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Orthodoxy in Serbia: between its public image and the everyday religiosity of its believers

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ABSTRACT
This article characterises and contrasts the most visible changes in the Serbian Church's public role with less visible and analysed trends among its believers. A very tight intertwining of the religious and the political elevated the Serbian Church's institutional position, secured an unprecedented construction boom, and even influenced some devotional practices of the faithful, especially through victimhood-oriented collective identity building. Yet our research demonstrates the ambiguous impact of these changes on believers, whose lives revolve around the liturgical cycle, fasting, and reverence for monasticism. These differences have already created rifts within the Church. In a trend that it is unrecognised by secular observers, it seems that some believers are increasingly differentiating between their ethnic and confessional identities.

KEYWORDS
Public orthodoxy; liturgical practice; monasticism; Serbian Orthodox Church; Serbia

Unsurprisingly, much of the recent academic literature on Serbian Orthodoxy examined it in connection to or through the lens of the wars which beset the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. During that period, places of worship featured as key targets of destruction and confessional belonging was turned into a means for exclusion, discrimination, expulsion, and annihilation. Yet all observers agreed that the wars could not be defined as 'religious'.[1] Nevertheless, it has been widely acknowledged that the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), like most other confessions in the former Yugoslavia and throughout Eastern Europe, was closely associated with the nationalist revival characterising the end of Communist rule and a never-ending transition to neo-liberal capitalism that is increasingly acquiring authoritarian features.[2] In addition, due to the image of itself which it projected in public discourse, the SOC and its leadership have been characterised by secular scholarship as traditionalist, morally conservative, and often monarchist. Observers have described its political outlook as largely shaped in the interwar period by European rightist conservative thought, and Russian émigré clerics.[3]

[1]In this paper only a selection of mostly English language publications will be cited such as Mojzes 1998; Perica 2002; Davis 1996; Velikonja 2003; and Ognjenovic and Jozelic 2014a, 2014b. For the emergence of conflict and the role of religious communities, see Buchenau 2004, 2005b. For the role of the West or its perception of the religion in conflict, see Aleksov 2020.
[2]See Aleksov 2010, 2008.
[3]For the ideology and politics of the SOC, see Buchenau 2005a, 2005c, 2006, 2014; Ramet 2006; Vukomanović 2011, 2008; Lis 2014; Hofmeisterová 2019; and Subotić 2019a.

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While violent interethnic conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, which the SOC considers its canonical territory, have subsided, interconfessional hostility persists. Among the Orthodox Christian community, in particular, this hostility is further amplified by disputes of ecclesiastic jurisdictions closely related to identity and nation building. In North Macedonia, the SOC insists on its canonical right over the territory, rejecting the 1967 self-proclaimed, autocephalous Archbishopric. Meanwhile, in Montenegro parts of the population identifying as ethnic Montenegrins demand their own Church for which they have established some rudimentary structures.[4] It was in Montenegro that the SOC made its greatest public intervention in 2019–2020, following the attempt by the leadership of Montenegro to pass an unfavourable law regulating its status and potentially nationalise its property. Led by its then Metropolitan Amfilohije Radović and the clergy, the faithful staged mass religious processions and protests, which not only saw the rejection of the proposed law, but the overthrow of the Montenegrin ruling party at the elections after three decades of uninterrupted hold on power (or 75 years if the Communist period is counted). The SOC in Montenegro was able to frame public discourse to its benefit, demonstrating its strong popular support, historical continuity, and commitment to non-violence. That said, it is still being challenged by the supporters of the separate Montenegrin Church and the former ruling party.

The ever-growing public role of the SOC as an institution goes hand in hand with the transformation of its flock, though much less is known about the latter. In 2017, Pew Research Center found that 88% of the Serbian population identified as 'Orthodox'.[5] In post-Yugoslav Serbia, as in other traditionally Orthodox countries, confessional and ethnic identities have come to be broadly interchangeable.[6] Yet the percentage of the Serbian population which regularly participates in liturgies and strives to live in accordance with other tenets of their faith is miniscule. Pew Research places the percentage of the Serbian population who attend church 'weekly' at a mere 7%.[7] An earlier study from 2010 found that only 4.1% attended church 'more than once a week' and 8,7% attended 'weekly'.[8] Therefore, in this paper we look at both the institution, and its most active lay members, who we designate as 'believers'. We borrow the term from the Serbian vernacular. In popular discourse, refering to someone as a 'believer' (*vernik*), can sometimes have a slightly derogatory connotation, rooted in the socialist past where overt religious practice was marginalised and ridiculed. However, in contemporary Serbia, those who strive to live a liturgical life refer to themselves as 'believers' (*vernici*). What is more, they sometimes draw a contrast between people like themselves, and the vast majority of the Serbian population, who profess only a nominal Orthodox identity. The term *vernici* thus came to replace the term *bogomoljci/Bogomolytsy* (God-worshippers), associated with the interwar lay religious movement that similarly challenged the Serbian Church with its intense liturgical devotion, lay missionary activity, and reverence of

