

RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AS A SOURCE OF SOCIAL CAPITAL IN TRANSITIONAL SERBIA

PROBLEM

Despite the predictions made by certain theorists, the secularization processes have had a limited effect in the greater part of the world, thus the desecularization, or revitalization of religion, is today present and manifested in various forms. Religion acquires a new social relevance (Habermas) and performs different functions in the modern society.

Such processes have not missed Serbia, where the relation between religion and society is somewhat more specific, since religion had an important function in structuring and legitimizing many conflicts in the previous period. Having in mind that peoples living in Serbia bear the “curse of small differences”, religion has played a role of a significant identifying marker that has separated them and highlighted the differences in situations when other identity indicators have failed to sufficiently emphasize the Us vs. Them division.

The process of retraditionalization – one of whose segments was the revitalization of religion through the return of religion onto the social scene and into private lives of Serbian citizens – was specific for the contemporary Serbian society in the previous period. Studies of religiosity on the territory of Serbia show the growth and intensification of religious practice in comparison to previous periods (Blagojević 2009). However, studies thus far also show that a high level of identification with the religious community is still present in Serbia, along with a significantly lower level of religiosity, and an extremely low level of religious practice (Blagojević 2009, 106; Zrinščak 2008, 34).

The focus in this text is on the specific use of religion as social capital. This function of religion in the modern Serbian society has not been the subject of analysis in sociological literature until now. If religious integration is observed as a traditional

form of social integration, a question is raised whether old forms of social capital are activated as a response to “social failure”, a great number of transitional losers, and weakness of social institutions. Social capital embodied in traditional networks of cooperation represents a substitute for state institutions which are weak (or do not function). On the other hand, a question is posed about the role of religion in the development of “moral density” of the civil society and whether it is possible to use religion in Serbia as this type of social capital. Analyses which connect these two phenomena point out that religion may indeed have the function of securing the integration of the modern society by developing the necessary humane character of the civil society, and teaching people to work for the general good. The Serbian society is multi-religious, and social capital functions within the confessions present in it. One should have in mind that the range of the use of religion as a source of social capital depends on the social teaching¹ of each of the present religious orientations. In such conditions, the use of religion for raising “collective awareness” of the social community can be limited to particular confessions and their internal cohesion.

Another important fact can contribute to better understanding of religion as a source of social capital in Serbia. Research shows that religious organizations, especially the Serbian Orthodox Church, are institutions which enjoy the highest level of trust from the citizens.² Thereat, Serbia is also trying to build a civil, secular society with a specific status of the SOC as traditional and informally most dominant.³

The research on this “type” of social capital in Serbia is relatively scarce. Such analyses of the role of religion in the construction of social capital were conducted in the case of Croatia and they can be used as the basis for comparison (Bahovec et al. 2007). The main questions discussed in this text are: Does the context of presence and functioning of religion in Serbia determine its use as a source of social capital? The influence of religion, as a source of social capital, is frequently associated with the development of the concept of democratic society in the contemporary literature within this field. Is it possible to talk about such use of religion in Serbia?

1 Thus, for example in Orthodoxy, which is the dominant confession on the territory of Serbia, social teaching either lacks or is significantly less developed (see: Đorđević & Jovanović 2010), and that is reflected on the ability of the Orthodox to “generate” social capital.

2 The research conducted in July 2010 on the territory of the Western Balkans showed that the military and church were the institutions most trusted in Serbia since 2008, however, the military took over the first place from the church in the last three years. The trust that the military enjoys increased from 63% to 77%, while at the same time the trust in church decreased from 75% to 66%. The church is followed by the police that enjoys the trust of 59,6% examinees in Serbia, while significantly lower numbers of citizens trust the media (41,6%), the judiciary (38%), and the government (33%). See *Gallup Balkan Monitor* research, pp. 32-3.

3 The 2006 Constitution did not mark the SOC as the only traditional community, enjoying a privileged position, but as sharing that status with six other, also traditional, religious communities.

The data analyzed in this text encompass 2008-2011, and comes from the following researches: “European Values Study” (Serbia 2008), “Cultural Practices of Citizens of Serbia” conducted by the Centre for Study in Cultural Development, “Social and Cultural Capital in Serbia” conducted by the Centre for Empirical Cultural Studies.

