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SILENCE OR CONDEMNATION: THE ORTHODOX CHURCH ON HOMOSEXUALITY IN SERBIA¹

ABSTRACT: The article deals with the representation of the gay population in the discourse of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The declarations of Church bodies and officials, as well as unofficial public statements of prominent believers regarding gay persons are analysed. There is an ambivalent attitude towards gay people that is usually expressed in the ‘hate the sin, love the sinner’ formula. There is also a different kind of ambivalence: the Serbian Orthodox Church as well as its faithful either stick to the ‘policy of silence’ regarding LGBT(Q) issues, or they resort to a very strong moralistic judgment and condemnation. This was particularly noticeable around the time of the gay parade taking place in Belgrade in 2010, as well as during the public discussion before the passing of the anti-discrimination law in the national assembly in 2009. The inclusion of philosophical and medical concepts in theological discourse can also be ascertained. As a result, besides the expected ‘sin’, the categories of ‘unnatural/contrary to nature’ and ‘(mental) illness’ are often mentioned in the Church discourse, which is usually saturated with accentuated anti-Westernism.

KEY WORDS: gay population, Serbian Orthodox Church, ambivalent attitude, moralistic condemnation

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Tišina ali obsodba: pravoslavna cerkev o homoseksualnosti v Srbiji

IZVLEČEK: Članek se ukvarja z reprezentacijami gejevske populacije v diskurzu Srbske pravoslavne cerkve. Analizirane so izjave cerkvenih organov in uradnikov ter neuradne javne izjave uglednih vernikov o homoseksualnih osebah. Opazen je ambivalenten odnos do istospolno usmerjenih ljudi, ki je običajno izražen s formulo »Sovraži greh, ljubi grešnika«. Obstaja tudi drugačna oblika ambivalentnosti: Srbska pravoslavna cerkev se, enako kot njeni verniki, drži bodisi »politike tišine« v zvezi z vprašanji LGBT(Q) bodisi se zateka k zelo močnim moralističnim obsodbam. To je bilo zlasti opazno med gejevsko parado, ki je potekala v Beogradu leta 2010, kot tudi v javni razpravi pred sprejemom protidiskriminacijske zakonodaje v državnem zboru leta 2009. Članek izpostavlja vključitev filozofskih in medicinskih pojmov v teološki diskurz. Kot rezultat tega se poleg pričakovane kategorije »greha« v cerkvenem diskurzu pojavljata še kategoriji »nenaravno/v nasprotju z naravo« in »(duševna) bolezen«, oboje pa je postavljeno v kontekst protizahodnih idej.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: gejevska populacija, Srbska pravoslavna Cerkev, ambivalenten odnos, moralna obsodba

1 Introduction

In contemporary Serbia, both religion and sexual diversity have gained great public importance. Before the 1980s, religion was almost totally absent from the public space in the former Yugoslavia. With the “national revival”, which peaked in the armed conflict in the 1990s, the region witnessed the “comeback” of Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Islam in Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia, respectively (Perica 2002). Although traces of desecularization of Serbian society can be seen in the past few years, the Church remains among the most trusted institutions (Blagojević 2008; 2011; 2012; Gallup Balkan Monitor 2010) and religion appears as an unquestionable identification marker.

Less than a year after the fall of the Milošević regime, the first attempt to organize a Pride Parade in the Serbian capital on 30 June 2001 failed. The main reason for this was a violent attack on Pride participants in the centre of Belgrade. Both LGBT and any “suspiciously” looking people were severely beaten. Thugs, mainly football fans but also students of the theology and “other Orthodox youth”, were led by the priest Žarko Gavrilović (Milosavljević 2001). Two initiatives to organize the Parade, in 2004 and 2009, were called off for security reasons. On 10 October 2010, the first, and so far the only successful Pride Parade took place, and this “was seen as a watershed in the history of LGBT rights in Serbia” (Mikuš 2011: 841), bringing to light the deep divide between traditionalist and modernist social forces.