[4]For North Macedonia, see Cepreganov et al. 2017. Since we began work on this article the Serbian Orthodox Church has taken the historically significant step of restoring liturgical and canonical communion with the Macedonian Orthodox Church. For Montenegro, see Saggau 2019.
[5]https://www.pewforum.org/2017/05/10/religious-belief-and-national-belonging-in-central-and-eastern-europe/ (accessed October 18, 2021).
[6]For instance, on Bulgaria see Ghodsee (2009). On Greece, see Hirschon (2009).
[7]https://www.pewforum.org/2017/05/10/religious-commitment-and-practices/ (accessed October 18, 2021).
[8]See Radić 2011.

monasticism.[9] *Vernici* may also refer to their compatriots as 'traditional believers' (*tradicionalni vernici*), to mark the distinction. Many Serbs also happily self-identify in such terms ('I'm a traditional believer'), flagging a 'cultural' appropriation of Orthodox Christianity, but not a sustained attachment to the Church or 'excessive' religiosity.

However, to understand the complexities of contemporary Serbian Orthodox religiosity, it is not enough to simply point to the nominal majority and the fervent minority. Instead, in this article we accentuate the distinction between the experience of Orthodoxy as a nominal confessional identity and as a transformative religious practice. Our research demonstrates the ambiguous impact the expansion of the Serbian Church's public role have on believers, whose lives revolve around the liturgical cycle, fasting, and a reverence for monasticism. These differences have already created rifts within the Church. In a trend that it is unrecognised by secular observers, we show that gaining public prominence threatens to stave off believers who are prioritising faith and salvation over national and state matters. The Church's reliance on the fusion between Serbian ethnic and Orthodox confessional identities, which saw its public pre-eminence cemented in the past decades, is increasingly challenged by some believers who try to differentiate between the two.

To make these observations we have drawn on our respective training in both historical and social anthropological research. The first part of the article, examining some of the visible changes in the Serbian Church's public role in the last couple of decades, is primarily based on a long-term engagement with primary and secondary historical sources about the SOC, as well as ongoing analysis of church-run and other media and online activity. The second part of the article uses ethnographic data, collected during multiple fieldwork trips in and around the central Serbian town of Kraljevo between 2016 and 2021. Kraljevo's inhabitants overwhelmingly identify as both ethnically 'Serb' and 'Orthodox'. However, the data presented here focuses on the demographically diverse networks of women and men described above, who self identify as 'believers' (*vernici*). Beyond claiming a nominal Orthodox identity (like the rest of town's population), these people strive to actively live Orthodox liturgical lives. The data was collected through extended ethnographic interviews and conversations, as well as participant-observation during Liturgies, shared meals, pilgrimages, and monastery visits.

The re-emergence of the church's public visibility and role in society

Similar to other Churches in Eastern Europe, the SOC experienced profound changes in the last three decades. Several scholars and sociologists of religion have offered a qualitative assessment of statements and communiques from its hierarchy and clergy, and supplemented it by other publicly available materials, such as media appearances. In addition, statistical data are produced to illustrate what was most commonly described as religious 'revival' – though its premises are often as dubious as the notion of 'revival' itself. First, survey data on church construction, attendance, or census self-declarations do not sufficiently reflect the peculiarities of Orthodox Christian devotion and practice. Second, most of what is attributed to religious revival is entirely new, and not a revival of anything that existed or was practised or believed before. Reflecting on the dilemma this posed, the sociologist Mirko Blagojević discussed many

[9]Arising partially under the influence of neo-Protestant sects the Bogomolytsy, with their strong devotion and novel practices, posed a serious challenge to the authority of the bishops, and their growth and outlook was only partially channelled under the leadership of the bishop Nikolaj Velimirović. See Radić and Djurić Milanović (2017), as well as several other studies in that volume.

possible terms to describe the phenomenon. These ranged from the 'reaffirmation' and 'revitalisation' of the church, to more normative terms such as 'retraditionalisation', 'clericalization', and 'retotalisation' to more poetic ones such as the 'return of the sacred' or 'religious renaissance' before he finally opted for 'desecularisation'. Blagojević chose the latter notion, clearly deriving from widely disputed secularisation theory, as the most apt way to neutrally describe a relatively stable and steady attachment of people towards religion and the church, and a very tight intertwining of the religious (ecclesiastical) and the political (social).[10]

