

## CHARITY OR TOLERANCE? DEBATING MORALITIES IN THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM OF CONTEMPORARY SERBIA

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### **Abstract:**

After regime change in 2000, the Serbian Ministry of Education introduced two new subjects in the schools: civic education and religious education. Representatives of local civil society associated the establishment of religious education in schools with a rise in nationalism and a split of the society into “believers” and “citizens”. Representatives of the church, on the other hand, criticised the concept of civic education as redundant, and its establishment as merely the minister’s “plot” to weaken the reintroduction of religious education. The paper discusses the debate on the new school subjects against the background of Serbia’s socialist past, the rise of militant nationalism in the 1990s (respectively its recent ascension), and the democratisation and human rights discourse.

**Key words:** socialism, human rights, civil society, education

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## Introduction

This paper addresses an important development in the post-socialist and post-authoritarian transformation of Serbia, namely, the reform of the school system following regime change in 2000<sup>1</sup> through the introduction of two alternative school subjects: religious education (*veronauka*) and civic education (*gradjansko vaspitanje*). Before, and especially after, these subjects were introduced in 2001, a heated debate evolved between representatives of the church, and among others, local NGOs. This debate can be understood as paradigmatic for the contemporary moment of social transformation, as it shows the fundamental contentions and similarities between civil-liberal and nationalist positions concerning an important aspect of the potential direction of social change: the education of young generations. The debate regarding the two school subjects can be seen as an expression of the contemporary discourse on morality, and the promotion of an “adequate” value system legitimized through constructing images of the past.

While advocating for religious tolerance and freedom within a secular state, NGO-representatives opposed both school subjects, arguing that they implied a break-up of society into “believers/Serbs” and “democrats/citizens”. Advocates of religious education, on the other hand, rejected the subject of civic education as artificial and redundant, and claimed it was merely a politically imposed “counter strike” against religious education. In the course of this paper I will argue that teachers of religious education avoid discussing concepts of tolerance and human rights by means of an “argument of inclusion”. This line of argument postulates the superiority of the traditional Christian values of love and charity over the allegedly redundant, artificial, and political nature of the “vocabulary of democratization”. I will conclude by indicating a crucial commonality of the two positions--the neglect of the burning issue of the current decline in socio-economic rights and security, which were core values addressed in the socialist period--by reference to the “hypocrisy” or “godlessness” of Yugoslav real-socialism. In order to contextualize my analysis, I will start with a few remarks on religion in socialist Yugoslavia, and Serbia in particular. In this context, I will also briefly discuss the extent to which socialism under Tito had some features of faith, and afterwards will turn to the debate at hand and outline the main opposing arguments, and how their constructions of the past imply visions of a proper morality and a “healthy” future society.

<sup>1</sup> The 5th October 2000 marked the downfall of the rule of Slobodan Milosevic and the victory of the Democratic Opposition (DOS), a coalition of 18 political parties and one labor union, at the federal elections.

## **The historical background: Titoism and Orthodoxy**

Although Yugoslavia under Tito was considered to be less repressive of religious freedoms than most of the countries of the Soviet Block, there was a significant amount of control and repression of the church by the communist party. As specified in the 1946 constitution of the Federative Peoples Republic of Yugoslavia, there was a clear division between the state and the church whereby the state was defined as secular. Religious education was banned from schools and even within the church was overseen by the state. Although the citizens were granted freedom of religion, which was considered to be a private matter, the state explicitly forbade “the misuse of the church and faith for political purposes and the existence of political organisations grounded on faith” (FNRJ constitution 1946, article 25; author’s translation).

The ideology and institutions that existed at that time had a considerable impact on the everyday religious practices of Serbians. Many authors identify a significant decline in church attendance and religiousness in Serbia (unlike in Croatia), and often assume that Titoism served as a substitute for religion (Buchenau 2003, Mylonas 2003). The narration that underpinned the communist ideology in Yugoslavia was the “cult” of the liberating Partisan-battle against Hitler’s Germany under Tito. The mythologized narration, based on the Second World War, focused on the heroism of the Yugoslav nation under the guidance of the unique, charismatic, and almost “messianic” figure of Tito, who not only liberated the country from Fascism, but managed to unite different nationalities through common struggle.