Since the Church occupies an important position in society, it greatly affects the attitudes of the people. Therefore, an insight into this religious institution’s positions

on homosexuality may prove useful in understanding the general public's negative opinion and prejudices² against same-sex love.

This paper deals with the representations of the gay and lesbian³ population in the discourse of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The press releases of the Church authorities, public announcements by bishops, priests, monks and nuns, as well as statements by prominent believers⁴ regarding homosexuality are analysed. The research (content analysis) was conducted on the material which consisted of: a) monographs on Orthodoxy and an Encyclopedia of Orthodoxy written by Serbian theologians (3 items); b) columns from *Pravoslavlje (Orthodoxy) - The Newspaper of the Serbian Patriarchate*⁵ from 2001 to 2012 (13 items); c) texts from *NIN (Nedeljne informativne novine - Weekly informational newspaper)*⁶ from 2001 to 2012 that addressed the relation between religion and homosexuality in Serbia (6 items); d) articles containing illustrative statements by Church members from the Serbian daily newspapers *Politika*, *Večernje novosti*, *Blic* and *Alo!* (4 items); and e) communiqués from the internet portal of the Serbian Orthodox Church (www.spc.rs) (6 items).

2 Church's frameworks for dealing with homosexuality

Our analysis shows that the contemporary Serbian Orthodox Church deals with homosexuality in three ways: homosexuality is either not addressed at all (policy of silence), it is dealt with in an ambivalent manner (hate the sin, love the sinner) or it is interpreted as a provocation coming from the West. However, when the Church feels provoked, silence and ambiguity give way to overt hostility, manifested in interpretations of homosexuality either as a deviation from the laws of nature or as an attack on the Serbian nation and its morals.

2.1. Awkward silence

The announcement and the very event of Belgrade's Gay Pride in October 2010 have triggered a massive reaction on the side of both the Serbian Orthodox Church officials

2. On homophobia in Serbia see: Gay Straight Alliance & CeSID 2010.

3. Although there are references to both gays and lesbians, statements concerning male homosexuals are much more prominent.

4. Public figures, such as artists, scientists, philosophers, and others, who openly declare as Orthodox Christians and advocate church agenda. The attitudes and acts of the far right or clerical-fascist organisations (such as *Obraz*) will not be discussed in this paper. This also applies to the writings of the Orthodox "moral crusaders": Žarko Gavrilović, who published the book *Stampedo Satanista (Stampede of the Satanists)* in 2010, or Ratibor Đurđević, the author of the booklet *Pederska Brigada (Queer Brigade)*, 1997).

5. The Church's bi-monthly journal intended for the general public, first time published in 1967.

6. A magazine with esteemed reputation that deals with political, social and cultural issues in Serbia, first time published in 1935. During January-March 2011, a six-part feuilleton »Serbian Orthodox Church in the New Century« was published in NIN, with one part dedicated to the Church's sexual ethics.

and their prominent believers, who otherwise tend to stick to the “policy of silence”⁷ regarding homosexuality, or ignore it, as advised by the Patriarch Irinej in his official address regarding the announcement of the Gay Pride in 2011: “In this particular case we hold that it is most suitable to treat the participants of the pride with total disregard. That could sober them up”⁸ (Irinej 2011). In his statement given to the Serbian tabloid paper *Alo!*, the Patriarch used somewhat harsher language: “This ‘pride’ should by all means be ignored, and I invite people not to be on the streets during the event and in that way, through disregard, to react to this *stupidity*”⁹ (Papović, Petrović & Dakić 2011, emphasis M. J.).