Indeed, an increased rapprochement between the state and the church is undeniable. It began in the late 1980s, with the state effectively adopting some of the same political agenda as the Church, and it lasted throughout 1990s, even though the two were often at odds on whether and how the agenda could be implemented. Serbia under Slobodan Milošević never formally institutionalised the SOC, and he remained at best distant, and at worst prone to limiting the Church's impact on public discourse. Much closer to the SOC was the new democratic Serbian government led by Zoran Đinđić, who came to power after the ousting of Milošević in 2000. Confronted as it was by the numerous challenges of transition, the newly created ideological vacuum, and the need to mitigate the radical nationalism that had marked Serbia in the 1990s, it decided to introduce compulsory religious education in an attempt to ensure the sympathy of the Church and popularity among the voters.[11] This major breakthrough had severe implications as the SOC educational establishments became state financed. Soon after, along with a few other religious communities deemed 'traditional', the SOC was given a special legal status. This was then followed by laws that allowed the return of Church property taken away on various grounds after the Communist takeover, privileging it above private property, most of which still awaits return to its owners or their descendants. Successive governments introduced regular subsidies and financing for the SOC clergy and monastics while local governments and enterprises followed suit with ad hoc subsidies.

The changes, sketched above, gave rise to a construction boom with more churches, monasteries, parish halls, bishops' palaces and houses for priests, built in the last two decades than in the SOC's entire history. The most famous construction site of all is the massive St. Sava Temple in Belgrade, long praised as the largest Orthodox church, or at least the largest in the Balkans,[12] though the recent inauguration of Bucharest Cathedral brings this into question. Podgorica (the capital of Montenegro), Bar, Banja Luka (the capital of Republika Srpska, or the Serb entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina), Niš, and all other major towns inhabited by ethnic Serbs have also seen major cathedrals being built in the last two decades. Most visible is the impact of new churches built in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where all three confessions compete in intense building despite massive poverty and depopulation, in a process described elsewhere as 'marking territory'.[13] The massive building spree unavoidably meant that the new churches are all alike, with standard design and structure, including the interior decoration (iconostasis, fresco painting), which is now, for the first time in history, being completed in parallel with outer construction. Even more striking is the erection of extremely tall bell towers (as part of or separate from the main church) of both Orthodox and Catholic churches, that immediately bring to mind the neighbouring and competing minarets of Bosniak mosques.

[10]Blagojević 2008a: 39.
[11]Aleksov 2004, 2017; and Buchenau 2014.
[12]Aleksov 2003.
[13]Sekulovski 2019.

Furthermore, after schools, the SOC gained an institutional presence with the Army and Police forces, and has been legally tasked or entitled to provide their moral and ideological framework. Besides owning its own electronic and print media, the new broadcasting law offered the SOC clergy the chance to produce and control programmes in many media, while Church representatives are secured board membership on state run outlets.[14] From its building next to the St. Sava Temple, the SOC runs a 24-hour TV station *Hram [Temple]*, its most ambitious media project to date. In addition, the SOC opened several new seminaries and theological schools/academies, set up a couple of grammar schools under its wing, but also many shops that, beside a greatly increased range of publications, sell a range of products from the monasteries or lands returned to the Church. Most importantly, both the SOC educational establishments and financial operations remain beyond the supervision, control, and taxation of the state.[15]

New saints

The newly gained prestigious position of the SOC in Serbian society is further confirmed by it being voted the most trusted institution in public polls – a trend which is similarly the case with all churches in the region. In addition to its relationship with the state and new public role, the Serbian Church has also taken important decisions aimed at the devotional practices of its faithful. For example, its leading body, the Assembly of Bishops, has been very active in the past three decades entering hundreds of men (and one woman) into the Church's official diptychon of saints. Unlike the early martyrs and saints venerated by both the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, most of the newly inaugurated saints are characterised by their 'death at the hands of Serbian enemies,' or their own nationalist fervour. This tendency is illustrated by the controversial declaration of sainthood for the interwar Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović,[16] and for the theologian Justin Popović.[17] Even more controversially, the SOC declared as saints several priests who were executed by Communist-led Partisans after the war, as members of Četnik Monarchist forces. Some of these were condemned for collaboration with Nazis and/or fascist Italy, and were held responsible for crimes against other ethnic groups and civilians.[18] However, most attention, and collective sainthood, was given to Serb victims of large massacres by fascist Croatian Ustaša and others during the Second World War (as well as in a couple of cases from the First World War). Commemorating the dead is,

[14]The current Patriarch of the SOC was a long-standing board member and President of the governing board of Serbian state Radio and Television.

[15]Members of the teaching staff at the Orthodox Theological Faculty of Belgrade (which has been reincorporated in the University of Belgrade since 2004) have been repeatedly disciplined or fired by the Holy Synod of the SOC for various reasons, such as opposing creationism in state education.

