

The Serbian Orthodox Church in the Face of the Covid-19 Pandemic

by Milan Vukomanović

The goal of this article is to highlight the religious dimensions of the Covid-19 pandemic in Serbia through sociological interpretation of the institutional role of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), including the process of the adjustment of clergy and believers to pandemic circumstances. Such an adjustment involves religious discourse, ritual practice, community and institution. A greater attention is thus dedicated to the uniqueness of the church institution in its relation to a broader social community, especially with regard to the discrepancies between the church practices and official state measures and restrictions. This also implies the necessity to mitigate tensions and prevent potential rifts between the religious and secular communities, or church and state.

Key words: Covid-19 pandemic, Serbian Orthodox Church, higher clergy, (de)secularization, church and state

doi: 10.55337/WLXV5504

It goes without saying that pandemics are sources of instability, societal uncertainty and crises that affect various aspects of human behavior, including religious life. The novel reality of a pandemic situation becomes an immediate threat to the social structure and strongly influences the scope, timeliness and forms of the social, economic and political response in a number of other domains conditioned by the pandemic. The response of churches and other religious institutions is of national and international importance, because during pandemics, societies are faced with extraordinary circumstances that seem, at least at first glance, as if they are beyond anyone's direct control. This, of course, is an aspect in which churches and religious communities find appropriate space for additional action. Furthermore, given the constitutional distinction between the state and faith organizations in many countries, including Serbia, the contrast between measures of adaptation to pandemics undertaken by state- and religious-institutions deserves special attention.

Adapting religious discourse, practice, community and institution to the circumstances of the pandemic is another relevant issue in this context. Firstly, it is important to note that there is no single response to a pandemic even within the same religion or church. It is thus important to highlight not only the adjustment to extraordinary circumstances of central church rituals (liturgy, mass), but also ritual practices within the family (e.g. *krsna slava* or patron saint celebration

among the Serbs). It is well known that Eastern Orthodox rites imply a high degree of physical contact between clergy and its congregation, including kissing of hands, icons, as well as hugging and kissing between the community members. During the performance of liturgy, the faithful normally receive communion from the same teaspoon, an act that significantly increases the probability of infection during epidemic conditions. In that respect, Eastern Orthodox spirituality could be regarded as very physical in its various forms of manifestation. Finally, one should also be alert to deviations in the practices of a church or religious community from official, secular state restrictions and measures.

Easter Celebration

During the “COVID-year” of 2020, the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) had to face at least two major challenges: the celebration of Easter under the unprecedented circumstances, and the loss of three members of its highest clergy, including Patriarch Irinej (Gavrilović) himself, due to coronavirus disease. According to President Vučić, the late patriarch achieved an unusual degree of partnership with the state¹, while the Holy Synod assumed a significant level of centralized power due to the fact that the Holy Council of Bishops was not convoked since May 2019. In turn, this has been reflected on the de-secularization process in Serbia and the position of the clergy that has been critical towards the political and public health decisions of the Serbian government.

Last year the celebration of several major religious festivals took place globally under very odd circumstances. In Serbia, one could observe clear differences within the narrative strategies and public messages of various religious leaders and church prelates. In contrast to the decisions made by the majority of other religious communities, the SOC opted against the cessation of regular liturgies, although elderly citizens were asked, due to health concerns, not to visit the churches during the pandemic. However, the church practice was not standardized in all of the eparchies (parishes). Some of them completely ceased the celebration of liturgies, while others continued with their usual practice. As an act of “concession” to public health measures, the faithful attending liturgies would stay in front of church entrances, stepping inside one by one in order to take communion. On some occasions, parish priests would administer communion outside their churches. Discrepancies also occurred between the homeland and the diaspora eparchies, whereas the latter demonstrated a higher degree of responsibility in these matters. This was probably another, though unusual, indicator of the most recent cleavage within the SOC’s higher clergy that has affected several other political and ecclesiastical issues.² One should therefore not be surprised by the lack of a unison policy within the SOC regarding the Easter 2020 celebration.

Very soon after the pandemic outbreak, on 15 March 2020, the Serbian government declared a state of emergency. The state of emergency was not

lifted until 6th May, so that the curfews and other movement restrictions were administered throughout the Easter season.