The above mentioned policy of silence is best illustrated with the following finding: homosexuality is not cited in any of the encyclopaedic or monograph publications that deal with Orthodoxy, whose authors are monks, priests or theologians from Serbia. Thus the three-volume *Enciklopedija pravoslavlja (Encyclopaedia of Orthodoxy)*, an ambitiously comprehensive work published in Belgrade in 2002 with Dimitrije Kalezić as its editor-in-chief, makes no direct references to concepts of sexuality, let alone “homosexuality”, in two thousand pages and among 14,000 discussed notions. It can be noted as a comparison that *The Oxford Dictionary of The Christian Church* contains this exact entry (see: Cross 1997: 786). Neither does *The Orthodox Church in 21st Century* by the late Radovan Bigović (2009) discuss the issue. Same-sex affection is, however, mentioned in the translated monographs by two foreign authors: in *The Orthodox Church (Pravoslavna crkva)* by Timothy Ware (Ver 2001) and in the identically titled monograph by Olivier Clément (Kleman 2001), although “homosexuality” is mentioned only in passing in the latter.

In a quite different manner, again as a comparison, *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to its History, Doctrine, and Spiritual Culture*, by John Anthony McGuckin (which has not been translated into Serbian yet), contains comparatively more references to the issue of sexual nonconformity with a compassionate tone, and use of terms such as: “consolation”, “grace”, “affection”, “support” and “encouragement” (see: McGuckin 2008: 423-424). There is not only an absence of silence in McGuckin’s account, but a detailed and understanding elaboration of the subject, which goes to show that this kind of treatment is possible inside the Orthodox milieu. This, further, tells us that the belittling attitude towards homosexuality is not in itself a necessary or unavoidable

7. “Orthodoxy does not debate this issue (homosexuality - M. J.), nor does it feel the necessity to pronounce it, taking the position that silence is better than condemnation” (Brown and Anatolios 2009: 132). “Orthodoxy attempts to stifle discussion of gay issues in the WCC (World Council of Churches - M. J.)” (Newlands 2006: 97 n3). On sexuality being a non-issue for the Orthodox see: World Council of Churches 1999.

8. Statements provided in the main text are author’s translations into English, except when noted otherwise. Their original Serbian versions can be found in the respective sources in the list of references at the end of the paper.

9. Translated by Zorica Mršević.

feature of Orthodox theology¹⁰, but, perhaps, of theologians coming from the specific social and cultural backgrounds ridden with homophobic affectations.

2.2 Ambivalent attitudes

The ambivalence towards the phenomenon of homosexuality, on the other hand, is evident in various comments and statements (Bogosavljević 2005; Cvetković *et al.* 2010; Čalija 2010a, 2010b; Đorđević and Sokić 2002; Irinej 2010). It can be observed that the attitude of the believers oscillates between the strict moralistic condemnation and compassionate evangelical love, and it is best formulated in the phrase: “hate the sin, love the sinner”. The attitude’s tone, intensity and its ideological saturation clearly position it within the frame of traditionalist¹¹ forces in present-day Serbia that strongly oppose the processes of modernisation, postulating conservatism as a response to social crisis, uncertainty and devastating consequences of an ongoing transition.

2.3 Provocations and obtrusions from the modern West

Mainstream religion in Serbia regards the issues related to LGBT community to be the topic which is imposed from abroad (Western Europe and America) and “essentially trivial” (Irinej 2010: 5). Drawing attention to issues pertaining to discrimination of gays and lesbians is perceived by some as “promotion” or “advertising” of homosexuality and forceful westernisation of Eastern Orthodox societies and cultures. Bringing up this topic is considered as “imposed by the ‘decadent West’” (Tucić 2011: 45)¹². This is also in line with the ever growing¹³ attitude present in Serbia regarding the European Union and the West as having “dubious and ludicrous moral standards” and being “a true danger to tradition” (Spencer-Dohner 2008). It is worth stressing that quite similar attitudes are present in the Romanian Orthodox Church (Stan 2010: 42), as well as other Eastern Christian Churches, as a renowned Greek sociologist of religion notes: anti-Westernism is a widespread phenomenon in the Orthodox world today, particularly

10. “The source of Orthodox intolerance is not to be found in the New Testament” (Ramet 2006b: 172).

11. Compared to Western Christian denominations, Orthodoxy appears to be a religious system more bound to tradition and the past (see: Makrides 2012; Ramet 2006b).