[16]Bishop's Nikolaj adoration is the only major local addition to the existing cults of saints venerated among Serbs, which, besides universal saints from Early Christianity, celebrate medieval ones like the founder of the SOC (or Žiča Archdiocese, its predecessor) Saint Sava. Popular preacher and religious writer, patron of the Interwar *Bogomolytsy* [God-Worshippers] lay movement, Bishop Nikolaj was also condemned for his antisemitic writing and association with fascist collaborationist Dimitrije Ljotić. During the war he was placed under house arrest by the Nazis and then interned in Dachau. He never returned to Yugoslavia and died in American exile. See Aleksov 2013. For more on his ideas and role as well as on the Bogomolytsy, see Bremer 1992. Jovan Byford (2008) is critical about his anti-Semitism.

[17]For Justin Popović's theological thought and its influences see Buchenau 2011; and Lubardić 2009.

[18]Three Četnik priests who were canonised were accused of being war criminals Milorad Vukojičić Maca, Slobodan Šiljak and Dušan Prijović. Their cult did not take hold, however. See https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/856243.html; https://www.republika.co.rs/366-367/17.html.

of course, absolutely germane to Orthodox thought and practice and Christianity has always relied on the remembrance of sacrifice and martyrdom as a hope for – and an example of – resurrection and eternal life. However, this recent increased attention concerning Serbian victims of the Second World War could be interpreted not only in terms of theological or pastoral concerns, but also as a way for the SOC to influence and position itself in the public sphere. In the past decade the public commemoration of the Serbian victims killed during the Second World War has far exceeded that of the Kosovo battle of 1389. The grand 600th anniversary of that battle, back in 1989, was seen as the peak of Serbian nationalism, eventually culminating in the dissolution of Yugoslavia and ensuing wars.[19] For the anthropologist Katherine Verdery, the parading of the relics of Lazar – the Serbian prince and Kosovo martyr – on the occasion of this anniversary, was one of the key examples in her study of how the dead served as vehicles for transforming perceptions of history in post-socialist societies.[20] In the meantime, victimhood-oriented collective identity building has become the most prominent theological discourse and practice. Hundreds of churches, monuments, sermons, and publications have been dedicated to the victims of the Second World War, their proper burial and commemoration. In addition, the definite surge in memorialising Serbian martyrdom has recently been situated within the Holocaust imaginary.[21] This strategy could be linked to similar attempts by other Eastern European countries to gain the world's sympathy for their national victimhood. It has been described as a wave of historical revisionism, whereby the Holocaust memory is decentred, and its horrors are repurposed to promote the narrative of post-war suffering under communism.[22] Globally, real or imagined victimhood has recently become the most powerful discursive tool in both international and personal relations. Yet this approach seems especially useful in the Serbian context, as Serbia is commonly seen as the key culprit for the wars in the 1990s.[23]

Here however, our paper departs from the standard observation of discourse and statistical data. Looking at the new saints, for example, ethnographic insight shows that so far they have barely inspired public veneration, and that despite institutional promotion their cults are not taking hold compared to traditional patterns of saint worshipping among the faithful. Traditionally, the most venerated local saint was St. Basil Miracleworker of Ostrog in Montenegro (*Sveti Vasilije Ostroški)*. Divisions among the hierarchs, and the separation of Montenegro from Serbia, somewhat distanced the cult spatially from most believers in Serbia. Then, after many failed attempts to disseminate new cults elsewhere, in recent years a young brotherhood was established in the monastery of Tumane, in Northeast Serbia, which initiated the worship of two, previously unknown, miracle working saints (St. Zosimos and St. James), quickly overtaking Ostrog in the number of pilgrims they attract.[24] There is nothing particularly Serbian or victim-oriented in the cult of these saints. Instead, the context of their veneration emphasises

[19]For the role of Kosovo battle in Serbian epic, literature, and mythology see Emmert 1990; Vucinich and Thomas 1991.
[20]Verdery 1999, 95–110.
[21]Karin Hofmeisterová (2020) elaborates on this most important public intervention by the SOC. Lea David (2017a, 2017b) also provides arguments. For further examples, see Aleksov 2008, Subotić 2019a.
[22]Emil Kerenji, 'Decentering "Cosmopolitan" Holocaust Memory,' *Shofar* 40, no. 1 (2022): 183–188.
[23]David MacDonald (2005) and recently elaborated by Subotić 2019b.
[24]St. James (Jakov Arsović) abandoned his diplomatic career in 1930s to join the *Bogomolytsy* movement, as a follower of Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović, displaying asceticism of the Holy Fools or *yuródivyy* (юродивый). He died in 1946, allegedly because of the harassment of new Communist authorities and was canonised by the SOC in 2017. St. Zosim is said to be a medieval hesychast monk, but is only remembered in popular tradition.

piety, faith, and divine miracles. At the same time, the believers have also embraced three cults originating from elsewhere in the Orthodox world – Saint Nectarios of Aegina (specially known as a helper to those with cancer), Russian Tsar Nikolai Romanov and his murdered family, and Saint John (Maximovich) of Shanghai and San Francisco, who spent part of his life as an exiled Russian monk in interwar Yugoslavia.

