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IDENTITIES AS NECESSARY FICTIONS

Abstract

The paper deals with the theory of identity which was elaborated by a British sociologist and historian Jeffrey Weeks in his book *Invented Moralities – Sexual Values in an Age of Uncertainty* (1995). Although he primarily discusses sexual identities, his view can be applied in considerations of other types of identity – ethnic, national, religious, class, status, racial, gender, generational, geographical, political in the narrow sense and so forth. As a part of his larger project of *radical humanism*, which puts the spotlight on individual freedom and celebrates the rich diversity of human goals whilst affirming the importance of solidarity among people, Weeks discusses identities as *necessary fictions* – complex, hybrid, heterogeneous and historical social constructions. If they are asserted too firmly, there are dangers of fixing identifications and values that are (always and necessarily) in flux; yet if their validity is denied, there is an even greater danger of disempowering individuals and groups from the best means of mobilizing for social change. Weeks (following Foucault) pleads for a move towards the research of the forms of social relations that would allow our identities to take on more fluid meanings, which would enable the actors to take a more enlightened, conscious and critical look at themselves and at those with whom they come into a variety of interactions. The last part of the paper examines the possibilities and scope of Weeks' conception in the study of post-socialist societies in transition.

Key words: Identities, Historicity, Social Constructionism

And so it comes about that we begin to conceptualize matters of identity at the very time in history when they become a problem.
(Erikson, 1977: 256)

Anthony Giddens, in a book which he wrote some twenty years ago (*Modernity and Self-Identity – Self and society in the Late Modern Age*) spoke, amongst many other issues, of 'the reflexive project of the self'. His basic point was that in modern times 'self' (or identity[1]) is reflexively produced or made – it is not inherited or given. Jenkins (2008, pp. 28-36) argues, criticizing Giddens, that reflexive self-identification, far from being distinctively modern, is a *generic* aspect of being human. He offers examples of St. Augustine's *Confessions,* written about 1600 years ago, as a testament to the possibilities

1 A number of sociological dictionaries (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Sociology*, *The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology*, *The Blackwell Dictionary of Sociology*, *The Sage Dictionary of Sociology*, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology*) have entries 'identity' referring to 'self', or vice versa. Following that, we use the terms interchangeably.

for re-forging the self offered as an example to others, as well as that of Buddhism which can be understood as a project for the reformation of the self. Without going into the debate about dating the emergence of this capacity for reflexivity, we can acknowledge the proliferation of identities in our time. Identities have nowadays certainly become more diverse and less fixed. There is a growing number of people who no longer feel obliged to cling on to the 'traditional' features of the self. To some people this poses a serious problem. But there are others who take joy in this new situation. The attitudes of both groups become a subject of research of social scientists, who, in doing so, use the concept of identity increasingly.

Where does this preoccupation with identity come from? Why is identity such a popular notion? What are the sources of this, it would not be too much to say, fascination with identity? Ravishment with identity, by the way, makes it even more problematic, since 'this concept has not only acquired such a near universal acceptance but it has also become a normative straitjacket' (Malešević, 2002: 195).

Some clarifications regarding the concept

The idea of 'identity', as we know it today, is a relatively new one. It came into use as a popular social-science term only in the 1950s (Gleason, 1983, p. 910). It has filled the role that the three other major social concepts have vacated, notions with equal value charge and 'all explaining' characteristic attached to them: *race*, *national character*, and *social consciousness* (Malešević, 2002: 209).

It has its origins in mathematics, where it is defined simultaneously in two ways:

> *as absolute zero difference and as relative nonzero difference [...]. The absolute definition of identity relates to 'the unconditional nature of a thing that is not derived from external relation – the product of internal self-similarity', while the relative definition of identity implies 'the conditional nature of a thing, n, derived from the difference between n and not(n) – the product of external other-difference'. (Malešević, 2002: 196)*

To put it a bit more simply (if not in a too simplistic manner): identity is about sameness and difference. Transposed to the sphere of social, '[i]dentity is about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others' (Weeks, 1989, p. 88).

Sociologists argue that identities are fluid and changeable, that persons during their life course can take on new ones, this depending on social, cultural and historical context that one finds him-/herself in[2]. Identity is, as stated clearly by Peter Berger in *Invitation to Sociology* (1963) to be 'socially bestowed, socially sustained and socially transformed'. Individual agency and structural factors are in a dialectical relation:

> *Identity is, of course, a key element of subject reality, and like all subjective reality, stands in a dialectical relationship with society. Identity is formed by social processes. Once crystallized, it is maintained, modified, or even reshaped by social relations. The social processes involved in both the formation and maintenance of*

2 'Identities are relational, formed through social relations and politics, so that powerful political movements give rise to identity rather that the other way round' (Weeks, 1995: 101).