12. Illustrative of this is the reaction of Patriarch Irinej to the exhibition of photographs *Ecce homo* by Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin in Belgrade in October 2012: “This is a shame, this is terrible, this is a scandal!” (S. S. & J. R. 2012: 23). The Patriarch wrote a letter to the Prime Minister seeking prohibition of this “deeply insulting” event (Irinej 2012). The controversial exhibition consisted of 12 photographs of New Testament scenes, in modern surroundings, portraying Jesus among homosexuals, trans people, leather people and people with AIDS. Ohlson Wallin “proceeds from the fact that Jesus accepted the rejected and helped them, so she, as a believer, asks how it is that today a war in his name is waged against the LGBT population” (S. S. & J. R. *ibid.*).

13. *Balkan Monitor* polls show a steady decrease of EU support in Serbia in the 2006-2010 period (Gallup Balkan Monitor - 2010 Summary of Findings: 16), and the recent polls show that the support of the Serbian public for the EU accession process is the lowest in the past 10 years (Pekušić 2013).

in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, expressed by numerous actors, manifested at various levels and operating in different contexts, religious and otherwise (Makrides 2009).

In his address regarding the announcement of the forthcoming Gay Pride event in 2011, the Serbian Patriarch Irinej stated that “[w]e have had enough of humiliation and meeting external expectations. This unnatural freedom offered to us by ‘the gay pride’ is strange to our history, tradition and culture” (Irinej 2011). The Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral Amfilohije Radović explicitly links homosexuality with modern civilisation, defining it as “something imposed by modernity”, and in that way invoking “the myth about a Western conspiracy against Serbia” (Stakić 2011: 56).

3 The resolute response of the traditional East

When feeling provoked, the Serbian Orthodox Church ceases the “silent treatment” of homosexuality, and indifference gives way to overt hostility and often insulting denunciation – a (common) feature of the post-socialist condition. During the days of socialist regimes

antireligious state policies have managed to tone down the moral zeal of most Orthodox Churches in Eastern Europe, which had to recognise that a tough stance on sexual behaviour and family issues could alienate a population that was already drawn away from the church by secularisation, modernisation, urbanisation, and the policies of an atheistic state. (Stan 2010: 42)

After the demise of socialism, Churches returned “with a vengeance” and re-entered the public space with vocal demands for restoring traditional morality and practices. Such moralistic fashion is ascertained by the Greek Metropolitan John Zizioulas (Ζηζιούλας). According to him, the main feature of this trend is giving primacy to adherence to moral laws over other elements present in the Church and an emphasis on social activism and Puritan piety “with almost exclusive emphasis on sexual morality” (Zizioulas *s.a.*). The rhetoric of “brimstone and fire” is used in condemning gay people, prominently utilised by the Metropolitan Amfilohije, who writes about the Gay Pride in Belgrade held in 2010, in this vigorous manner:

Something terrible happened yesterday in Belgrade. Never had something that terrible happened before in Belgrade. (...) It is terrible, as the event that took place today poisons; and it is dictated by today’s strongmen of the world. That is something that destroys not only the body itself but also the spiritual organism, the spirit of the folk, denies human life, and desecrates the holiness of the human body, human spirit, community, and leads to nothingness and self-destruction. (Amfilohije 2010b: 17)

In the second article published in the same issue of *Pravoslavije*¹⁴, the Metropoli-

14. It was issue 1046 from October 15 2010, with the following headline on the cover page: “Obraz Beograda mora da bude svetao!” (“The Honour of Belgrade has to be Bright!” - which are the words of major Dragutin Gavrilović from the speech delivered to Serbian troops who were defending Belgrade from the invading German and Austrian armies in 1915). An article with the identical title did not discuss the Gay Pride directly, and one could get the impression that the editorial board of the magazine pretended to be ignorant of the recent events - the fact that the Pride had been held five days before and that it was marked by an outburst of violence caused