The chasm between the public image of the church and everyday Orthodoxy

The dichotomy between the popular and institutional veneration of saints is not the only example of the growing chasm between the official, public image projected by the SOC, and the everyday Orthodoxy practiced by its believers. Because of its increased public role, the SOC has also experienced a serious schism. This latest schism was a consequence of the church's close relationship to the state, its commitment to ecumenism, and – the most sensitive issue of all – the independence of Kosovo. Kosovo has been the seat of the Serbian Patriarchate (with interruptions) since the fourteenth century, making it, as many in the SOC like to say, the Serbian Jerusalem. Its bishop, Artemije (Radosavljević) of Ras and Prizren, clashed with other bishops regarding their (in his eyes) lame stance towards the independence of Kosovo, which was proclaimed in 2008 by the authorities of its overwhelmingly ethnic-Albanian inhabitants. In addition, Artemije objected to the SOC's official ecumenical stance, and the bishops' majority support for liturgical reform. When punished for alleged financial malversations and removed from his post by the Assembly of Bishops, Artemije established his own church, known as the Diocese of Ras and Prizren in Exile. A spiritual father to many, Artemije drew with him at least one hundred monastics, and thousands of the most devoted faithful. In the meantime, since Artemije was excommunicated from the SOC, his followers have established more than forty churches and monasteries throughout Serbia, an emerging parallel Orthodox structure.[25] Remarkably, what distinguishes this group of faithful is no longer strictly opposition to political matters, but their strict adherence and participation in liturgical life, fasting, and reverence for monasticism. As already stressed, these are the same key defining features of religiosity as practiced by *vernici* or believers, who are still the backbone of the SOC.

The issue of Artemije's schism brings us to the turning point in this article. Whilst much of the previously noted literature has (understandably) analysed the growing influence of the institutional church and its considerable political power, such analyses have generally overlooked the *other* ways in which 'Serbian Orthodoxy' has been re-emerging into the public sphere. Just as there have been institutional transformations, so too one can observe real shifts in terms of personal piety, and a growing chasm between the Orthodoxy practiced by dedicated believers and the population at large.[26] The split between a 'churchly religiosity' and religious practices which may emerge outside the church's domain is certainly not an exclusively Serbian phenomenon, but has been identified in postsocialist Russia, too.[27] What

[25]An English language 'Biography of his Eminence, the Bishop of Raško-Prizren in Exile Artemije,' detailing his life and especially the emergence of his new 'Church' is published on the Church's website. See http://www.eparhija-prizren.org/?p=99421.

[26]Kuburić 2011 is a rare glimpse into the changes on a parish level.

[27]See, for instance, Naletova 2010.

interests us is whether and how, as Milena Benovska has suggested in her analysis of Russian Orthodoxy,[28] such a minority can power and affect wider social and institutional transformations.

Orthodoxy in the public sphere

After decades of the socialist state hampering overt religious expression, in contemporary Serbia, 'religion' is now 'present at every step'.[29] Today, Orthodox Christianity is ubiquitous in the public sphere: from the paper icons given away as 'free gifts' with the tabloid press, to the icons of Saint Sava in state school classrooms, to the church calendars which sometimes grace the walls of police stations, to the crosses which dangle from rear view mirrors. Meanwhile, at public events in museums and libraries it is not uncommon to see members of the clergy in their black robes. To understand the widespread social acceptability of such Orthodox imagery one has to appreciate how, as well as flagging nominal confessional identity, such Orthodox symbols and images implicitly flag ethnic identity, too. They speak of collective belonging to the Serbian people, just as they speak of Orthodoxy.

By way of ethnographic example, consider the case of the patron saint day, or *slava*.[30] The *slava* is a custom unique to Serbian Orthodoxy, even inscribed on UNESCO's list of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Whilst its origins are unclear, it is generally suggested that Saint Sava introduced the practice of each family venerating a patron saint as a means by which to harmoniously integrate pagan idolatry and Orthodox Christianity.[31] (Traditionally, *slava* are celebrated in the home with guests coming, sometimes over a period of three days. The core of the celebration is the round ritual bread or *slavski kolač* which is traditionally baked by the woman of the house, taken to church in the morning to be blessed by a priest, then later shared with the guests. Under socialism, those who continued to observe the practice did so surreptitiously, fearing repercussions.

