

Believers and Priests during COVID-19: Serbian Orthodox Church Liturgical Practices

by Stefan Radojkovic

Serbian Orthodox Church clergy's reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic at the beginning of 2020 were, if anything, as complex and diverse as the thinking and actions of believers in Serbia (including Kosovo-Metohija). This was particularly visible regarding the need for liturgical practice adaptation and the way of administering communion. In order to untangle complex issue of contradictory and undefined statements, recommendations, and consequential actions taken by priests and believers, lived religion approach was applied to uncover whether liturgical practices were adapted and in what way. Also, we have outlined reasons that could explain the adaptations during a global crisis.

Keywords: Serbian Orthodox Church, COVID-19, priests, believers, liturgy, communion, lived religion.

Return of the Serbian Orthodox Church – Reactions

Just as the return of religion was noticed in societies across the globe during the 1980, the same could be said of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) in Communist Yugoslavia. Ensuing public and scientific debates about the SOC's comeback were rife with arguments from both proponents and opponents.¹ Accordingly, and this is especially true for the post-Yugoslav period, SOC documents and official announcements were closely analysed. Interviews were conducted with both prominent SOC representatives and their critics. The general Serbian public was surveyed about religion. Conclusions among sociologists ranged from Orthodox Christians' utter inability to accept and understand modern life, democracy and human rights in particular, to their ability to accept its economic and technological achievements only.² Although few and far between in term of sheer volume, responses from the Church followed along these lines:

These democratic processes are slowed down by 'masked' Communist nomenclatures and oligarchies, and by incorrect perceptions of democracy, human rights, and freedoms (democracy is seen by many as a source of unlimited wealth and hedonism, or as a source of unlimited and unrestricted rights and freedoms).³

Even after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is a kind of trigger for discussions among sociologists and for theological debates within the SOC,⁴ there is little evidence of fruitful exchange of opinions between these two, notwithstanding exceptions such as *Teologija.net*.⁵ Part of the explanation can be found both within

SOC history⁶ and history of sociology during Communist Yugoslavia and after it.⁷

On the other hand, one could find a plethora of divergent positions taken by both Bishops and their clergy alike. The main issue was the (in)acceptability of holding Sunday liturgies in the extraordinary conditions of the pandemic; at its core was the question of communion's hygienic adequacy. More specifically, was it necessary to adapt the established liturgical and communion practice of the believers to the situation; if so, in what way and to what extent?

Bishop Dimitrije (Rađenović) made 11 recommendations to clergy and believers of his diocese, some of which refer to the adjustment of previous liturgical practice, but not to the conduct of communion.⁸ In contrast, Bishop Grigorije (Durić) pointed out current non-existence of any official attitude of SOC regarding COVID-19 as well as the rather broad stance of the Synod which can be interpreted differently.

In fact, the Synod issued two announcements.⁹ In addition to the expected criticism from the civil society, there were voices from the SOC itself, which not only questioned some Synod's decisions, but also strengthened the impression of the lack of a coherent attitude within SOC towards COVID-19. Among those voices was appearance of Fr. Vukašin Milićević on a well-known TV show where, on the one hand, he emphasized the need to adjust communion to the current situation and, on the other, he expressed skepticism about the possibility of applying the Synod's recommendations.¹⁰ Namely, in the third letter from March 28, the Synod's office recommended that sick people and people over the age of 65 should not come to liturgies, but should receive communion at home.¹¹ Also, the Synod did not ban the holding of liturgies or the administration of communion to believers, although it did try to limit the number of people present at liturgies by calling for respect regarding official prevention measures.

As Easter approached (19 April 2020), the views of SOC dignitaries did not become any more harmonized than they were at the beginning of the pandemic and its outbreak that coincided with Easter Lent. Jorgačević not only confirms the diverse range of SOC Bishops' decisions, but also tries to point out their attainments.¹² Specifically, Jorgačević raises the issue of respect for the recommendations, both Synodal and episcopal, by believers on Easter day. If the insights presented in her text are to be believed, the reactions of believers were equally, if not more, complex.

