not rational, if I have no relationship with God I do not have to even try to understand why somebody else has. Which doesn't mean that I'm blessed with the churches, the Orthodox Church especially since I live in Serbia and it concerns me the most. ... I try not to impose my daughter to religiosity or irreligiosity. Somehow I want her to get to know something that is in the end a history of our humanity, I mean this Western in which we live, so I do not want to separate her from that in some kind of violent way, and we will see what she will choose." (age 33, does not choose a particular feminist orientation).

A wider explanation of a relationship between religion and church and influence of a church in society, one respondent includes in her answer: "I'm an atheist, not that I believe in

something like etc., but I'm an atheist. I believe in physics as in a complete miracle, and this part is intimidating to me, and I think that this is also one of the issues for feminists, how to suppress the kind of ignorance that is being plagued by this religious upheaval in our public space, by such a terrible irruption in public space. I do not really challenge anyone's personal right to practice whatever and if it does not threaten other people, but this is now completely endangering. The census, for example, has shown the same thing that to declare as an atheist is bad. It's totally terrible, it's a big problem. I had the opportunity to talk to some parents about civic or religious education and what they choose for their children, since the parents choose, and many tell me they would like to be able to choose both, what is the point here? –the children themselves will choose whether they will believe in evolution or "Creator", and I say well hold on, and people think they are tolerant now. I do not think that the scientific truth is the only and engraved, but for the children to believe in "Creator" don't kid me. I think that the problem of this metaphysics of our existence is in the organization ...I sometimes reencounter with it and then I have to think about again, when someone says to me "God created man" I say "yes, you are really cute", and I'm in the phase of doing so, but no, I now have to talk seriously with some people, as if we are living in a parallel universe... Well, in 2003, religious education was introduced ...But then it was supposed to said that we are a secular state and why religious education in schools, who wants to educate for religious education, there are parish homes and you can take child there. I look at it as divisions that existed earlier, and as a continuation of that dichotomy, as we are from the Partisan family, and we are not communists we are bourgeoisie, etc." (age 35, leftist orientation, not liberal before anarchyber feminists)

Here are some more interesting views of feminists about church:

"Well, in principle, I'm a little annoyed by the church, but just the church I don't mean religious people. Here I was in one part of America for a long time ...they believe in many of these syncretic

gods and everything, and it's completely okay because they do not have that dominant attitude of the church. I have lived in countries of different religions ... and it's all disgusting, it's all the same to me, and there are completely different religions, but I always get upset, it always irritates me. *What irritates you?* So, when the pope goes out and says, for example, that the women are murderers when they have an abortion. Or now I don't remember because I was small then but when the Muslim religion says that the man's right is to have as many women, and that all leads me to madness. So, I lived in countries with different religions, but unfortunately, I couldn't join anywhere. *You don't like those kind of grouping, religious?* No, I don't like in some way principles, these are the old structures of authority and power, and I do not need consciousness above mine. It would be fine for me to have some church that would listen to me and my problems, and not give me directions." (age 57, does not choose a particular feminist orientation): "The question of religiosity ... I am an agnostic and I think that our societies little by little loses its secular character, which is very bad, every society that loses its secular character endangers women's rights, endangers women." (age 70, socialist feminism): "Well, I think that all existing confessions are actually against women and holding a woman in a subordinate position. The Orthodox Church is horrible, but other (churches –A. V) are not much better." (65, anarchist feminism): "I absolutely do not like any institution, otherwise, I have a fair resistance towards institutions because I think they are there to enslave us, but I have nothing against the institutional religion. I personally have strong spirituality that developed during my work with people, I was not educated in that direction, but I did a lot of work and I still work on spirituality as a sublimation of some other things, and I believe... I would not say I believe because it means believing in God, but I don't think I will explain my religious beliefs now because they are not religious they are more spiritual, they just come from my education in the direction of organic energy, the life energy that flows through all of us and connects us. And I know the laws of nature and biology and physics, so in that sense I'm talking about spirituality, which I see every day in myself, and in others, and around myself... I'm very ecologically aware, I think that the best and most useful direction for us who live...is to connect ecological and feminist

movement, as it is in a way on West, and there are a lot of these conclusions, because I consider it to be inseparable, such as protection of life, a protection of diversity as the sameness, because I believe in variety and biological concepts of differences, but I absolutely oppose to different possibilities because we are different, we the fact that we are different shouldn't punish us but reward us."(age 61, social feminist).