As a result, the Serbian Patriarch and Holy Synod asked for a temporary cessation of curfew for the period of duration of the Easter liturgies (The curfew implied weekend restrictions of movement from Friday 5 pm to Monday morning). Several public petitions were signed by citizens and public figures demanding a short-term cessation of curfew, so that congregations would be able to attend the Easter service. The arguments of this group emphasized that Easter has been the greatest Christian festival and one of the major religious rituals. Some secular arguments were also heard in public, referring to the freedom of religion and violation of human rights of church-going citizens. It should be noted, however, that the right to life and health also pertain to fundamental human rights and that these rights cannot be abrogated by invoking other freedoms. The right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health was first articulated in the 1946 Constitution of the World Health Organization (WHO). In line with the current Covid-19 pandemic, the WHO issued an interim guidance entitled "Practical considerations and recommendations for religious leaders and faith-based communities in the context of COVID-19" in April 2020.³ Furthermore, the SOC itself very precisely defined its liturgical practices and measures during epidemics (e.g. disinfection of teaspoons, etc.) in its regulations dating back to 1929.

Special attention in this context should be paid to the disagreements between the SOC position on the pandemic and the policies of the Crisis Committee, a governmental body in charge of public health during the Covid-19 crisis. The expert members of this Committee, predominantly doctors, supported the weekend curfews during Easter; while the SOC representatives insisted on (religious) exceptions from the rule. These tensions were mitigated by a phone conversation between President Vučić and late Patriarch Irinej shortly before the Easter celebration. They issued their joint statement in which they declined the possibility of curfew suspension during the Easter holiday. They also appealed to citizens to adhere to regular epidemiological measures. The Patriarch remarked that some church officials gave inappropriate statements and that the SOC should keep its unity, sabornost, and health of all citizens of Serbia. However, despite all those appeals and protective public measures, Easter of 2020 was celebrated in some churches with the presence of faithful, although without any mass gatherings. The general public was divided on this matter: some were critical towards the government, while others were disappointed by the SOC's determination to organize liturgies during the pandemic crisis.

It is worth noting that religious communities in Serbia, including the SOC, have not been consulted in creating governmental recommendations and strategies against Covid-19. Accordingly, the direct impact of religious leaders on the behavior

of the faithful was crucial for conveying health-related messages during religious holidays. Due to dissonant voices coming from different SOC prelates, a significant level of confusion was raised among the Orthodox believers. Some bizarre cases have also been documented in this period. A controversial Orthodox abbot from a monastery near Serbian town of Valjevo issued himself a certificate against wearing a protective mask, because it violated “human dignity”.⁴ In that context the abbot even referred to the Constitution of Serbia and the Law on Churches and Religious Communities. Concerning the issue of human dignity. He identified it with God’s image, omitting the fact that God was not mentioned in the Serbian Constitution, and that human dignity, as a constitutional category, is not related to any particular religious organization. Finally, article 11 of the Constitution stipulates that churches and religious communities are separate from the State. As a citizen of Serbia, this Orthodox priest has not been exempted from the Law on the Protection of Population from Infectious Diseases either.

The Deaths of Higher Clergy

As coronavirus cases surged globally, the Covid-19 deaths of the two highest SOC prelates have additionally raised questions about whether the SOC has done enough to slow down the spread of the virus or, perhaps, contributed to exacerbating the disease. The SOC has, unfortunately, paid a heavy price for either neglecting or mitigating restrictions imposed by the state. Thousands of people attended the funeral of the Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral Amfilohije (Radović), spreading thus the epidemic further around Serbia. Amfilohije died on 30 October 2020 due to health complications caused by Covid-19. The faithful from Montenegro, Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina paid their respects to him by occasionally kissing his body.