> *identity are determined by the social structure. Conversely, the identities produced by the interplay of organism, individual consciousness and social structure react upon the given social structure, maintaining it, modifying it, or even reshaping it. Societies have histories in the course of which specific identities emerge; these histories are, however, made by men with specific identities. If one is mindful of this dialectic one can avoid the misleading notion of 'collective identities' without having recourse to the uniqueness, sub specie aeternitatis, of individual existence. Specific historical social structures engender identity types, which are recognizable in individual cases (Berger & Luckmann, 1967: 173-4)*[3]

There are a few caveats that should be kept in mind concerning the concept of identity. First of all, identity 'is a *process – identification* – not a 'thing'. It is not something that one can *have*, or not; it is something that one *does*' (Jenkins, 2008: 5). It cannot be stressed enough that identity 'is not something tangible, material or visible' (Malešević, 2002: 195), since the casual *reification* of 'identity' could pose a serious problem, rendering the concept totally unusable for scientific purposes. Second, 'identification doesn't *determine* what humans do. Knowing 'the map' – or even just approximately where we are – does not necessarily tell us where we should go next (although a better or worse route to our destination might be suggested)' (Jenkins, 2008: 5). And last, but not the least, identifications are embedded in diverse *power relations* – 'knowing who's who isn't merely a matter of neutral classification. Or, rather, classification is rarely neutral [...]. At the very least, classification implies evaluation, and often much more' (Jenkins, 2008: 6). Interrelations of identities and interests are hard to unravel, and should always be taken into account when considering identity.

Jeffrey Weeks on identities as necessary fictions

British sociologist and historian Jeffrey Weeks gave the most elaborate deliberations on identity in his book *Invented Moralities – Sexual Values in an Age of Uncertainty* (1995). Although there, as well as in his other writings, he primarily discusses sexual identities, his view can (with more or less success) be applied in considerations of other types of identity – ethnic, national, religious, class, status, racial, gender, generational, geographical, political in the narrow sense and so forth.

To put it most succinctly: he speaks of identities as *necessary fictions*. His view offers a critical view of all identities by demonstrating their historical character and arbi-

3 Classical sociological statement on identity, with an emphasis on the individual-society dialectics, quite similar to the one quoted above, can be found in Peter Berger's writing on 'Identity as a Problem in the Sociology of Knowledge', where he explains the relation between psychological reality and social structure: 'psychological reality is in an ongoing dialectical relationship with social structure. Psychological reality refers here, *not* to scientific or philosophical propositions *about* psychological phenomena, but to the manner in which the individual apprehends himself, his processes of consciousness and his relations with others. Whatever its anthropological-biological roots, psychological reality arises in the individual's biography in the course of social processes and is only maintained (that is, maintained in consciousness *as* "reality") by virtue of social processes. [...] Self and society are inextricably interwoven entities. Their relationship is dialectical because the self, once formed, may act back in its turn upon the society that shaped it (a dialectic that Mead expressed in his formulation of the "I" and the "me"). The self exists by virtue of society, but society is only possible as many selves continue to apprehend themselves and each other with reference to it' (Berger, 1966: 106-7).

trariness, debunking their 'naturalness', revealing the tentacles of power that ensnare and shape them. It brings identities back to the world inhabited by human beings, who created them in the first place, thus revealing the openness and contingency of any identity. This move makes human agency essential in the battles fought around identities.

This perspective is a part of Weeks' larger project of *radical pluralism* which puts the spotlight on individual freedom and celebrates the rich diversity of human goals whilst affirming the importance of solidarity among people. There is some ambivalence on his part in recognizing the fictional character of identities, and even their ability to limit, but at the same time seeing the sense of identity as an individual's personal compass through the uncharted complexity of social relations. Abandoning identity could mean losing a valuable reference point in an otherwise incomprehensible and potentially hostile environment; hence their character of necessity.

This tension must be kept in balance and identity politics becomes the art of maintaining equilibrium between affirming and denying validity of any identity.

> *If they are asserted too firmly there are dangers of fixing identifications and values that are really necessarily always in flux; yet if their validity is denied, there is an even greater danger of disempowering individuals and groups from the best means of mobilizing for radical change. (Weeks, 1995: 88)*

To create an identity means finding a delicate balance between the opportunities of contemporary life and identification with one version of history. In other words, it involves placing oneself in the narrative[4] of the past, appropriating a particular history and making it usable in making sense of the present – using history in legitimizing contingency.