One participant in her answer linked her attitude toward church and abortion: "About the church all the worst, no matter how deeply I respect the question of religion as a personal question of choice, but the question of the church as a political factor in this society becomes scary, because we are a secular state...The church has no right to stop the law against discrimination, church doesn't have right to make public statements about gay parade... I think that in the last twenty years the church had a tragic role in this society...from great support for war and war criminals, and that is terrible, although I don't think that all representatives (of the church – A.V) are like that, probably among them you have people who deeply believe. So, the church as a political factor, and it becomes, it is terrifying for me, and this is one of the things that we need to be very careful about, and second during the nineties was an attempt by the Synod to deny the abortion right. The role of women in church reading is deeply conservative, deeply traditional, she has been instrumentalized exclusively as a mother, a follower...which is a long-standing issue because the right on abortion is a political right, a right of every woman to dispose of her body...who wants to take it away is really...and after all, what is the idea of a healthy society and a healthy family, which now appears in our public discourse? What does a healthy family mean? That women who want to have children and cannot, are no longer healthy, and then they are discriminated against with these texts." (age 35, does not choose a particular feminist orientation).

Here are some more interesting views of participants about a relationship with religion and church in which they insist that the state should be strictly separated from the church: "For example, in relation to religion, and not just

religion, in relation to a church, I'm not talking about religion, but about the church, about Christianity, I thought that I have no problem, my parents are atheists, I have no problem, what's there to talk about it, and then I realized how many drifts are there...and that I was not aware at all that it was coming from there. *Where did they come from?* From Christianity, especially the churches. *Do you think of the influence of the church on your understanding, feminism and everything?* Not to my understanding of feminism, but to our consciousness in general, on a perception of ourselves, on state in life ... and this exists, it is part of the patriarchal heritage, but that one part is specific because it originates from Christianity."

The opinion of another respondent was:

"Regardless of being an atheist, I used to, as my mother did, respected beliefs, and that was okay. My mother, although she was an atheist, went to celebrated "slava" with her friends, and she led me to as a little girl. My grandmother was religious, maybe she did not bear priests, a priest never came into our house, but she celebrated "slava" and was religious. I remember we celebrated "slava" and she would cross in orthodox manner three times every night... she was religious, but never indoctrinated us, we weren't baptized, there were grandmothers who secretly took babies and children to baptize. Earlier I respected, I'm much sharper now, especially when I saw now what happens, and how in one extremely aggressive, wild, primitive way in which church enters the essence, into the core of a society that consider itself as secular and that no one can do anything, no one can declare itself as an atheist loudly, publicly state that you are atheist. I grow up in a civil family, that is, we did not celebrate, grandmother celebrated "slava". My pressure rises, especially where the representatives of the church manage to achieve some significant influence...especially women's place in Christianity is catastrophic, there a rape is allowed, and it means fulfilling a marital obligation, a woman is dirty. Only a few theses to mention, that is very important, every woman asks herself, in her greatest depth, what she thinks of herself, intimately that it is dirty? it is imputed through the church, it is a terribly important thing for the essence ...Well, I'm telling what I'm currently thinking ... I'm now very fiercely

against the Orthodox Church, because what she represents here, I would also be against the Catholic... absolutely." (age 63, does not choose a particular feminist orientation).