In the post-war period this narration invaded every aspect of the everyday life. It was constantly reproduced and enforced in students’ homework, literature, official political speeches, history books, architecture, art, commemoration celebrations, the bestowal of decorations, the famous annual torch relay in Tito’s honour, etc. The grand narration of “Yugoslavism” based on the dictum of “brotherhood and unity,” with all its multifaceted aspects contained with it a “holy” and dogmatic aura, and as such, represented a rival to Serbian Orthodoxy. Although both narrations in some way implied the same “enemies”--the Third Reich, Ottomans, Habsburg monarchy, or Italy--one aspect made them diametrically opposed: the issue of nationalism. Specifically, while the Second World War narration constructed the authenticity of a new nation as a means for supra-ethnic cohesion and a suppression of ethnic differences and the potential for conflict, the grand narration of the Serbian Orthodox Church was, and is, intrinsically Serbian-nationalistic.

The autocephalous Serbian-orthodox church builds its legitimising narration on the grounds of the canonization of political rulers. The result of this process was the establishment and worship of the sanctified lineage of the Nemanjic-dynasty<sup>2</sup>, done simultaneously as saints and as protectors of Serbian national identity and territory. Present in the frescos, the liturgy, and religious rituals on the family-level, as Mylonas notes:

*“the Serbian congregation was formed both in heaven and on earth, reiterated by the liturgical commemoration of sanctified patriots that eventually evolved into a precious spiritual and exegetic referent (...)”* (Mylonas 2003: 52).

In that sense, according to Mylonas, (2003) Serbian orthodoxy can be considered to be the *“sacralisation of Serbian national identity”*. One crucial aspect of the church’s narrative is the Kosovo<sup>3</sup>-myth. This oral history tradition became incorporated into the church’s nationalist narrative, and aides the cosmogonic reinterpretation of the defeat of the Serbs in a battle against the Ottomans into a moral victory. It postulates the territory of Kosovo as the Serbian holy land, and avers its crucial importance for the aspired unity of the nation.

Finally, it should be pointed out that the religious and historical values and images constructed by the Serbian Orthodox Church imply a nationalist anti-modernism, whereby the nation is considered to owe its existence primarily to the church, which guided and preserved the Serbian nation during difficult historical conditions. In this sense, an opinion one often hears in contemporary statements by church representatives is that modernism and secularization would not only pose a threat to Serbian Orthodoxy, but to the nation itself. Serbian Orthodox religion and the nation, the argument goes, are intrinsically linked to one another, and belonging to the nation is equated with being a Serb Orthodox Christian (Ilic 2005: 285; for the case of Romanian Orthodoxy see Rogobete 2004).

Beginning in the late 1980s and continuing throughout the 1990s, the Serbian-Orthodox church entered into a strange coalition with the victorious nationalist fragment of the Serbian communist party, which

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2 The Nemanjic-dynasty ruled Serbia between 1166 and 1371. The brother of the first crowned king (Stefan Prvovencani of Serbia) Rastko Nemanjic (known as Saint Sava) was the founder and first archbishop of the independent Serbian Orthodox Church (1219).

3 On 28th June 1389 the Serbian army (led by Lazar Hrebeljanovic) was defeated by the Ottomans (led by Murat I). In the local Serbian oral epic tradition the decision of Lazar to go into the battle regardless of the most certain defeat of his troops turns into the metaphor for protecting Christianity by choosing the “heavenly kingdom”.

was later to become the authoritarian rule of Slobodan Milosevic. The rise of Milosevic took place due to the exact issue that serves as the cradle of the Serbian orthodox mythical source of legitimisation: the Kosovo. Specifically, Milosevic not only pronounced himself the protector of the oppressed Kosovo-Serbs in the late 1980s, but also used one of the strongest symbols of Serbian Orthodoxy, the Kosovo myth, in his speeches in order to achieve his political goals.