Making Sense of the Complex Situations

First, global religions and local beliefs, i.e. the human need for spirituality and meaning, have not been overcome. Based on Casanova's findings religion in Europe has emerged from the private lives of individuals, especially since the 1980s, and now penetrates the sphere of public life.¹³ In fact, Casanova points out the border porosity between private and public life, affecting relations between church institutions and the state and between believers and parish priests.¹⁴ Being more

radical in her critique, Ammerman believes that theories of modernization fail to explain why societies, during the process of modernization and development, incorporate and promote religious sentiments and practices instead of pushing them into the domain of the private.¹⁵

On the other hand, Blagojević argues that return of religion in public sphere (*deseccularization* of Serbian society, in our case) could be explained by major socio-political turbulences and long-lasting social crisis (e.g. dissolution of socialist Yugoslavia) i.e. “revitalization of the religion and church was not a result of an eminently religious process in terms of sincere and deep change in the spiritual life of people, [...]”¹⁶ In his subsequent article, Blagojević has modified his previous statement to certain extent. Although primacy of socio-political factors is undisputed, individual spiritual transformation is not only possible but part of the equation as well; just not on a socially relevant, mass scale.¹⁷

If that is the case – individuals are able to act autonomously in a religious way, within the context of certain socio-political situation – I am more interested in exploring their contemporary religious practices and sentiments; but, how to do that? The *lived religion* approach – named after the 1994 joint collection of works by American sociologists and historians – represents one of the alternatives to the dominant ways in which we deal with religious issues. The emphasis is on researching the authentic religious experience and practice of both individuals and religious groups.¹⁸ A similar turn took place within history. According to Kjeldstadli, the new wave of historians is expanding the field of their interest (chronologically, geographically, and in terms of society), as well as their research methods.¹⁹ On the one hand, writing is more problem-oriented, with a synthetic approach prevailing according to which it is the whole that matters, rather than its parts;²⁰ on the other hand, instead of analysing SOC documents (classic historical approach) or public opinion polls (mainstream sociological approach), new research methods are more appropriate to anthropology (e.g., participatory observations of religious ceremonies and interviews with believers).

To put it more precisely, I have embarked on a sort of “walking the wire” venture between the exploration of authentic religious practices and experiences of believers and their priests while simultaneously trying to take the *lived religion* approach for a test drive. The goal is to see if we can bridge the gap not only between proponents and opponents for a SOC public life comeback, but also to update our understanding of religious people as persons not opposed to modernization but active participants in this process.

Researching the Complex Situations

It was a relatively simple challenge to operationalize and determine the research subject of SOC believers’ daily religious practices in Serbia (including Kosovo-Metohija) during COVID-19. The main question of aforementioned discussions was

the hygienic adequacy of communion, i.e. was it necessary to adapt established communion practice to the circumstances? If it was, in what way and to what extent were they adapted?

Starting on 21 March 2021 until the liturgy held on 13 June nine field trips to observe and participate in liturgical life of the believers were conducted at four locations.²¹ Of these four locations, two in Belgrade and one in Kosovo-Metohija proved to be of special importance, and therefore the subject of analysis. In particular, I participated three times each in the liturgical life of the parish Church of Transfiguration²² and the graveyard Church of St. Tryphon,²³ both located in Belgrade; on the other hand, I started my field work by going to Gračanica Monastery. Due to the unexpected finding, I repeated the participatory observation once more time before the end of the field work on 13 June 2021. It should be noted, the majority of field trips took place during Easter Lent.

In addition to notes and photographs, participation in the liturgical life of Belgrade church communities produced interviews with two focus groups,²⁴ during July and August 2021.²⁵ It was impossible to apply the same research method when it came to Kosovo-Metohija, because it would imply continuous presence in the field. Due to logistical restrictions, 2 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with SOC believers from Kosovo-Metohija were conducted (Tatjana Lazarević and Darko Dimitrijević, both prominent within their respective communities).

In addition, due to the intrinsic advantages and limitations of both research methods, I conducted two more 'control' interviews with experts from academia and media sector.²⁶ Interviews with Marko Veković,²⁷ professor of religion and politics, and Jelena Jorgačević,²⁸ journalist in charge of religious topics reporting, were necessary not only to analyze the behavior of SOC and its believers during COVID-19, but also for the critical rethinking of my initial premises alongside the preliminary findings.

Liturgical Practices in Serbia during COVID-19

I started our research work by visiting the Gračanica Monastery. Already during the first field trip on 21 March 2021, liturgical changes were visible. Although the liturgy officially begins at 8 am – as indicated at the entrance of the Monastery – on this occasion it started at around 7 am so as to end before 9 am. Due to this unexpected change, I had to repeat field-work (i.e., participatory observation) once more. Despite a second attempt to attend the liturgy, and this time from the beginning, I was unsuccessful. I received an explanation for this behavior from the local priest during an informal conversation with a parishioner at hand. It was an unwritten rule aimed at reducing the number of believers attending the liturgy, hence fewer opportunities for spreading the disease. Jelena Jorgačević, a journalist at *Vreme* news magazine and one of the interviewees, pointed out the fact that this liturgical change is not an isolated incident: "I know the priests who did that in

Belgrade. They say that there will be a liturgy at 8 or 9; they start an hour earlier so as not to make a crowd. When the communion starts, there are not too many of them indoors. And I heard that from several priests.”