Weeks acknowledges the influence that the work of Michel Foucault had on him. He continues Foucault's endeavor of shedding light on the operation of discourse(s) in producing and maintaining identities[5]. To be more precise, what is produced

> *is not an identity but a propensity. It is the whole series of social interactions, encounters with peers, educational processes, rituals of exclusion, labelling events, chance encounters, political identifications, and so on, which structure [...] identities. They are not pre-given in nature; probably like the propensities themselves they are social creations, though at different levels in the formation of psychological individuality. (Weeks, 2006: 139)*

Foucault is following his mentor's (Louis Althusser) idea of *interpellation*: ideological state apparatuses train people to recognize themselves in a particular way – 'men [*sic!*] become that as which they are addressed' (Berger, 1966: 114). So he sees the relationship between symbol and symbolized as not only referential but productive[6]. Discourses of

4 The importance of narrative in sustaining an identity is stressed by Giddens: 'A person's identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor – important though this is – in the reactions of others, but in the capacity *to keep a particular narrative going*. The individual's biography, if she is to maintain regular interaction with others in the day-to-day world, cannot be wholly fictive. It must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing 'story' about the self' (Giddens, 1991: 54).

5 It is interesting to note the absence of the term 'identity' (*identité*) from Foucault's original text (Halperin, 1998: 109).

6 Compare this to Ian Hacking's contrasting people and things: 'Except when we interfere, what things are doing, and indeed what camels are doing, does not depend on how we describe them. But some of the things that we ourselves do are intimately connected to our descriptions. [...] all intentional acts are acts under a

power produce subjects by 'discovering their own truths'. A well-known passage referring to the constitution of 'the homosexual' from Foucault's first volume of the *History of Sexuality* illustrates this:

> *As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and a possibly mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle; written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away. It was consubstantial with him, less as a habitual sin than as a singular nature. We must not forget that that the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized [...] less by a type of sexual relations than by a certain quality of sexual sensibility, a certain way of inverting the masculine and the feminine in oneself. Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species. (Foucault, 1979: 43)*

Against the instances of this practice of subjecting people by 'discovering their inner and eternal truth'[7], Weeks sets a group of ideas that makes up his concept of identity as necessary fiction:

Identity as essential truth	**Identity as necessary fiction**
Uniformity	Difference
Fixity (naturalness, eternity, truth)	Fluidity (historical openness, flexibility, temporality, conditional nature)
Myth (agent of stability)	Fiction (agent of change)
Given or assigned character	Choice
Monolithic or homogenous	Complex, hybrid, heterogeneous

For Weeks, identities are less (or not at all) about expressing an essential truth about our being. They are about mapping our different values – of autonomy, relationships, belonging, difference and diversity. Countering essentialism(s), Weeks also sets himself against any kind of fundamentalism, which he sees 'as a reflex against the rapidity of change, where everything that was fixed begins to seem radically uncertain' (Weeks, 1989: 97), an attempt to proclaim particular experiences as universal truth (p. 98) with affirming 'absolutism against relativism, certainty against chronic uncertainty' (Weeks,

description. Hence if new modes of description come into being, new possibilities for action come into being in consequence' (Hacking, 1992: 80-1), and: 'Who we are is not only what we did, do, and will do but also what we might have done and may do' (p. 79).

7 'The seeking out of a 'true identity' is here seen as a threat and a challenge, because it is not freely chosen. It claims to be finding what we *really* are, or should be, and as a result identity becomes an imposition' (Weeks, 1991a: 74).

2005: 195), while offering 'security and a sense of home' and soothing 'the anguish of individual choice' (*ibid.*).