TWO CONCEPTS OF SOCIAL CAPITAL: BOURDIEU VS. PUTNAM

Two concepts of defining and interpreting the concept of social capital have crystallized in the theory. According to Bourdieu, “Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word” (Bourdieu: 1986).

Fukuyama, Coleman, and Putnam (normativists)⁴ represent the other dominant theoretical direction which determines social capital as interiorized social networks, norms, and trust that allow for a spontaneous reliability in the society. Members of a social group interiorize rules and customs, therefore, gaining mutual trust in other members believing that they will respect the same rules of behaviour, which is the essence of the functioning of social capital (Fukuyama 1997; 35). Putnam determines social capital as a force which helps members of a community to achieve collective goals by working together. “Social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arises from them” (Putnam 2000, 19). In his book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* from 2000, Putnam talks about the decrease in the level of social capital in the US that causes loneliness and alienation. In his later works (*Better Together: Restoring the American Community*, with Lewis M. Feldstein, 2003), he discovers that the force needed to bring back the “moral density” to the modern American society lies precisely in the role of religion.

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND RELIGION

Putnam considers religion as a very important source of social capital. “Putnam (...) himself has recognized that faith communities in which people worship together are arguably the single most important repository of social capital in America” (Smidt

⁴ A complex analysis of all these concepts and their points of convergence and divergence would take too much space, therefore, it is presented here in a completely simplified manner.

2003, 2). The relation between social capital and religion is highly complex. Religion can be treated as a segment of integration of the civil society, as one of the actors and organizations, yet it can also be considered as a “traditional way” of social connection when it acts at the level of state and politics (Zrinščak 2005, 82). It is hard to discern when one or the other function of religion is in action based only on the analysis of indicators. Following Casanova’s analyses of deprivatized religion, Croatian sociologist Zrinščak poses a question concerning the possibility of reconciling functional differentiation of modern society and deprivatized religion (Zrinščak 2005, 82). He concludes that the action of religion compatible with the functional differentiation as a modern structural trend is possible at the level of the civil society. Other authors also share such Casanova’s propositions in their texts where they analyze the role of religion as a source of social capital. “Religion is an important source of social capital in many modern societies. Religion as a body of beliefs, values and norms motivates believers to volunteer in community affairs to provide social services such as health care, soup kitchens, education, and helping the poor. Religion also provides a source of common identity to its followers and creates bonds between them. Obviously, religion is only one source of social capital or civic engagement, albeit an important one” (Ugur 2007, 154-5). In this case, religion is recognized as one form which acts among other forms of organization and encourages solidarity in the modern civil society. Furthermore, the importance of religion for social capital in cities is also emphasized. “Religion fosters community in a variety of other ways. Soup kitchens, clothing closets, mission projects are religious activities in support of community. Religious institutions also create and sustain local community development corporations, job training, youth programs, and daycare. In Greater Indianapolis there are countless connections between faith and community. Clearly, religion is an important source of social capital in this city” (Bodenhamer, 1996). Thus, religious organizations encourage volunteering for the general good on the one hand, while instigating altruism through socialization on the other. In his analyses, Putnam has Protestant communities in the US primarily in mind.

Norris and Inglehart analyze the connection between religiosity and social capital in an array of modern societies by analyzing data from the European Values Study. The general impression gained after the insight into the data and the analysis itself is that it is very hard to observe “a regularity in observed irregularities” (Inglehart & Norris 2007). The regularities determined in the analyses show that there is a correlation between attending religious service and volunteering for charity activities. The positive correlation is observed in Protestants, Hinduists, and Judaists, while the negative correlation is noticed only in Orthodox believers. Norris and Inglehart

conclude that belonging to religious organizations goes hand in hand with the engagement in community and democratic participation.

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND RELIGION IN SERBIA – DATA AND ATTEMPT AT INTERPRETATION

Serbia is very specific when it comes to the presence and functioning of religion. If one says that it is the case of a postsocialist society of “instructed atheism”, Eastern European, mainly Orthodox society, one still does not have all of the relevant data needed to enable a complex analysis of the “religious situation”. Some of the data which follows can contribute to producing a clearer picture.

The data obtained from our research shows that there are 86.7% of Orthodox examinees in the sample. The second largest group consists of Catholics (4.5%), then Muslims (3.1%), and atheists (1.9%). This distribution is mostly in line with the representation in general population.