Today, however, the *slava* arguably percolates all spheres of Serbian society. The family unit is not the only entity which can take a patron saint and thus the yearly *slava*. Businesses, clubs and organisations might also choose to adopt a *slava* – which nowadays brings with it legitimacy in the eyes of an overwhelmingly Orthodox society, but also the opportunity for an annual celebration. It has become a widespread cultural phenomenon and is increasingly commercialised. The tabloid newspapers sometimes print leaflets about the saint's day in question and how to observe it. In supermarkets, one can find gift sets (such as ready-wrapped bottles of wine and boxes of chocolate) for guests to present to their hosts, as well as gift bags emblazoned with Orthodox imagery or simply the words 'Happy Slava!' Some enterprising individuals have set up small businesses which cater for *slava* celebrations, offering ready-made cooked food to alleviate the workload of the host. The scale of *slava* celebrations has expanded so much that one occasionally hears people criticising families who now choose to celebrate their *slava* in restaurants, claiming that this overlooks the intimate, domestic aspect of the celebration. The overall point is that the *slava* has become part of everyday Serbian life, both for those

[28]Benovska 2021.
[29]Radulović 2012: 5.
[30]Bakić-Hayden (2018) offers a solid background to the *slava* tradition and its relevance in contemporary Serbian society.
[31]Bakić-Hayden 2018: 290.

who engage deeply with the liturgical practice of the Orthodox Church (to whom we return below) and those who may be indifferent and sceptical – or even self-avowedly atheist. An undeniably Orthodox practice has gained widespread social acceptability, speaking of both ethnic and confessional belonging.

The same could be said of contemporary Christmas festivities, celebrated according to the Julian calendar on 7th January. In the weeks leading up to the event supermarkets stock all the necessary accoutrements. On the morning of Christmas Eve (*badnje veče)* men would traditionally go to the forest to take an oak branch (*badnjak*), which would be decorated and then later burnt on the fire. Today, however, practically sized oak branches can be purchased in supermarkets, packed in plastic bags. It is a common sight to see these branches tucked into the bumpers of cars. On *badnje veče* churches (which might otherwise be rather quiet) throng with people, with those that cannot physically enter the church standing outside. After Vespers, bonfires are lit outside and people gather round, drinking rakija, talking and making merry.

Slava celebrations and the celebration of Christmas are two examples of where Orthodox festivities surge into the public sphere. These are celebrations which engage swathes of the Serbian population who might otherwise not be interested in religion or the Church. It can be seen simply as 'what we Serbs do.' That said, it is important to note that these celebrations are also very much practiced by those who identify as believers. However, believers usually choose to gloss such practices in explicitly *Christian* terms, situating them as part of the liturgical calendar, not simply as Serbian national traditions.

Liturgical lives

Western commentators have occasionally (and understandably) observed that Orthodox worship practice seems to be somewhat lax, with participation in liturgies non-mandatory, and people wandering in and out as they please. This is not a false observation, and certainly captures the approach of many so-called 'traditional believers' portrayed above. From the church's theological perspective such occasional participation is wholly inadequate. The Divine Liturgy – where believers receive Divine Communion, the body and blood of Jesus Christ – is at the very heart of being Orthodox Christian. Ideally, life is structured around the liturgical year and its four main fasts. One needs to actively 'witness' faith. It is not enough, 'believers' (*vernici*) claim, to simply identify as 'Orthodox' because one happens to be born an ethnic Serb in Serbia. Rather, one has to practice that faith by fasting, praying, attending the Liturgy, and receiving Divine Communion regularly. Not surprisingly, those churchgoers sometimes talk about the moment they started to observe the fasting calendar as the moment at which they started to live 'in the faith'.[32] As well as being a concerted process of work on the Christian self (cutting out heavy foods to make room for more prayerful thoughts) fasting is preparation for receiving Divine Communion. The church has always taught the need for frequent Communion, though in recent years it has increasingly emphasised the practice. At the same time, the priests are now also encountering an ever-growing body of believers who are willing to keep all the fasts, allowing them to take Divine Communion regularly.

[32]See Lackenby 2021.

So why is it important to analyse this small, but noteworthy, minority of self-identifying believers, who seek to live a liturgical life, and who take issue with the 'traditional' Orthodoxy of the majority of the Serbian population?[33] One reason is that sociological research has shown how the identity of those who go to church has changed dramatically since the 1980s. If regular churchgoers once used to be predominately rural, elderly and female, by the 1990s research suggested that this demographic had significantly diversified.[34] Certainly, as well as encountering pensioners and unemployed men and women, at liturgies in contemporary Serbia (especially in the bigger cities) one is just as likely to meet medical professionals, university professors, teachers and lawyers, as well as students and graduates. What this diverse range of people have in common is an interest in Orthodox spirituality and a desire to live 'liturgically' within the Church, to transform themselves as Christian persons and work on their salvation. For believers, Orthodoxy is significantly more than being framework within which to enact one's ethnic Serbian identity. It is a means by which they 'work on' their salvation.