> *The story of identity puts some light on the troubling paradox: people are increasingly aware that modern society is about flux and change, that what they call 'identity' is as much a product of language and culture as of nature, but at the same time they earnestly strive to fix it, stabilise it, say who they are by telling of their nation, ethnic origin, gender, sexual orientation, and so on. (Weeks, 1985: 186)*

Social constructionist views, which emphasize the role of social relations and historical processes in production of identites[8], are '[b]y their nature [...] less likely to be politically appealing than the pleasing simplicities of essentialism' (Weeks, 1998a: 136) or fundamentalist versions of moral absolutism:

> *It is far easier to confront each difficult area of choice with a moral code which tells us exactly, and invariably, how we should live. In a social climate of rapid social – and moral – change, and of the emergence of new social possibilities, identities and lifestyles, it is a temptation to seek once again the security of absolute moral standards, which fixes us in a world of certainty where personal and social identities are given. (Weeks, 2010, p. 145)*

Social regulation 'provides the conditions within which those defined can begin to develop their own consciousness and identity' (Weeks, 1981: 108). Social categorization and self-categorization offer comfort, security and assurednes, but at the same time social categorization controls, restricts and inhibits by creating the idea of uniformity, that neglects the complexities and differences as prime features of human condition – 'a crude tactic of power designed to obscure a real [...] diversity with the myth of [...] destiny' (Weeks, 1991a: 74). That is why some theoretical strands (queer theory being the leading force) argue for a strategy of total obliteration of identities[9], perhaps getting their inspiration from fragments of Foucault's opus, like the next one which seems to call us not to discover the roots of our identity but to commit ourselves to its dissipation:

> *Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are. We have to imagine and to build up what we could be to get rid of this kind of political 'double bind,' which is the simultaneous individualization and totalization of modern power structures. The conclusion would be that the political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our days is not to try to liberate the individual from the state and from the state's institutions but to liberate us both from the state and from the type of individualization which is linked to the state. We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries. (Foucault, 1982: 785)*

8 For a good example of social constructionism at work, see an essay by Jeffrey Weeks: 'The Construcion of Homosexuality' (chapter 6 of Weeks' *Sex, Politics, and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality Since 1800* [1981], which was later [1996], with minor omissions, reprinted in a reader *Queer Theory/Sociology* edited by Steven Seidman).

9 The dissolving of the 'unity of the self' (as the corner stone of identity) started, in the west, with empiricist philosophers' calling it into question: 'The unity of the self was not a problem so long as the traditional Christian conception of the soul held sway, but it became a problem when Locke declared that a man's 'Identity ... consists in nothing but a participation of the same continued Life, by constantly fleeting Particles of Matter, in succession vitally united to the same organized Body.' [...] Locke and Hume 'use the word identity to cast doubt on the unity of the self'" (Gleason, 1983, p. 911).

Heavily influenced by Foucault, Weeks, nevertheless, does not make an appeal for abandoning identities. He follows Foucault in picking a fight 'against that which ties the individual to himself and submits him to others' (Weeks, 1991b: 167), struggling 'against subjection, forms of subjectivity and submission' (*ibid.*), with a 'refusal of imposed definition' (p. 169). He pleads for a move towards the research of forms of social relations that would allow identities to take on more fluid meanings, which would enable the actors to take a more enlightened, conscious and critical look at themselves and at those with whom they come into a variety of interactions. He states his case of identities as fictions, necessary ones, but nevertheless, fictions, 'constantly questioned yet all the time assumed' (Weeks, 1991a: 69).

At the beginning of the chapter dedicated to identities Weeks (1995: 83) quotes several lines from Wystan Hugh Auden's poem *The Age of Anxiety* (1947) as a motto: 'Human beings are, necessarily, actors who cannot become something before they have pretended to be it; and they can be devided, not into the hypocritical and the sincere, but into the sane who know they are acting and the mad who do not'. The quality of one's performance with her/his identity is not to be regarded as naught if the actor/actress knows that it is all just a play, a fiction, but one that cannot be willed away.

> *But to say that something is a historical fiction is not to denigrate it. On the contrary, it is simple to recognize that we cannot escape our histories, and that we need means to challenge their apparently iron laws and inexorabilities by constructing narratives of the past in order to imagine the present and the future. (Weeks, 1995, p. 98)*

Necessary fictions in a time and place of transition

As if he sensed that he might be criticized from he position of the 'ordinary little man' who has too much of everyday problems and for whom the musings on identity are hardly affordable luxury, Weeks wrote:

> *One possible criticism of what I am going to say is that I will be dealing with issues which do not directly relate to most people's experience. The majority of people on a global scale still have to struggle with getting their daily bread, against the exigencies of extreme poverty, famine, drought, war, authoritarian governments, corruption and violence. Compared to these questions, concerns about sexuality and the body and a sense of self may seem fairly trivial when most people have to struggle just to survive, the worries of the Bien pensant educated middle class rather than the preoccupations of the embattled majority. (Weeks, 1998b: 39-40)*

Offering an (aristocratic) ideal of 'creating an aesthetics of their own life', of becoming an 'artist of the self' to the greatest number of people in the post-socialist countries would be treating them with gross insensitivity, insolence, or contemptuous rudeness. Alex Callinicos, a Trotskyist political theorist, in his *Against Postmodernism: a Marxist critique* (1989) gives a reply to Foucault's question 'why everyone's life couldn't become a work of art?':

> *The answer, of course, is that most people's lives are still [...] shaped by their lack of access to productive resources and their consequent need to sell their labour power in order to live. To invite a hospital porter in Birmingham, a car-*

worker in Sao Paulo, a social security clerk in Chicago, or a street child in Bombay to make a work of art of their lives would be an insult. (cited in Burrell, 2006: 174).