tan labels the Gay Pride as “a parade of shame and embarrassment”. A year earlier, in 2009, he labelled the event as “a parade of Sodom and Gomorrah” (Milićević *et al.* 2010: 52), by making use of the Old Testament’s symbolism of Sodom and Gomorrah, this time adding the New Testament metaphor of “the tree that does not bear fruit” (and is to be cut down, destroyed and cast into the fire; see: Matthew 3:10, 7:19; Luke 13:6-9) – which, according to Stakić (2011: 56) “represents a rather explicit call for violent intervention”. Similarly, professor Žarko Trebješanin, a psychologist, claims that the Metropolitan Amfilohije encouraged violent right-wingers “to crush the sinning, and by repeated mentioning of Sodom and Gomorrah, he practically called them to violence” (Mršević 2013: 66). For male homosexuality (“muželoštvo”¹⁵) Amfilohije stated that it represents: “a) desecration and abuse of human nature and its God-given potentials, b) violence against the moral order of things, c) observed more closely, it is a conscious or unconscious human impulse for self-destruction” (Amfilohije 2010a: 6-7). An apocalyptical motif is also present in his (hate) speech as he sees the Gay Pride as the announcement of no less than the “twilight” of the Western civilisation and the “fall” of Christian peoples (Amfilohije 2010a: 8). It is also worth noting that he puts the entire blame on the violence escalating around the Gay Pride in Belgrade on the organisers, “these godless perverse people” (Amfilohije 2010b: 16). He continued with moral(istic) crusading in his Christmas Epistle from 2013 where, after reusing the barren tree metaphor, spoke of “unnatural, mindless and futile inflaming of male for male and female for female”, while positioning “homosexuality”¹⁶ in the context of the “new totalitarianism of mindless drives” that, as he believes, leads man to chaos,

by the far right-wing groups (at the forefront of which was *Obraz*). Still, by using the given title and relying on its allegorical meaning, the magazine obviously sided with “the defenders of the purity of the Serbian nation”. Additionally, this issue of the magazine contained a number of articles dealing with homosexuality - the statement of the Holy Assembly of Bishops regarding the announcement of the gay parade in Belgrade, the interview with Amfilohije “Kolo smrti na ulicama Beograda” (“The Circle of Death on the Streets of Belgrade”), “Jedan pastirski osvrt na homoseksualnost” (“A Shephard’s View on Homosexuality”) by Thomas Hopko, the plea of priests from Niš “Homoseksualnost je neprirodna i grešna” (“Homosexuality is Unnatural and Sinful”), Miodrag Popović’s Prayer from the Saint Sava Temple “Sve mi je dozvoljeno...” (“I am allowed everything...”), Amfilohije’s speech “Nasilje obezboženih ljudi stvara drugo nasilje” (“The violence of Infidels Prompts more Violence”), as well as the interview with Zorica Kuburović “Moje ‘ne’ promociji duševne bolesti” (“A ‘No’ to the Promotion of Mental Illness on my Behalf”) - so one could safely claim that № 1046 of the magazine *Pravoslavljje* focused on the issue of homosexuality.

15. *Muželoštvo* is the Church Slavonic translation of the Greek term *arsenokoítai* (ἀρσενικοίται) which is used by St. Paul in 1 Cor 6:9. The word most probably comes from the Corinthian slang of that time. Old Latin translation is *masculorum concubitores* – “male bedfellows”. “Muž” is “man” or “male” in Church Slavonic, and “lož-” refers to “sleeping” or “lying down”, therefore *muželožnik* is “the man who lies with men”.
16. The term *homosexuality* is incorrect, because it does not aim at denoting a doctrine, movement or an artistic style, but one of the varieties of sexuality, thus: *homosexuality*. Besides, if *homosexuality* was the right term, we would speak of *homosexualists*, not *homosexuals*.

death and nothingness, renders consecrated sanctity of marriage pointless, destroys family, abolishes monogamy, and in the name of individual sexual satisfaction transforms a mother's womb from the workshop of life to the workshop of death, legalises all sexual depravities making them into a business worth billions (Amfilohije 2013). Similarly, Žarko Vidović, an "orthodox philosopher" sees the Pride as a "declaration of war", and even as a "genocide" to which he responds "with the defence of the family as a true Church"¹⁷, while recommending harsh punishment of excommunication from the Church community for gay people, whom he also labels "pathetic", for "[t] here is no remorse for those who want to subject to ridicule what God created such as the power of humans to give birth to children" (S. T.L. 2010: 11).