The coalition of the church and this nationalist chronological successor to Yugoslav socialism was an ambivalent one until its end. The fact that Milosevic picked up crucial nationalist symbols enforced the popularity and role of the church. At the same time, through this tenuous coalition the church elicited considerable nationalist and anti-western potential among the citizens, and legitimized the Milosevic regime and the wars of the 1990s. Yet the Milosevic-regime never acknowledged the church's role in society and politics, and did nothing to re-established religious education in schools.

After regime change in 2000, the ideological obstacle for the church's possibility to serve as one of the major actors in society and politics vanished. Specifically, the new political elite, in spite of internal ideological conflicts between nationalist and liberal "players," had a common similarity: anticommunism/antisocialism. Because of this, an important aspect of the church's return to the public sphere has been the reestablishment of religious education in public schools starting with the school year 2001/2002.

At this point it is important to stress that the introduction of both school subjects was a political issue, and as such, was poorly planned and happened quite abruptly. Following meetings between seven religious communities<sup>4</sup> and Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic, the government issued a decree on the 5<sup>th</sup> of July 2001, which stated it was the right of those seven religious communities, labelled "traditional religious communities," to have state-sponsored religious education in public schools. This same decree introduced civic education as an alternative subject. At that moment, neither the teaching staff, nor the teaching materials, was clearly defined and ready. In the case of civic education, it was soon clear that the teaching materials would consist of handbooks on non-violent/conflict and communication, as well as human rights and tolerance, which were developed by several local NGOs in the 1990s, and that teachers would use the interactive workshop model in its teaching. However, school psychologists and teachers of other school subjects

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<sup>4</sup> The Serbian Orthodox Church, the Islamic Community, the Catholic Church, the Slovak Evangelical Church of Augsburg Confession, the Jewish Community, the Reformed Christian Church, and the Evangelical Christian Church of Augsburg Confession.

needed to be trained in this method before using it in the classrooms a mere several weeks later. In the case of religious education, the situation was similarly precarious. There were no teaching materials for the subject, and the church was to select teaches from senior students of theology only a few weeks before the beginning of the school year. As I could conclude on the basis of my interviews, most of the teachers did not adhere to the sketchy teaching plan provided by the church, but instead improvised their own curricula.

### **Either “little Serbs”, or “little democrats”? Individual freedom and the rejection of imposed alternatives**

While representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church demanded the introduction of religious education (with reference to international human rights documents<sup>5</sup>), and as a rule refused the introduction of civic education (one of this subject’s pillars being precisely the knowledge transfer of human rights principles, discussed in the next chapter), local human rights NGOs refused both new school subjects. Human rights NGOs who had joined the Board for the Right to Education Free of Religious and Political Indoctrination, a civic initiative of private persons and non-governmental organizations, rejected the introduction of the new school subjects, and called on parents to boycott both religious and civic education. In a public proclamation ([www.geocities.com/veronavika/proglas.htm](http://www.geocities.com/veronavika/proglas.htm)) the Board stated that the introduction of religious education and an alternative school subject does all of the following: breaks the principles of the secular state and the freedom of conscience and belief; creates an new source for discrimination and conflict; enhances gender inequalities; threatens children’s rights through a political instrumentalization of the school system; threatens the civil educational system; ignores the existing procedures and standards for introducing new school subjects; neglects pedagogical and psychological consequences of such an act; causes suspicion regarding the political motives of such an act; threatens the multi-confessional and multicultural coexistence of the state (especially in the autonomous province of Vojvodina); and manipulates the religious feelings of citizens [author’s translation].

Although the proposed school subject would promote values of democracy, human rights and tolerance, opponents of the government’s decree refused the introduction of the “alternative subject”:

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<sup>5</sup> The right to education, the right to choose one’s own world view, the right to practice a religion, the parent’s right to bring up their children in accordance with their religious beliefs (Aleksov 2005: 342)

*“Primarily because the new subject, which was later named ‘civic education’, was being introduced hastily and with no previous public debate. The Belgrade Centre for Human Rights declared that an option couched in these terms implied that religious education did not promote democracy, human rights and tolerance. (Aleksov 2005: 344)*

According to human rights activists, the reintroduction of religious education in schools would be a “step back” for the establishment of a “healthy” democratic society, which is defined by breaking with the value systems of both the nationalist and socialist past. The trend of power sharing between nationalist political parties<sup>6</sup> and the church is perceived as a threat to the secular state, whereby religion should be clearly demarcated from politics and religiousness should be a strictly private affair. For most NGO-representatives, religious education is a means to equate Serbian Orthodoxy with the nation. According to them, religious education would enforce the pattern of thought and agency that proved to be fatal in the 1990s, namely, nationalism and intolerance<sup>7</sup>.