The Serbian Patriarch Irinej caught the virus at the same funeral and was hospitalized soon after. His condition worsened and he died on 20 November 2020. During the funeral ceremony, as a matter of precaution, an open casket with the Patriarch’s body was covered with plexiglass shield in order to minimize contact. However, many mourners who attended the funeral ignored precautions by taking wine from the same communion spoon or by kissing the glass shield and thus maximizing the risk of spreading the infection. Because of this lack of discipline, Bishop David, who led the funeral liturgy, also tested positive for coronavirus and was hospitalized. Other senior members of the church - Bishop Milutin (Knežević), the deposed Bishop Artemije (Radisavljević) and hieromonk Prohor Josifov—also died of the coronavirus. Many others tested positive, including Metropolitan Hrizostom (Jević), acting head of the Synod, Bishop Joanikije (Mićović) from Montenegro, and vicar bishop Stefan (Šarić)—the right hand of the Serbian Patriarch. In that context, Dr. Predrag Kon, a leading member of the Crisis Committee and a senior Serbian epidemiologist, stunned the public by his statement, broadcast on the

national television, that despite “the great risk posed by the funeral of Patriarch Irinej” and the fact that such gathering is “epidemiologically unacceptable, no one can forbid it”.⁵The military hospital care and funeral of the late Serbian Patriarch not only took on a conspicuous “state character” (with the presence of the highest state officials and President’s speech at the funeral), it also demonstrated that the Serbian government, during the coronavirus crisis, was not able to protect the rule of law for all of its citizens and that church officials were largely exempted from most of the epidemiological measures. Perhaps this is an indicator of the process of advanced de-secularization of the Serbian society and politicization of the SOC by state officials (especially President Vučić), eager to obtain the church support for the forthcoming governmental decisions regarding the status of Kosovo. One should also mention in this context that generous state funds have been allocated to the SOC on three separate occasions during 2020, while underpaid doctors and nurses in hospitals worked under extremely difficult material conditions, not to mention the layoffs in other professions due to the pandemic.

New Patriarch

The election of the new Serbian Patriarch was also organized in the midst of the pandemic. The election session of the Holy Council of Bishops was scheduled for 18 February 2021, in accordance with the deadlines stipulated by the SOC Constitution and notwithstanding the pandemic. Altogether, 34 bishops and metropolitans were eligible for this highest office.

By the mid-1990s, there were rumors within the SOC about the existence of two different factions: the zealots and the moderates, or “hawks and doves”.⁶ Their differences were expressed in some dogmatic issues, as well as on questions concerning the SOC’s view of national identity, political engagement, priesthood, religious education, ecumenism, etc. In the SOC, the distinction between a liberal and a conservative wing has traditionally been tackled in relation to the election of a new patriarch, or concerning the possible visit of the Pope to Serbia, whereby the bishops who are committed to ecumenism have usually been labeled as liberal. For example, when Patriarch Pavle was surprisingly elected in 1990, most of the commentators did not view him as a member of either of the two church currents. However, his successor, the late Patriarch Irinej, was perceived, at least in some circles, as a moderate bishop. However, one should bear in mind that conservatism is the predominant feature in the SOC Sabor.

Today, the divisions within the highest church ranks are predominantly personal and, to some extent, political. It seems, however, that the outset of the 21st century Serbia saw the emergence of a small liberal wing within the SOC, which was more open to modern secular influences. From time to time, their liberal proclivities surface in public speeches and media interviews more than in the official church gatherings and ecclesiastical bodies. This group, in my view, includes the following

bishops: Grigorije (Durić), Maksim (Vasiljević), Teodosije (Šibalić), Joanikije (Mićović), Andrej (Čilerdžić), Irinej (Dobrijević). Most of these high-ranking prelates serve today as bishops in the western diaspora — in the USA, Austria, Switzerland, and Germany. It is also important to note that the liberal attitude of these bishops varies depending on the theme under consideration and does not automatically refer to all the issues in a public debate. For example, most (if not all) of these bishops have a rather unison ecclesiastical-political view of Kosovo, but they express a much more flexible attitude towards science, education, human rights, and ecumenical dialogue. One candidate from this rank, bishop Grigorije, was actually proposed by his peers at the Holy Council for the new patriarch.