The prioress of the monastery Sokolice in Kosovo, Mother Makarija Obradović labels homosexuality as:

"a severe disease of human personality", and a homosexual person as "an abomination before God", a person with diminished physical and human qualities, a potentially sick person, if otherwise such a person has not already been "awarded with incurable AIDS". "The Serbian Orthodox Church has methods to deal with this phenomenon if such cases appear within the ranks of priests and monks, but such examples *do not exist among us*", the Mother asserts confidently, by adding that *such cases might exist in other religions*. (Nikoletić 2011a: 37, emphasis M. J.)

The surprisingly belligerent tone used by the cloistress and reference to "methods of dealing with this phenomenon" (unusually reminiscent of *Die Endlösung*), bear witness to the intensity of condemnation. The firm non-acceptance of the existence of homosexuals among the clergy¹⁸ recalls the anecdotal remark by the Serbian Prince Miloš from the 19th century in which he denies the existence of homosexuals in Serbia.¹⁹ These are textbook examples of the tendency for which Abraham Roback coined the term *ethnophaulism* – a practice of groups to attribute the origin of social failings to other ethnicities/peoples. "In the case of homosexual behaviour, ethnophaulism is not only a type of group slander, but it also reflects a curiosity to trace the custom to its purported source" (Dynes 1990: 368), which takes a rather simple form: homosexuality

17. On 12 September 2009 a "Family walk" took place in Belgrade, organized by the "patriotic" organization Srpski sabor Dveri (now a political party) with the blessings of the Serbian Orthodox Church, as a sort of a counter-parade to the gay-pride (which was scheduled for September 20, but did not take place). The "Family walk" was presented as an "expression of the belief in the world of traditional values and communities, family life and morality" (Obradović 2009: 5).

18. "Despite the fact that the Church sees homosexuality as a perversion, those attracted to the same sex could be found among the ranks of monks, bishops, priests and theology students" (Nikoletić 2011b: 43).

19. "Our society could never pride itself on even a remotely humane attitude towards gays and lesbians. Only until recently this 'highly moral' society refused (even) to accept the existence of the same-sex orientated women and men. This 'blindness' for homosexuality is reflected in the best manner in an anecdote according to which, while writing the criminal code for the (newly-)independent state of Serbia, the advisers asked Prince Miloš whether to include male homosexuality into criminal offences or not, to what he responded: 'God forbid, so someone may think that such a thing exists here!'" (Nebričić 2009: 97).

is a form of corruption introduced from abroad and most definitely not indigenous to our healthy country (or church).

3.1 Betrayal of the nation

The Serbian Patriarch interpreted the announcement of the Gay Pride in 2011 as a treacherous diversion aimed at drawing public attention away from the alarming situation in the southern Serbian province of Kosovo and Metohija, where ethnic Albanians, after the armed conflict and NATO intervention in 1999, seceded from Serbia. In 2008 the Republic of Kosovo declared independence, increasing the already high level of political instability of the region, which in its turn plays a major role in shaping opinions towards non-normative groups and behaviours, like homosexuals. Furthermore, Kosovo has a special significance for the Church and for the Serbian nation. It is the area where the “Kosovski boj” (“The Battle of Kosovo”) between the Serbian army and the invading army of the Ottoman Empire took place in 1389. The battle acquired an almost timeless dimension, regarded by Serbs as a defining moment in their history and identity. Numerous medieval monasteries and churches are situated in Kosovo, which is often referred to as “the spiritual cradle of the Serbian nation”. A strong mythical significance of Kosovo constitutes the core point of this specific form of religious nationalism²⁰.