One common argument against religious education is it enforces a hierarchization of religious communities (Ilic 2005), and thereby creates the potential for discrimination and conflict. Specifically, religious education promotes intolerance towards atheists and members of smaller religious communities, which have not been recognized as “traditional religious communities,” and hence are not entitled to state-sponsored religious education in public schools<sup>8</sup> (and also are sometimes even labelled as sects by representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church; see quote on page 10). Apart from the hierarchization of faith, according to human rights activists, the reform of the educational system unfairly imposes on parents and pupils the choice between perceived opposing moralities and world views. This places parents and teachers in an unfruitful and precarious dilemma: are they to educate children as little democrats/citizens or little believers/Serbs? One NGO-activist from Belgrade aptly captures this dilemma as follows:

6 Political parties attending good and brisk relations with the Serbian Orthodox Church include both the national-democratic parties (such as the Democratic Party of Serbia, DSS) and the radical nationalist political parties (such as the Serbian Radical Party, SRS).

7 NGOs not only hold the church responsible for the nationalist ideology and war crimes committed under its patronage in the 1990s, but often stress its unreadiness to confront and condemn those. The confrontation with war crimes committed in the name of nationalism would however – according to human rights activists – represent the ultimate precondition for democratic consolidation.

8 Two extreme examples of the exclusion of religious communities from the sphere of “traditional” religions are The Romanian Orthodox Church (one of the officially recognized churches in Banat, Vojvodina) and the Christian Adventist Church (which is entitled to religious education in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Austria) (Aleksov 2005: 344)

*“The establishment of those two subjects as alternatives is highly hypocritical. Does that mean, that we can have either little future Christians or little future democrats? Does that mean that we are creating a xenophobic society where one can chose to be either a proper orthodox-Serb or a cosmopolitan? This approach is terribly wrong.”* (Personal interview)

The potential split is also noticeable in the schools. One teacher of civic education I spoke with lamented over the upcoming division she has been witnessing among her pupils. Children would not just perceive, but also reproduce, the divide triggered by the two alternative subjects in their daily lives outside the classroom. In this way, dichotomizing stereotypes became enforced, and an intolerant atmosphere characterised by a pejorative labelling of the “others” emerged :

*“There is a huge problem I can witness in my school. The kids are splitting in two factions, those who attend religious education and those who chose civic education. I became aware of that when I heard a few children shouting to their schoolmates: ‘Hey, you sect members!’. The other group promptly shouted back: ‘What do you want, you priests?’ I felt dreadful and I went to the teacher of religious education and told him that we must do something, because Serbia is splitting in two.”* (Personal interview)

During my fieldwork I also witnessed splits and conflicts evolving in what were previously deep and long-lasting friendships because of the choice between the two alternative school subjects. In a close circle of friends who used to spend many months of their student times on the street protesting against the Milosevic-regime, the decision of some to enroll their children in religious education encountered a considerable lack of resentment from other members of the circle. While explicitly denying that her daughter would be exposed to nationalist ideology during the lessons in religious education, a usually tempered young mother claimed that one should not take this issue too seriously, and that her daughter and her classmates simply enjoyed listening to “ancient stories” and learned “a lot about history”. Although not discounting the possibility of enrolling her daughter in civic education at a later date, she simultaneously claimed that it would still be too early for her seven year old daughter to be exposed to “complex issues such as human rights or discrimination”. In this case, religious education seems to stand for “easy to digest” knowledge, which is seen as more appropriate for early childhood.