Further research of liturgical practices revealed additional reasons behind the changes. The village of Goraždevac (Kosovo-Metohija) has developed its own liturgical practices. According to Darko Dimitrijević,²⁹ editor of the local radio station, in order to avoid confrontation with the local administration

We organized ourselves so that we had a priest in the church with five other people; also, we had five more people at the gate, next to the door on the right; on the left side of the church, five more people so we didn't gather and concentrate in one place. [...] So, the goal is not to create a problem for the priest or for ourselves, after all.

Similarly, churches in Belgrade, which were visited during our field trips, undertook liturgical changes. The front doors of one parish church were left wide open during our first visit and in front of them an average of five to ten people carefully followed the liturgy. Most of the believers stood quietly inside the parish church, some with protective masks over their faces. In contrast, a cemetery church did not keep the door open. Instead, speakers were placed on the wall near the entrance, i.e., the altar was equipped with a sound system. Although significantly smaller than the above-mentioned parish church, the cemetery church was completely occupied (approximately fifty people, some with masks). Additionally, a dozen believers stood in front of the shut door while closely following the liturgy over the speakers. The liturgical practice had undergone certain changes, obviously. The open door of the parish church suggested the use of the churchyard as an alternative space for the liturgy. Nada, one of the interlocutors from the parish church congregation, confirmed it: “Our church worked normally, except during one period when the liturgy was held outside.”³⁰ In the case of the cemetery church, the yard around the church was used as additional space, thanks to the audio equipment.

However, the Gračanica Monastery/Goraždevac church and the churches in Belgrade carried out different measures. While liturgical changes were adopted by all, churches in Belgrade changed the practices of communion as well. For example, Petar did receive communion but took the advice of cemetery church priest: “Our priest advised us not to take full spoon with our mouths, in the way we usually do.”³¹ Goran, one of the regular attendees at the cemetery church liturgies, pointed out during our conversation there was no uniform answer by the priests to the question of an acceptable way for administering communion: “We hear that it was different in other churches. There was not one particular position on the matter, also. Maybe there should have been one.” Ljuba, an interviewee from the parish church, indirectly confirmed Goran’s thoughts by providing information about

the awkward situation in the church located just outside Belgrade: “I heard from my own sister, when some people came to receive communion, there was a bit of frowning. They wanted to take communion, but they would not open their mouths. Over time, they gradually freed themselves from it.”

These differences have not gone unnoticed by our interlocutors. Tatjana Lazarević, *KoSSev*'s editor-in-chief and a well-informed person with a critical mind, is familiar with the adapted liturgical practices by the SOC churches.³² She considers the need for communion self-evident: “For example, I fully understand people who treat communion the same way nowadays as they did before. The very act of communion, I completely understand that. I also think that is completely right for the Church authorities to look for a way to protect the believers. I think that is not unfamiliar to Christianity.” Jorgačević believes that parishes outside of Belgrade are “livelier,” and that this has a special credence in Kosovo-Metohija province where Gračanica and Goraždevac are situated: “The only institution that, in my opinion, maintains ties with the people there helps those people, especially in the enclaves [Serbian rural areas in Kosovo and Metohija], is the SOC. The same goes for those Serbs who are not believers.” In other words, the relationship between priests and believers is extremely important according to the *Vreme* journalist – the metaphor *living Church* is frequently used in the interview when describing their interaction – which partly explains why communion practices in Kosovo-Metohija differ from those in Belgrade.

The second part of the explanation, of course, lies in the fact that belonging to the SOC is part of the Serbian community identity. We cannot ignore the fact that in conditions of *double isolation* – Živojin Rakočević's description of Kosovo Serbs life during the pandemic³³ – SOC churches and monasteries become areas of even more pronounced identity significance. Therefore, it is not surprising that for the inhabitants of Goraždevac, the modest celebration of the village's patron saint (14 May, St. Jeremiah), in accordance with the epidemiological regulations, is of great importance.³⁴

Clergy adaptations to COVID-19

The key word is *adaptation* to the emergency situation during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic in Serbia, including Kosovo-Metohija province (March 2020–May 2021). The primary challenge for faithful ones was how to follow, to the greatest extent possible, medical recommendations and administrative regulations; at the same time, how to practice one's faith in accordance with these recommendations and regulations, and sometimes despite the imposed restrictions. Priests and their parishioners found themselves between a hammer, i.e., responsibility towards society in a time of crisis and an anvil – the need to practice their faith. There were various creative solutions applied, both in the way the liturgy itself was performed, and in the ways communion was administered.