In a world of pleasure and consumption, this kind of ideal could do well as a guide through life, but whatever worlds of transitional countries might be like, those of pleasure and consumption they are not. With very high rates of unemployment, corruption, poverty, organized crime and a number of unresolved political issues they seem to be a fertile soil for fundamentalism and political extremism, which rarely set aesthetics as their highest values.

Yet, there are groups who forge their identities in a way that treasures difference and opts for social change, and, in doing so, present a good illustration of Weeks' theory that was sketched above. One of those are religious LGBT people, whose efforts in constructing viable identities, in spite of the presence of cognitive dissonance, are the subject of intensive research of one author of this paper (see: Jovanović 2008, 2010). Exploration of hybrid identities of religious sexual minorities, more precisely discourses used by religious gays and lesbians in the process of overcoming tensions between religious and sexual spheres of the *self*, highlights the general dynamics (or dialectics, if you will) of traditional and modern in post-socialist societies. Engaging with, and finding a possible solution for the clash of the religious (being on the side of traditional) and non-heterosexual (coming from a distinctively [post-]modern sphere[10]) in one's identity construct may serve as a 'map' or 'guide' for elucidating other, more 'ordinary' tensions between conflicting poles in the identities of the people from the countries that belonged to 'the other side of the iron curtain': national/ethnic vs. European, local vs. global, open/inclusive vs. closed/dismissive of others, etc.

The very existence of these 'blended identities' represents an act of resistance against the dominant moral and political regime, and a step in the direction of social change towards the climate of accepting diversity, with, perhaps, far-reaching consequences: 'The self is not a passive entity, determined by external influences; in forging their self-identities, no matter how local their specific contexts of action, individuals contribute to and directly promote social influences that are global in their consequences and implications' (Giddens, 1991: 2).

The abovementioned research was, in its first instace, conducted in the Serbian city of Niš with 5 participants, 4 of whom identified themselves as Orthodox Christians and one as a follower of Judaism. In the next occasion, one religious lesbian from Niš was inquired, and in the last wave (January 2012) 8 people (4 gays and 4 lesbians) from the Serbian capital Belgrade were also interviewed. They were all asked a set of questions which served as a kind of check-points in the conversation, rather than queries in need of a 'correct' or 'definite' answer (for more details on method used see: Jovanović, 2008: 337-339 and Jovanović, 2010: 76-77).

When answering the question 'How would you define yourself?', the research participants primarily reflected on their psychological and physical traits, features of character, social roles, and only after these (if at all) did they give answers pertaining to their sexual-

10 'Sexuality has remained the last social domain which until relatively late period, retained the label of 'natural', and at best a 'personal thing' persecuted and locked up in the private sphere' (Jovanović, 2009: 11).

ity. Although all of the interviewees were part of the stigmatized minority group, none of them mentioned the stigmatized part of the identity as crucial. This could mean that the participants were to a great extent accustomed to their homosexuality, that they took it for granted, as an integral part of their identity and did not have any particular need to accentuate it. So, it seems that they were refusing to subdue to a heteronormative order and bring their sexuality (which, allegedly, 'defines the truth of their being') to the forefront. This refusal to be defined by the heteronormative institutional order has similarities with the refusal to define one's religiosity in accordance with the dogma, i.e. with the dictate of the religious institution.

When asked about their religiosity, all the participants talked about confessional belonging and, all but one, declared themselves as Orthodox Christians. They stated that they were born in Serbia, and were baptized into Orthodox Christianity as children; therefore they could be called 'geographically Orthodox'. They did not value their confessional belonging very much as, they emphasized, they didn't choose the time and place into which they were born. The exception is the participant who declared himself as believer of Judaism. Confessional belonging was 'a very important thing' to him, since he had a possibility of choice, which he exercised (with his father being Orthodox Serbian and mother of Jewish origin). Therefore, confession was more valued when it is a product of personal choice, and not as socio-culturally given.