Apart from refusing the “dichotomization” caused by the government’s decree, the public proclamation of the Board for the



Right to Education Free of Religious and Political Indoctrination stated that, under other circumstances, the introduction of a school subject would be of immense importance, because it promotes the values of civil society (<http://www.geocities.com/veronavika/proglas.htm>). For representatives of human rights NGOs and teachers of civic education, the new school subject, when properly planned and discussed, would have the critical function of establishing a new society of citizens, namely, a democratic “Bürgergesellschaft”. Since the past decade has been marked by strong national prejudices, intolerance and violence, the new school subject of civic education would serve as a collective “recovery” process conducted through educating young generations to respect others regardless of national, religious and private differences. The proposed workshop method would require interaction and active participation in a group process, and would trigger civic awareness, and the desire to participate in shaping one’s own society and respectfully communicate with others. Finally, the youth would be provided with the knowledge on human rights and the ways of achieving those.

One teacher of civic education summarized the aim of the new school subject as follows:

*“A citizen is an individual who is familiar with his and her freedoms and rights and actively participates in social life. It would be great if that person would first see the individual human being and not the nationality, that is, a person who would not have prejudices towards specific groups. A person, who is able to solve a conflict and not hurt the other side, is a person, who is open for compromises.”*(Personal interview)

Such an image of a citizen implies both a break with the image of the “receptive and inactive citizen” under socialism (see Rogobete 2004), which relied on the state for the guarantee of primary collective rights on the one hand, and the type of national intolerance and violence marked by Milosevic’s authoritarian rule up to 2000 on the other. The individualistic design of morality further implies the necessary causal continuity and transition from socialism into an authoritarian nationalism through the link of collectivism. A young NGO-activist, who strongly refused the introduction of religious education in schools, explained to me her vision of the entanglement of the two systems and ideologies, which in spite of their often postulated incompatibility, were grounded on the absence of an individualistic consciousness in Serbia in the following way:

*"I think that the last 10 years are simply the climax of the preceding fifty years, where there was only this collectivism which destroyed any kind of individualism. One was no individual but merely a part of something, which was bigger and smarter than oneself. Under such circumstances one could not develop a civil awareness."* (Personal interview)

The critique of socialism primarily focuses on deconstructing real-socialism under Tito by pointing to the lack of individual consciousness and responsibility. The socialist system is portrayed as a system of false values characterized by moral hypocrisy. The collapse of morality is explained through the lack of individual responsibility caused by the system in which "everything belonged to everyone" (the "working people"), meaning that in the end, no-one had to feel responsible for anything. The system that legitimated itself by unconditionally promising (yet only partly providing<sup>9</sup>) social security--the right to work and income regardless of actual engagement--ultimately eroded the official ideology. The crucial actor of the system, the worker, either turned into a passive individual with a receiving habitus towards the state, or into a member of the socialist-manager-oligarchies that used "everyone's" property and the informal exchange networks for gaining personal profit. Thus, as one NGO-activist from Nis concludes, "Yugoslav socialism produced hypocrites," while at the same time produced people "who believe that the state is somehow magically connected to a source of energy and that it has constantly to provide them with everything they need".

At the end of the 1990s, the hypocritical morality of real-socialism encountered a highly criminalized regime based on the rhetoric of nationalism (national uniqueness), conspiracy-theories and xenophobia, constant military recruitment, and a severe setback in socio-economic standards. According to local NGOs, the church helped this transformation of socialist collectivism into a nationalist one, and welcomed the "spin-off" of the Milosevic-rule, namely, the return to faith. According to the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, the collapse of socialism and its values created a "vacuum" and an "identity crisis" that gave the church a chance to influence the construction of a "new cultural model" of "certain values, which were marginalized under communist rule" (Helsinki Committee for Human Rights 2005: 72). Apart from aiming to become a "state church," the Orthodoxy at the time was:

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9 See Woodward 1995.