In the second group, there is a strong current of prelates loyal to the authoritarian President Vučić. This group is concentrated around Bishop Irinej Bulović and the Synod under his control. In present-day Serbia Vučić's support means a lot, and Bulović's spiritual son and the state-media favorite is Metropolitan Porfirije (Perić). Not surprisingly, in February 2021 he became the new Serbian patriarch. After a long period of time, during which the patriarchal position was occupied by a senior prelate, a relatively young bishop (born 1961) sat on St. Sava's throne. One of his most important roles, at the present moment, is to resolve at least some aspects of a serious organizational rift within the SOC that came as a result of the recent governmental (presidential) interference in the ecclesiastical matters. At any rate, the future role of the head of the SOC will be related not only to alleviating the consequences of the current pandemic, but also to taking responsibility for upcoming church activities, including the fall 2021 session of the Holy Council of Bishops. Various challenges will emerge on an almost daily basis, as exemplified in 2020 by a great number of sick and deceased clergy, including the late patriarch Irinej himself. Already during his first liturgy as a patriarch, Porfirije invited the faithful to respect anti-epidemiological measures, take care of themselves and their neighbors and follow their church in these hard times.⁷ It is still uncertain how much such an appeal will reverberate in the practical, everyday behavior of Orthodox believers in the period before their patron saint celebrations and Christmas.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let us note that church leaders normally belong to the most trustworthy part of a society, especially during the times of social crises and historical challenges or tragedies. Therefore, they are important potential sources of reliable information during a pandemic. In turn, this kind of trust implies a greater responsibility and commitment for church representatives. Their messages could have very positive effects for the entire population if they are in harmony with the statements of the secular decision makers in the area of public policy and healthcare. Such an effect is amplified in the less accessible,

rural environments or among marginalized social groups. Their responsibility extends to refuting disinformation and rumors that can spread fast and have very serious consequences. That kind of individual as well as institutional credibility of clerics and religious organizations could save lives and mitigate afflictions during the pandemic period. Apart from healthcare and social institutions, the churches and other religious organizations are bearers of support and comfort for their communities. They are often more available than other institutions, especially in times of crisis. Their pastoral and social care is particularly important for the more vulnerable segments of population.

Unfortunately, the collective experience of life with Covid-19 in Serbia indicates that neither the state nor the church responded adequately in terms of the aforementioned concerns. State representatives, including the members of the Crisis Committee, gradually lost their initial credibility due to contradictory information and lack of transparency in their reports regarding the number of infected and deceased citizens in Serbia. The SOC high-ranking prelates, with few exceptions mainly from the diaspora eparchies, have left an impression of utter disorganization and arbitrariness under the new, dramatic circumstances. In fact, they even contributed to the severe negative effects of the pandemic, instead of participating in their elimination. This is probably best exemplified by a number of Covid-19 related deaths of the SOC highest clergy in late 2020, whereby a great number of other bishops and priests were infected or life-threatened by the disease. Therefore, both the church and state proved inadequate in their novel, rarely assumed role that demanded much higher level of dedicated leadership. The Serbian population, including the believing citizens, stayed extremely confused in terms of various pressing issues: whether they would physically participate in church rituals and ceremonies or not; whether they ought to be vaccinated or not, etc. The number of obtained dosages of vaccines in early 2021 has been very disproportionate to the number of immunized citizens of Serbia. If one adds the doctored numbers of infected and deceased inhabitants, the political misuse of the pandemic crisis, lack of self-criticism and accompanying manipulation of public opinion—the picture of religious, social and political implications of the pandemic obtains even dimmer tones. As a result of that, the political, spiritual and material recovery from the crisis, which has already acquired global historical proportions, will probably be as dramatic as its painstaking survival.

About the Author

Milan Vukomanović, born in Belgrade in 1960, is a full professor of sociology at the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade. He earned his doctorate in 1993 at the University of Pittsburgh, U.S.A, where he taught religious studies courses until 1995. He was also a visiting professor of this University (program Semester at Sea) and a guest lecturer at NTNU, Norway and University of Sarajevo. Vukomanović has received several academic fellowships and grants from the University of Pittsburgh, University of Oslo, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Catholic Relief Services and other international institutions. The area of Prof. Vukomanović's academic interest ranges from sociology of religion and history of religions to studies of Early Christianity and Islam. He has published and edited several books, including *Homo viator: Religion and New Age* (*Homo viator: religija i novo doba*, 2008), *Religious Dialogue in the Balkans: The Drama of Understanding* (2005), *The Sacred and the Multitude: Challenges of Religious Pluralism* (*Sveto i mnoštvo: izazovi religijskog pluralizma*, 2001). His bibliography includes about 300 journal articles, chapters in books and other works in Serbian and international publications.

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