Moreover, it is also important to emphasise the extent to which the believers function as a vital centre of the SOC, filling churches for Sunday Liturgies throughout the year, as well as ensuring a regular flow of congregants at other services during the week. They develop close bonds with clergy and monastics. By regularly inviting priests to their homes during Lent and before their patron saints' days, and asking for many other services, they provide a small, but important and steady financial contribution to the Church as a whole, and to individual clergy, who in the SOC mostly depend on alimony for their income. With their frequent visits to monasteries they provide an even bigger support to monastics. Furthermore, younger believers may be inspired to study theology themselves and continue to become priests or religious education teachers. Many monks and nuns are recruited among the believers just like before they were recruited from amongst the God-worshippers. Such observations are not intended to diminish the sincerely-felt religiosity of other Serbs who might not wish to engage deeply with regular liturgical practice, but rather to insist upon the important economic and practical base which such believers provide for the SOC.[35]

This renewed engagement in liturgical life by believers has concrete effects in the public sphere. Forms of embodied piety – such as fasting, or genuflecting and crossing oneself – do not go unnoticed in a society which was, only fifty years ago – under the influence of atheistic Yugoslav socialism. That is not to claim that people did not covertly engage in religious practice under socialism (they did). But today they can do so openly, in public space. Thus, Orthodox liturgical piety stands out and can be critiqued and commented upon by those who might be more comfortable with a 'traditional' Orthodoxy.[36] An apparently excessive dedication to churchgoing can generate scepticism and disdain from others, and the suggestion that it can be as harmful as other forms of addiction.[37] Even the church hierarchy can be suspicious, as such strict devotion is reminiscent of the interwar Bogomolytsy or identical with current schismatics (*Artemijevci*). In other words, it carries potential for conflict.

[33]See also Raković 2012, 2013.
[34]Blagojević 2008b, 2012; Radisavljević-Ćiparizović 2006.
[35]Milena Benovska (2021) makes a similar argument about the crucial role a practising minority of believers plays in sustaining the functioning of the Russian Orthodox Church.
[36]see Lackenby, forthcoming.
[37]Radulović 2012: 118–119.

As well as pushing others to rethink their relationship to food and to the body, so too intense liturgical practice invites reflection on 'Serbian Orthodoxy' itself. Specifically, how to understand the relationship between ethnic and confessional identities? For those who see Orthodoxy as primarily a pathway to salvation, the ultimate personal goal is much greater than the preservation of Serbian national identity. What drives such believers is not primarily a postsocialist nation-building project, but rather the fear of not attaining eternal life. Needless to say, such grassroots thinking enriches and complicates narratives which have associated the 'revival of religion' in postsocialist Orthodox majority countries with projects of nation building or anti-Westernism.[38] This is certainly not to suggest that Serbian identity is unimportant among believers – it undeniably is, as they embrace the church's impassioned discourse around remembering 'who we are', not forgetting one's ancestors, and nurturing Serbian roots. But, through attempting to live intense liturgical lives, believers come to suggest the emphasis should not be on a worldly, political nationalism. Some of them claim that word order is important: one should strive to be 'Orthodox Serbian' (with faith in the primary place) and *not* 'Serbian Orthodox' (where ethnicity comes first). The overall point is that, for some believers, the renewed interest in liturgical piety is not just about a rediscovered collective identity, but also about cultivating themselves as Orthodox subjects. To get a better sense of the tensions this creates, we consider yet one more concrete example, that of monasteries, and the different approaches and perceptions the believers demonstrate towards monasticism as the key mainstay of Serbian Orthodox faith and tradition.

Monasteries: Serbian monuments or bastions of orthodoxy

Monasteries play a very significant role for Orthodox Serbs, no matter what their belief and practice are. Of the more than three hundred monasteries on the territory of Serbia alone, some are especially renowned as ancient sites of great historical significance for the Serbian people. The most notable of these are the monasteries founded during medieval Nemanjić dynasty, such as Studenica, Žiča, Dečani, Peć and Gračanica. Through these sites both ordinary citizens and political elites can make powerful claims about Serbian historical rootedness on a particular territory (three of the above are in Kosovo) and the longevity of Orthodox Christian tradition. Sites of committed religious life, Serbian cultural heritage, and architectural beauty, monasteries are the places in which most of the Serbian population engage with 'Orthodoxy', regardless of their liturgical commitment.