*“feeding the fiction of the Serbian nationalists that the unification of “all Serbian lands” is possible (...) especially after October 5, 2000 the Serbian Orthodox Church is promoting, with great success especially among the young population, the cultural and political values that are not only conservative and retrograde, but directly opposite to the postulates of modern civilization” (ibid).*

### **Rising from “the bottom”: Revealing “empty” values of democracy through faith**

For representatives of both local NGOs and the Serbian Orthodox Church, the reform of the educational system is a medium for disbanding the “past”, and is a (re)creation and sustainment a desired moral code. The church’s image of socialism is less elaborate, and as a rule, restricts its delegitimizing critique of the system to “godlessness,” thus believing an anti-Serbian stance to be the prime negative characteristic and source of moral decay. In this way, the re-establishment of religious education in schools is seen as a way to recover the authentic value system based on Orthodox Christianity and national identity, which almost perished under socialism. The following statement by a religious education teacher in the course of his interpretative recapitulation of the period after the Second World War clearly expresses this line of argument: “We hit rock bottom and it is our fault. We have to conceive god and in that way conceive ourselves. We have to understand the importance of being Serbian, of being Christian, of being orthodox-Christian”.

Religious education, as this teacher views it, is a tool for the rehabilitation and the recovery of the nation by re-establishing its suppressed faith. Specifically, the result of religious education would be young believers who are resistant to sin and temptation. As I could conclude from my interviews, sin and temptation are primarily equated with religious sects, drugs, and homosexuality. In an anti-Western manner, these sources of “spiritual pollution”, as they are labelled by church representatives, are seen as the effects of globalisation, which is understood exclusively in terms of cultural imperialism and cultural homogenization through “Westernization” (Tomlinson 1999: 89). The negative and homogenizing influences of this are considered to be destructive for faith, and as such, for the nation, which is often described with a metaphor of a delicate organism. One teacher of religious education “pictured” these threats as follows:

*“This unfortunate process of globalisation is going to destroy this nation. The reason is that we are supposed to consider the Serbian-orthodox church and the Adventist sect as being equal. And because we are supposed to be happy that gays*

*and lesbians walk our streets. It simply must not be that an orthodox Christian, a Serb allows such a thing. This will destroy us. It will destroy the skeleton of Serbianhood.”(Personal interview)*

The values of human rights and tolerance, being a part of the “globalization-package,” are considered to be equally external and forced upon the nation. However, there are two core varieties of their discursive discrediting from the religious-nationalist angle.

The first, an “aggressive” and “offensive” rejection of the value of human rights from a nationalist-clerical standpoint, often takes the shape of explicitly discrediting local human rights organizations and their representatives through ad personam arguments. Some of the favorite targets of these verbal attacks are female activists of local human rights NGOs, who are attacked in reference to their alleged national or ideological background (labelling them for example as “Croats”, “communists” or “sectarians”<sup>10</sup>). An extreme example of this verbal praxis of misogyny (Blagojevi\_2002), voiced in the course of advocating religious education and discrediting human rights (that is, civic education), is the following argument advanced by a member of the local extreme-right clerical movement “Obraz”. According to his view, the fact that human rights activists are opposing the introduction of religious education in schools is merely another expression of their “dispraise” for the Serbs.

*“These self-proclaimed guardians of the Serbian nation – for example Mrs. K.B. – claim that the instance that teachers of religious education teach our children that the Serbs must finally unite is something bad, backward and conservative. One of their motives is their hatred towards the Serbs and the other one is the fact that they get well paid for their job. What gives K.B.- who is not even Serbian – the right to speak about our shortcomings? (Personal interview)*

In addition to the explicit ad personam argument against human rights as a western-hegemonic concept and its advocates as “foreigners, spies, and collaborators,” the second, and much more sophisticated mode of argument against human rights that I encountered in interviews with religious education teachers is what I would call the “inclusive” argument. This form of argument constitutes a “milder” and “non-offensive” critique of the introduction of civil education in schools, which is

<sup>10</sup> In 2002 the following graffiti appeared on the door of the Helsinki Committee in Belgrade: „Sectarians, get out of Serbia“ (Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia 2005: 66)

considered to be merely an imposed political manoeuvre to counter religious education. In this sense, religious education is viewed as a superior form of knowledge that contains eternal, all-encompassing truths. Thus, civic education, which is supposed to give children an understanding of human rights and the notion of tolerance, would be redundant according to the “argument of inclusion”, for these values would already be included as the prime goal of religious education. As one religious education teacher put it:

*“The professed goal of civic education is already inherent and thus imparted to the children by religious education. Because when you learn to love your neighbour as yourself, then you will of course not go out to the street and beat him. That is, only when you have realised this and not only learned it by heart, you will act accordingly. When you live in charity, it is redundant that someone explains to you what it means to be tolerant. Tolerance is an invented, artificial notion, which permeates the local media. What I am trying to say is, when you love human beings, why do you have to tolerate them? What does it mean at all to tolerate someone? It means that I hate you, but the law forces me not to cause you any harm and to tolerate you, because if I don't, I am breaking the law. The concept of religious education has a reverse perspective: I love every human being and this love makes any tattle about tolerance and human rights simply redundant.”* (Personal interview)

From this religious perspective, legally-anchored human rights are merely an empty legal form without an authentic value-content. Understood as such, human rights and tolerance are nothing more than an artificial occlusion of intolerance, which is considered to be the inevitable result of atheism and the lack of love and charity. The postulated primordial equality of all human beings before God makes the notions of human rights and tolerance superficial and alien political categories. The conception of equality and naturally-given rights, which are considered to be given a priori, unalterable, and eternal, thus exclude the need for any kind of human rights activism. The same teacher concludes his argumentation as follows: “We are all equal before the lord and there simply are no rights that have to be proven and fought for. What do human rights mean at all when we are all equal before god?”

This line of argument can also be viewed as an expression of trends in contemporary Orthodox anthropology, which raise the spiritual over the material realm of existence (Rogobete 2004). In that sense, the realms of the social, economic, and political radically lose significance (Rogobete 2004: 284), and the socio-political order becomes irrelevant and replaceable, as it represents neither the source nor the site of morality. Instead, the authentic source of morality lies in the reality-transcending, mystical relation of the

individual with God--the quest for approaching God's image (deification, or "obozenje" in Serbian) by being a part of the supra-individual entities of the church, the community of believers, and one's own family. The space of "authentic morality" is not society in the sense of the social, political, and legal order, all of which are "external" pressure structures, but the "inner need for doing well and becoming a better person". One of the teachers of religious education I interviewed recalled the "series" of political formations and "countries" he had lived in over the course of (only) three decades of his lifetime without "moving from the spot," and concludes:

*"I would like to live in a society which holds on to moral principles, where you love the other not because you have to, but because you have an inner need for love. Such a society is not a result of political, but personal developments – of trying to become a better person. I don't associate the image of an ideal society with a specific socio-political order. I don't believe that a system can make people happier."* (Personal interview)

The over-politization of everyday life in Serbia, combined with the continual corruption, espionage scandals, murders, lagging socio-economic progress after the enthusiastic promise of the reforms, frequent elections with low turnouts, certainly represent a evidence of citizens' "retreat" from the political space, particularly the decrease in the belief that one can actually influence the direction of socio-political and economic change. In that sense, Rogobete's concern over the potential consequences of a one-sided interpretation of Orthodox Christianity in establishing a democratic society is legitimate. The reductive approach to anthropology, which raises the religious life above the every-day life, the spiritual over the material, and the eschaton over history "is a dangerous perspective in relation to building a democratic society that requires active ethical involvement. There is an inherent risk in thinking that politics, social issues, ethics and economics have no ultimate value and that therefore it does not matter how one approaches them"(Rogobete 2004: 284)

### **Conclusion: The silent consensus of contesting moralities**

I would like to conclude by pointing out the prime commonality of the two positions, namely, the neglect of socio-economic security and equality. This socio-economic inequality is particularly endangered by contemporary transitional reforms, and moreover, represents a crucial value within socialist thought. Through the exclusive equation of socialism with the repressive regime of the Tito-real-socialism, any

contemporary demand for, or reference to, the values of socio-economic equality is primarily labelled as “socialist” in terms of passivity, lack of responsibility, hypocrisy and collective illusion. Thus, equality in Serbia today seems to mean either equality before the law, before the global human rights regime, or before God, all of which leave aside a vision of a substantial socio-economic equality addressed by socialist thought. Although the socialist vision has proved unsustainable, and Yugoslav socialism produced ideologically averse practices of clientelism, uneven resource accumulation, and corruption, it is nevertheless striking that neither the liberal-democratic nor the religious-nationalist concepts of morality have taken up the issues of social security, socio-economic equality and solidarity.