One feminist declared that she is not against religiosity and that individual's right to believe is a private matter: "I'm an atheist, but I have nothing against people who believe, I absolutely think it's everyone's right, but I think it's kind of a private matter. And I think that the state of Serbia, which states in the Constitution that it is a secular state, we know precisely what secularism is, that is the complete separation of church and state and that a church cannot interfere with anything that is not a church issue, and for years they wanted to present us, in effect, that secularism is tolerance in relation to different religions, I mean let them tell that to someone else, it is well known what secularity is. So, against religion as such I have nothing against, I have against wrong interpretations or misuses of religion, which is an absolute characteristic of religious fundamentalisms, from the Orthodox to any other, and towards church I have a terrible attitude, I see the church as my greatest enemy, I mean the church which just misuses faith... and is somehow based on human fear, on human misery and pain, and thus manipulates with it. For me it is an organization rich sources of funding, with incredible influence, and incredible ways of sustainability.

They (members of the church – A.V.) are even now, although some studies show that a good part of people lost confidence in the church...they now have in a large number of cities, at least I know for the city from which I originate, they have some sort of split between the two churches, where they supposedly say that these others don't serve the service as it should by canons, and where it is actually only important to somehow keep people in their parish, even if it's based on a fictional schism as a way of self-sustainability. Now, these people from one place go to another church, and all this is in fact the same circle where they turn around. So, I think the church is very dangerous because of its influence and power and of course because of somehow the worst possible relationship to

women above all, but also to all other people who are different, and which do not fit into the canon “Good Orthodox girl” or “good Orthodox boy”. So, in my opinion, if the church did not initiate, it largely participated and supported the worst things that happened in this area.” (age 36, does not choose a particular feminist orientation).

Conclusion

Based on my findings, it is confirmed that feminists are in majority atheists, they don't believe in God and have a negative attitude about the church and more on representatives of the church in Serbian society. The opinion of all respondents is that SOC is very powerful organization with strong impact on social life. Thus, when participants explain their attitude towards church and faith in God it prevails that religion is not needed in public schools and consider that it is necessary that church and state are strictly separated because Serbia is a secular state by Constitution.

Views of feminists in my research show that a strong influence of Serbian Orthodox Church is not acceptable. Feminists believe that to believe or not is a right of every human being, but they consider it an intolerable mix of the church in everyday issues of citizens, and the restriction of women's rights in any form.

It seems to us that our individual and collective history is moving and progressing, however, “it is true that the social balance maintains a consensus on the minimum of public principles through explicit and implicit norms (governance and subordination) with insignificant or very slow movement and development (Vuković, 2012: 215)”. Sociologists have also explored the question whether religion is used as a source of social capital in the contemporary Serbian society, and conclude “that religion in the Orthodox community in Serbia is not used as an important resource of social capital, and that not enough attention is paid to the forms of cultural capital which are objectivized (Gavrilović, Jovanović, 2011: 149)”. Each identity is layered and

dynamic, and this is evident in the fact that identity can have a class, party, gender, component that together make political identity and influence the forms of political action. Identity provides an opportunity for personality development, but also limits the individual in some aspects, because it does not form once and for all, but changes itself under the influence of social factors and through doubts and conflicting attitudes in the individual (Vuković, 2013: 249). Identity emerges as a product of the relationship between the individual and the environment in which it is located, and the two essential components of this notion are affiliation and “otherness”.

Even interviewees who are not completely indifferent to the religious phenomenon are sceptical towards institutional religious forms and consider that their relationship towards God is based on a faith that does not need an intermediary - the church and its representatives. Considering the powerful process of de-secularization and revitalization of religion, as well as notion that people avoid declaring themselves as atheists, the question is will few feminists be the only and rare social actors who will plead atheistic position in our society in future? In order to understand religiosity and create social relations, we need a dialogue in social space between social actors who declare themselves as believers and those who consider themselves as atheists. A dialogue which would not be, what dialogue often is - the abundance of rhetoric and manifestation of power between participants in different positions of power and influence, but a constructive exchange of opinions with mutual respect of all actors and a purposeful analysis of past, present and future (Vuković, 2017).

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