Under socialism, monasteries were primarily viewed as sites of cultural heritage and historical interest, and as such also tourist attractions. In the meantime, monasteries have become – as elsewhere in the postsocialist world[39] – destinations for 'spiritual travel' (*duhovno putovanje*). Pilgrimages to monasteries are now mostly organised by parish churches or church travel agencies, with posters advertising these excursions (with departure times and the itinerary of monasteries to be visited) plastered on walls and lampposts around Belgrade and other towns. Such trips particularly target believers, who may appreciate the lengthier, and what they perceive as the more authentic liturgies

[38]For recent overviews see Roudometof et al 2005, Leustean 2014, Krawchuck and Bremer 2014.
[39]See Kormina 2010.

served in monasteries. They are often followed by a meal or refreshments for participants, in the practice commonly described as *Agape* (a must for the current schismatic Artemijevci too). However, in monasteries one also encounters people who attend church very rarely and who, in fact, may be rather critical of sustained liturgical practice. Monasteries thus emerge as sites exemplifying the rift between 'pilgrimage' and 'tourism', or between those who strive to live liturgical lives and 'traditional believers'.

With the number of monasteries doubling since the 1990s, there has been a noticeable shift in the popularity of wonder working monasteries compared to the historically famous ones, as indicated with the example of Tumane above. In addition, people are frequently searching for monasteries as 'spiritual' centres, where they go to heal their souls. People visit these monasteries for confession and spiritual guidance from monastics established as 'spiritual fathers,' rather than their local parish priests, a trend described throughout the Orthodox world. Despite the opposition of the hierarchy and parish priests, this practice of monks serving as spiritual fathers has only become more widespread, followed by a general surge of interest in monasticism itself, with the monastic life attracting younger, often well-educated novices.[40] The followers of Bishop Artemije, now in schism with the SOC, gather and worship almost exclusively in their monasteries, scattered throughout country and housing the monastics who sided with him and were expelled from the SOC. For both the *Artemijevci* and our believers, monasteries have become – in addition to committed liturgical life and fasting – the most important distinguishing feature of their faith. Rather than cultural monuments, monasteries assumed a normative model of what Orthodoxy *should be*. Furthermore, they offer means by which to critique not only the institutional church, but also the nominal or 'traditional' Orthodoxy of much of the population. So far, the SOC has attempted to steer this trend by setting up new monasteries and establishing more firm control of the existing ones. Parish churches are also introducing more rigorous and lengthy services, such as the all-night vigils on the eves of major feast days. Others are introducing *Agape* and after-liturgy discussions. It seems that the oldest rivalries in Orthodoxy, between the monastics on one side, and secular clergy and hierarchy on the other, is being played out again in a new context.

Conclusion

Although it is too early to draw any definite conclusions, our research points to an emerging and yet unstudied trend in Serbia, that might have parallels in the rest of the Orthodox world. We identified an emerging trend of believers making a distinction between (Serbian) ethnic and (Orthodox) confessional identity – a fusion which has long been taken for granted both by the Serbian Church and its secular observers. While most of our research was conducted before the pandemic, the epidemiological measures introduced by the Serbian state – and the ensuing discussions and polarisation within the Orthodox Church globally – will most likely deepen this rift in the future.

Finally, and not entirely unrelated to the challenges discussed above, the most damaging threat to the Serbian and other Orthodox churches was recently caused by the schism between the Ecumenical and the Russian Patriarchate and the tragic conflict over Ukraine, which erupted after our initial empirical research was conducted. Yet it is only the

[40]Bakić-Hayden 2003; Anđelković 2019.

culmination of over a century of unresolved ecclesiological arguments about spiritual primacy over Orthodox Christians, and the relationship between individual churches and their respective (canonical or political) territories, nations, and ethnies. Since the collapse of Communism, the Serbian Church vociferously promoted its close ties with the Russian Orthodox Church while both churches closely alied with their respective governments. The most visible result of these entanglements for the Serbian Church was the giant mosaic decoration of the above mentioned St. Sava Temple in Belgrade, which was financed by Russia and its oil giant Gazprom Neft. But the ties go much deeper when it comes to the exchange of students, literature, ideas. There are frequent mutual visits and Russian nuns are reviving several monasteries in Montenegro. However, the conflict between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Ecumenical Patriarchate, backed by the so-called Greek churches (Patriarchate of Alexandria, Church of Cyprus, Church of Greece), has placed the Serbian Church in a vulnerable position. Communion and liturgical unity with sister churches has all but ceased, while the pressure on the Serbian Church to take a stand is rising. Having only recently re-acquired public prominence, the Serbian Church has still to learn to cope with what that status brings, both from believers and from other churches doubting its course on various levels.

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