Despite the high confessional identification (86.7% of examinees declare themselves as Orthodox against 2% of atheists), only 62.1% of examinees declare themselves as religious, while only 18.1% regularly visits religious buildings for prayers and rites. The analysis of data obtained from the World Values Survey (2002, 2005) and European Values Study (2008) research shows that this number of those people who declare themselves as belonging to any confession is stable and that it does not represent the current mood among the believers. All of these results confirm the findings of Blagojević and Zrinščak on the very low percentage of religious participation.

This ratio is much more balanced in Croatia (confessional identification 88.9%, those declared as religious 79.9%, visiting religious buildings for prayers and rites 52.8%), while the situation is somewhat similar to that in Bulgaria (confessional identification 70.0%, those declared as religious 46.7%, visiting religious buildings for prayers and rites 20.2%) (Zrinščak 2008, 33). If similarities and differences are observed, it can be seen that this is the case of postsocialist societies, and the mutual denominator for Bulgaria and Serbia is Orthodoxy.

If we return to the data from our research, we can see that 80% of examinees regularly celebrate religious holidays, while only 8% participates in charity activities of a religious community. Regularly or frequently: 7.5% reads religious literature, 16% fasts, and 17.3% prays.

We could draw a rough conclusion that the presence of traditional religiosity can be clearly seen, even over a small number of indicators, which is characterized by confessional identification connected to ethnic identity and celebration of religious

holidays (where Patron Saint's days are also important), as well as more significant days in one's life, such as weddings, infant baptisms or burials of the deceased.

To make the picture complete, the data that only 17.5% of examinees consider religion important in their lives should be added. The family is in the first place, then comes the job, followed by friends and acquaintances, entertainment, *religion*, politics.

When we look at the data on self-identification, only 1.3% of examinees choose religious identity as the primary identification marker when other identification options are available, for 6.9% of examinees it is the second most important source of identification, while 9.1% of examinees consider religion as the third most important source of identification (after the first two which they consider more important). This data can be interpreted as an indicator of the relatively rare "use" of religious orientation as the first source of personal identity in the situation where this type of identification is observed in the context of other identity options. Religious identification is not one of the most important sources of personal identification in Serbia.

The data on the network of friends that our examinees have shows that in 90% of cases the first, second and third friend belong to the same confession. This means that confessions are mostly closed when it comes to making friendships.

Our examinees testify that people ask them for help all the time in 22% of cases, while occasionally in 52% of cases, but these are the people who are members of their religious community in 2.7% of cases, occasionally in 8.2% of cases. Such data is confirmed by the research of the Centre for Study in Cultural Development and the CECS research. This shows that there is no practice of offering and asking for help when in trouble between members of the same religious group, primarily within the Orthodox community (for which valid conclusions can only be drawn due to the number of examinees). Most frequently it is the friends from their neighbourhoods, neighbours, relatives, and colleagues from work who ask for their help. In the focus group interviews, examinees also emphasize how they most often turn to their friends and relatives when they have problems. Even though the Orthodox are the most numerous group, when we look at other confessions with the percentage of people asking for help in mind, we can see that Protestants are in front, followed by Muslims.

Only 11.2% of people think that they can rely on three members of their own religious community, 6.7% on two, a 1% on ten. It is also interesting that 30.6% of examinees believe that they cannot rely on any one member of their religious community, while 55% of examinees do not even consider asking someone who belongs to the same religious community for help. The connection in the sense of social networks of members of the Orthodox religious community is not specific for relationships within this group.

Special attention should be paid to the data which shows that only 8% of examinees claim that they participate in charity activities of their religious community. This type of activities is exactly what characterizes the practice of religious communities which function at the level of the civil society. When regular visits to temples for prayers and religious rites are related to charity activities, a certain connection between these parameters can be observed. Namely, with the decrease in the level of visits to religious buildings for prayers and rites, the participation in charity activities also decreases (Pearson Chi Square 1579.245, df 9, Sig .000). These findings confirm the connection that Norris and Inglehart point to. However, when it comes to Serbia, it should be noted that both of these parameters are very low.