The only predictable thing about it was the striking absence of a uniform response from parish priests to the controversy over the hygienic concerns. To quote Jorgačević, if someone is looking for a homogeneous SOC position on any issue, “it does not exist. The Serbian Orthodox Church is a heterogeneous multitude, and we see it in dozens of examples, on most important social issues. As a final point, that is the case with the pandemic.”³⁵

From the interviews with various interlocutors, as well as from our visits, it can be concluded that parish priests, at times with an agreement amongst the parishioners as in Goraždevac, applied certain tactics aimed at reducing the number of believers present at liturgies; consequently, a reduction in the number of those who wished to receive communion was achieved. At other places, all did not welcome the priests’ adaptations. Dragan, an interviewee from a Belgrade parish church, witnessed a unique way in which the priest there administered communion to believers – pouring communion from a certain height into wide open mouths; in his estimation, the priest was young and therefore probably inexperienced or inconsiderate.³⁶

Regardless of whether they agreed or disagreed, approved, or condemned, showed understanding for the priests and their adapted liturgical and/or communion practices, interviewed believers agreed on one thing without exception. According to Tomislav, who was one of the most eloquent and unrestrained interlocutors from the Belgrade parish church congregation, when everything is taken into account adaptation is not important because: “I need Christ. If you are going to give me [communion] with a metal, wooden or plastic spoon, give it to me. If you’re going to pour it to me from a meter or ten-centimeter distance, give it to me. I take communion with Christ in order to live. I don’t live to receive communion; I receive communion to keep on living until the next communion.”³⁷ In other words, despite the lack of uniform liturgical practices in churches, the need for communion among believers is unquestionable. The only thing that was unknown was the way the local clergy responded to their needs.

About the author

Stefan Radojković, PhD (1984), graduated from the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade, Department of History (2009). He continued his post-graduate studies at the Faculty of Political Sciences (FPN) of the University of Belgrade, where he obtained a master’s degree in political science for international affairs in 2014. The same year in November, he enrolled in doctoral academic studies (International and European Studies) at FPN. In September 2024, he defended his doctoral dissertation on the survival practices of the Serbs in Kosovo-Metohija. As an expert associate at the Genocide Victims’ Museum (MŽG) in Belgrade, from July 2018 until June 2022 he participated in the projects ‘Crimes on the Territory of the

Former Yugoslavia in the 20th and 21st Century' and 'Encyclopedia of Genocide in the Independent State of Croatia'. He has been employed at the Institute for Political Studies since February 2023, currently as a research associate.

Endnotes

- 1 Compare: Radovan Bigović, *The Orthodox Church in the 21st Century* (Belgrade: Foundation Konrad Adenauer – Christian Cultural Center, 2013); to: Milan Vukomanović, “Ecclesiastical Involvement in Serbian Politics: Post-2000 Period”, in *Politicization of Religion, the Power of State, Nation and Fate. The Case of Former Yugoslavia and its Successor States*, eds. Gorana Ognjenović and Jasna Jozelić (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 115–149.
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- 7 See also: Dragoljub B. Đorđević, “Religijsko-crkveni kompleks, raspad druge i budućnost treće Jugoslavije (fragmenti)“, *Filozofija i društvo* 6, no. 1 (1994): 330.
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- 20 Ibid.
- 21 The researcher was guided by the instructions set out in: Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 431–452.
- 22 Dates are as follows: April 11, April 18 and May 23.
- 23 Dates are as follows: April 4, May 2 and May 16.
- 24 Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 501–513.
- 25 Although I am part of the religious community generally speaking, parishioners needed time to get used to me in order to do interviews. Dates for focus group interviews are as follows: July 28 (parish church) and August 8 (graveyard church).
- 26 Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 469–491.
- 27 Marko Veković, “COVID-19 and Orthodox Christianity,” interview by Stefan Radojković, Belgrade, September 2, 2021.
- 28 Jelena Jorgačević, “COVID-19 and Orthodox Christianity,” interview by Stefan Radojković, Belgrade, August 1, 2021.
- 29 Darko Dimitrijević, “COVID-19 and Orthodox Christianity,” interview by Stefan Radojković, Goraždevac, August 28, 2021.
- 30 Parish Church, “COVID-19 and Orthodox Christianity,” interview by Stefan Radojković, Belgrade, July 28, 2021.
- 31 Graveyard Church, “COVID-19 and Orthodox Christianity,” interview by Stefan Radojković, Belgrade, August 8, 2021.
- 32 Tatjana Lazarević, “COVID-19 and Orthodox Christianity,” interview by Stefan Radojković, Kosovska Mitrovica, August 9, 2021.
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