It is also illustrative that these incompatible sides both use images of the socialist past to delegitimize each other. On the one hand, the liberal-democratic position identifies the Serbian Orthodox Church’s equation of faith and nation as the legacy of socialist collectivism, which opposes and prevents the formation of a democratic value-system based on individual freedom and responsibility, active involvement in society, tolerance, and human rights. On the other hand, the church views the local human rights NGO circles as the successors of the “godlessness” and repressive stance towards religion that were characteristic of the Tito era, and pejoratively identifies NGO-representatives as “communists” who nowadays impose on the educational system the ideology of human rights instead of Marxism.

The mutual labelling that characterizes the debate on the introduction of the new alternative school subjects is an expression of the lack of balanced assessments of the socialist period. Milan Kangrga, one of the prominent Praxis<sup>11</sup> members and critics of both Tito-real-socialism and nationalism, identifies an “amnesia” which had set in after 1990 (Kangrga, in Popov 2003: 156). According to Kangrga, the vast majority of intellectuals seem to have “forgotten” their former way of life. Instead of a balanced approach to socialism that would consider the values of socioeconomic security and equality against the background of current reforms, the entire

11 The philosophical circle Praxis (named after the homonymous philosophical journal published between 1964 and 1974, when it was prohibited by the regime) included well-known philosophers such as Gajo Petrovic, Predrag Vranicki, Milan Kangrga, Rudi Supek, Zagorka Golubovic, Mihajlo Markovic, Ljubomir Tadic, Nebojsa Popov etc. This philosophical circle became well known in other communist countries and the West for its critique of the Tito-socialism regarding the authoritarian party-nomenclature, the paradox of the ideology of “democratic centralism plus worker’s-self-government” and the regime’s repressive character (Popov 2003: 37-38).

socialist period has been declared the “age of darkness” (ibid). Zagorka Golubovic places the popularity of the neoliberal pattern of thought as combined with a distinctive “anti-socialist” resentment:

*“Neoliberal ideas are very popular among intellectuals, who are not willing to enter a dialogue with ideas, which to them sound “socialist”. The “anti-workers-trend” is pronounced and the idea of the necessity of social justice and equality is being denied. In the name of an over-pronounced (egoistic) individualism primarily (if not only) the struggle for individual civil rights is being highlighted, while completely disregarding collective rights” (Golubovic, in Popov 2003: 160).*

While human rights NGOs almost exclusively focus on the fight for individual rights and against the resurgence of nationalism and de-secularization, they neglect the burning issue of the deteriorating social and economic rights that characterizes the current process of transition. The prevailing statement concerning rising poverty and unemployment identifies the socialist past as the source of decay, and appeals for “individual awareness” and patience regarding the ongoing reforms. While lamenting over her clients’ requests for “unrealistic rights” of employment, one human rights activist described to me the typical counselling situation:

*“Someone comes to us and laments over having lost his job. ‘You have to protect my rights’, he demands. Then we say, sorry, this is transition. We as a human-rights-NGO can not give people a job. It is clear how the capital and the market function. This is a question of individual awareness.” (Personal interview)*

The church also neglects the importance of social and economic security by criticising both the “corrupt” socialist past and the “materialist”, “consumerist”, and “pleasure-oriented” nature of global capitalist consumer society. The main answer to the hardship of the present moment is the return to faith, which is considered to represent the embodiment of authentic, non-materialistic values. In that way, even life in poverty suddenly becomes a virtue and a sign of strong faith. A religious education teacher pointed out to me the importance of giving the children an understanding of the authentic immaterial values of life in the following way:

*“We have materialised our life completely. Everything is only about possession. But the church can help in understanding poverty. Namely faith makes one feel*



*rich. One even feels richer when one doesn't possess. At the end of the day you can think to yourself – I don't have a lot but I have prayed to the lord and this is my major wealth". (Personal interview)*

Thus, although strongly opposing and de-legitimising each other, the advocates of the two alternative school subjects seem to have thing in common: the desire to educate new generations that will show more tolerance for the effects of the post-socialist transformation into (neo-liberal) capitalism, and the ongoing decline of socio-economic standards.

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