Focus group interviews show that examinees do not recognize other people of the same religious orientation as similar to themselves in any case, but that they always take other characteristics into consideration, such as material status (class-layer belonging in the narrow sense) or personal traits. One of the cases even showed that someone who at one point started dealing with his or her own religiosity was ostracized from the group of friends! If we consider the data from European Values Study 2008, where only 3.2% of examinees mentioned that they belonged to a religious community when choosing between various types of organizations, a picture of networks that can be established in Serbia on the basis of religious orientation is quite clear. Thereat, only 21.2% of examinees think that religion helps them solve social problems, while spiritual problems (62%) and moral problems (43.1%) are the ones solved with the aid of religion. Even family problems are not solved from the viewpoint of religion to a great extent – 33.5%. Religion in Serbia (above all among the Orthodox) is rather understood as individual ethics and relationship with the higher power, than as a source of social teaching and legitimization of social behaviour, which is in accordance with the fluid social teaching of the SOC where this world is perceived as only a second-class phenomenon.

It is important to mention that the level of activity within the civil society / civil activism is also very low. Only 2.3% of examinees participate in associations which deal with various forms of social care, 4.4% in cultural activities, 5.7% in unions, 2.1% in local community actions, 1.1% in associations for the protection of human rights. The situation is similar with the participation in associations for environment protection, and women or peace movements. No less than 77% of examinees claim that they do not belong to any group or association. In such conditions, the premise about the connection of belonging to a religious community and some other civil association (Norris, Inglehart) does not hold in the Serbian case.

Neighbourhood is considered to be an important institution for accumulation of social capital. When asked who they would not want in their neighbourhoods, the examinees from Serbia single out criminals, alcoholics, drug addicts, mental patients, HIV-positive people, while confession does not belong to the most important markers. Even when it is the case of Muslims (having recent conflicts in mind), or Judaists (occasional anti-Semitic messages), they do not occupy a high position on the list of unwanted neighbours.

What should definitely be taken into consideration when studying social capital within religious groups is the structure of the authority inside the religious organization. John A. Coleman says the following on that matter: "A crucial distinction to explain variance in religiosity and the generation of social capital lies in a differentiation between *horizontal* and *vertical* relations of religious authority. For example, some forms of religiosity, such as traditional Catholicism in Italy, remain intensely hierarchical in structure. They foster vertical relations (between bishops and priests and priests and people) of passivity and subordination. (...) Only horizontal authority structures, generally, seem to generate social capital" (Coleman 2003, 36-7). The relations between different level clergy, as well as between clergy and laity in the Serbian Orthodox Church are mostly those of subordination, where an exaggerated condescension is noticeable in religious people when it comes to "church matters". In that sense, there is no basis for creating social capital in the structure of the authority within the church.

Trust is one of the most important parameters of social capital, yet only 11.6% of examinees think that the majority of people in Serbia deserve their trust, while 86.2% of examinees believe that in Serbia one should "have eyes in the back of one's head". Such a low level of trust in other people is probably an indicator that religion does not enhance the feeling of altruism, bonding, and "moral density" in Serbia.

The data from the analyzed research implies a very limited use of religion as a source of social capital in Serbia. Our sample, guided by the structure of general population, offers the most comprehensive picture of Orthodox believers. Some other analysis, with its focus only on minor religious communities, would, perhaps, create a different picture of them. Even though religion is very present in various aspects on the social scene in Serbia, we cannot consider its functioning as a significant source of social capital. If we perceive the role of religion in the creation of social capital in Serbia as Bourdieu does, we can conclude that belonging to religious communities is not used as part of life strategies, that is, religion is expected to solve spiritual, and not social problems.

If, on the other hand, the basis of our analysis is Putnam's concept of social capital embodied in norms, networks, and trust, we can again observe that people in Serbia do not create networks on the basis of belonging to religious organizations, because

we do not count on members of the same religious community in difficult situations, neither do they count on us, even though we are limited by confession in our friendships. Focus group interviews in both Niš (dominantly Orthodox environment) and Novi Pazar (dominantly Muslim environment) show that friends are those we turn to in difficult situations. Nevertheless, if we bear in mind that our closest friends belong to our confession, this may implicitly point to the existence of such relationships.

When we talk about Serbia, the first conspicuous impression is that religion at the “level of the civil society”, the aspect present in Western cities, does not support the community. Namely, “Serbian Orthodoxy” does not nurture such forms that are characterized by charity activities and volunteering, and which strengthen the collective awareness of members of a religious community for the general good.

The basic communication within the Orthodox religious community is maintained by visits to Patron Saint’s days and birth, wedding or death rites, which once again points to the “four rite believers”.

The everyday presence of religion in events on the public stage in Serbia belongs to the area of state and politics (Casanova).

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