The participants emphasized their spirituality as opposed to traditional religiosity. Aware of the social context, which is characterized by the wave of retraditionalization, that is, 'a return to the good old values', they notice, in the religious sphere, the phenomenon of 'belonging without believing' – conformist behavior in accordance with the new dominant ideology. The behavior, whose authenticity, in a sense of being based on the inner religious feeling, can be questioned. This religious revival in the East differs from the process of desecularization in the post-modern West, and is marked by retotalization and recollectivization – the form very similar to the communist social system.

In connection with such an understanding of spirituality, which emphasizes action of the self, and not that of religious institution, is the phenomenon that Danièle Hervieu-Léger calls *bricolage* ('bricoler' – cobble; do odd jobs; potter about; tinker), and Robert Wuthnow terms *patchwork religion* ('patchwork' - a collection of miscellaneous or incongruous parts; a jumble) – religion 'thrown together' from the beliefs and practices which were at hand (as an object made out of Lego bricks). People are shaping their faith out of elements which are borrowed from traditional and publicly recognized religions, the new (mostly New Age) religious movements, from the folk superstition, profane ideologies and popularized scientific concepts, primarily psychological and especially psychoanalytic ones, where spirituality functions as the ability to make connections between these fields. This kind of religious hybridity presupposes the process of negotiating between different parts of religious identity, as to make them a compatible whole. This process seems to be the hallmark of the modern world, where identity negotiation appears to be unavoidable.

Post-socialist societies seem to be taking make-up exam in religious instruction – institutionally determined religious practices and beliefs are gaining absolute primacy in the religious lives of majority of the people. This may be a necessary step in a tardy

process of modernization, it may be a reaction to the long-term imposed atheization on the part of the socialist state, and it may also be one kind of cultural resistance to the 'godless' and consumerist West and its 'Eurosecularity' (Berger). Whatever the case may be, the form of religiosity found in the participants in the research can be qualified as the vanguard for its social environment, since this form of religiosity is characteristic for the Western, highly developed capitalistic, post-modern/post-industrial societies.

Interviewed gays and one lesbian turned out to be spiritually, and not institutionally, i.e. traditionally religious. This came as a no surprise, having in mind that LGBT people have been discriminated against by the society, and, particularly, by the traditional religions. This may have 'pushed' them to look for the answers to the 'questions of eternity' beyond the tenets of organized religions.

They believed that non-heterosexuality was in accordance with the Christian faith. Gays and lesbians rose above the institutional lines when it came to the shaping of their faith – they put great emphasis on personal religious experience as contrasted to the established Church practices. Specific social situation, that of being stigmatized on the basis of their sexuality, played the crucial role in the shaping of their faith. Respondents showed a high level of criticism towards institutionalized churches, where the credibility of the churches and their dogma on homosexuality were brought into question. Critical interpretation of dogma was carried through socio-cultural relativization of the meaning of the Holy Scriptures, emphasizing the fallibility of the Church as well as acknowledging the lack of informed, educated and goodwill clergy.

Since the Bible is one of the primary sources of the negative attitude towards homosexuality on the part of the Church, interviewed LGBT Christians questioned the accuracy and stringency of dogmatic/institutional interpretations of the Holy Scriptures through highlighting the socio-cultural-political context in which scriptural texts were written. Taking into account the historical and cultural context in the metaphorical (not literal) understanding of Biblical texts was justified by the process of 'sifting' – the use (or reinterpretation) of certain parts of the Holy Scriptures that support the construction of religious identity of non-heterosexual people, and rejection of parts that cannot be used for that purpose. Here we witness an example of fiction (as an agent of change) versus that of myth (as an agent of stability and an instrument of preserving the status quo).

All these activities bear witness to the primacy of the self and low influence of religious authority structures. Belonging to traditional Churches is not absent, but it does not include conformity and acceptance of dogmatic views on the issues of homosexuality declared by the official religious institutions: there is a coexistance of traditions and the self in a sort of a 'creative dialogue'.

The real challenge in Serbian, and for that matter in all post-socialist societies, would be a democratic search for a meaningful life. Not by striving for a new (or 'good old') unitary set of values and retreating into the fortress of the seized identity, but rather by engaging with diversity of values and finding a possible balance.

The challenge is huge. There are many temptations and trials to fold back to this or that model of the past. But that makes the need for invention of viable individual and collective narratives for making sense of new circumstances and new possibilities even greater. Guidelines set by Weeks could be of some use in this undertaking.

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