Patriarch Irinej made a direct link between the situation in Kosovo and the gay parade: “Bearing in mind the announced parade in Belgrade, we come to the conclusion that one wants to cover up and obscure the tragic position of Serbian people in mournful Kosovo and Metohija” (Irinej 2011). Ivan Vučković, an actor²¹, made a similar statement, labelling the gay parade as a “hypocritical whim and a dictated abnormal requirement” in the moment when lives and rights of “our brothers” from Kosovo and Metohija are “really threatened” (Lazić 2010: 21).

3.2 Deviation of human nature

The Orthodox official theology unambiguously interprets homosexuality as a sin, illness, disorder, a form of zeal and addiction (similar to drug abuse), as well as something unnatural, sacrilegious and destructive:

Suffice it to say that the official position of the Orthodox Churches towards homosexuality has remained conservative, similar to the stance adopted by the Roman Catholic Church, and more intolerant than the Orthodox pronouncements and practices towards abortion and contraception. Orthodox Canon Law condemns homosexuality in the harshest terms. (Stan 2010: 39; see also: Hopko 1987, 2010; Popović 2006, 2010; *s.n.* 1984)

The Church’s discourse on homosexuality incorporates the ancient Greek philosophical notion of *non-natural* or *unnatural* (*παρά φύσιν*), where the *nature* is not only postulated as a criterion of a proper sexual behaviour, but as a power that “itself

20. For more on the gradual shift from “instrumental pious nationalism” to “religious nationalism” in Serbia see: Drezgić 2010 and Vrcan 1995.

21. Who, ironically enough, played a part of the priest in the popular TV series “Selo gori, a baba se češlja” (“The village is on fire, but grandma is combing her hair”).

condemns the perverted practice” (Primoratz 1999: 51). Conflating of the concepts of *natural* and *moral*, and making “the distinction between the natural and the unnatural seems to give the condemnatory moral use of the term a particular force, as well as a certain veneer of objectivity and, in certain contexts, of almost scientific authority” (Primoratz *ibid.*).

The Church also adopts the pathological model and “borrows” the concepts such as *disease*²² and *disorder* from the medical discourse, although, when it comes to same-sex attraction, these notions are considered to be outdated²³. However, the passage from the Nativity Encyclical of His Holiness Patriarch Irinej and all the Hierarchs of the Serbian Orthodox Church from 2011 demonstrates the aforementioned:

What is AIDS, that horrible disease and calamity of our time, if not, in most cases, a consequence of the desecration of the sacredness of marriage and the misuse of sexuality and physical love, and often a consequence of their *unnatural* use? As the misuse of God-given psychophysical powers causes many *diseases*, likewise the *misuse of nature and the natural resources* around us, man’s insatiability and greed are *damaging nature* (...) The disdain of the *healthy, God-given laws of human nature*, transfigured by Christ’s Birth into the unlimited “measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ”, and the *idolizing of unnatural fornication and adultery* cannot but, *according to the very nature and moral order of things*, end up in the demonization and annihilation of humanity in its very essence.²⁴ (Irinej *et al.* 2011: 2-3, emphasis M. J.)

4 Embracing the fallen

Despite the general reject of homosexuality, there are certain writings and statements among the officials of the Serbian Orthodox Church that assess homosexuality and the gay parade in a more collected manner, in line with the thinking of John Zizioulas expressed in an interview from 2000 where he states that

If homosexuality is perceived as a sin, then again, it is the Church that has to accept such a sinner in the same manner as it accepts the heterosexual one. For there is no difference between these two: if the first one is a sinner, then that is the case also with the second. Otherwise, it would be a form of racism – to consider a certain sin as unacceptable and the other as acceptable. (Marković 2000)

The statement issued by the Holy Assembly of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church regarding the announcement of the Gay Pride in Belgrade in 2010 was also,

22. Patriarch Irinej in an interview from 2012: “I do not judge those people but feel deeply sorry for them. It is probably something stronger than them. It is a deviation of the human nature which is not seen anywhere else in nature. I think it is a disease, and that these people need help to overcome this unnatural anomaly” (Spaić & Popović 2012: 18).

23. Contemporary medicine no longer considers homosexuality to be a disorder: the World Health Organisation removed it from the registry of illnesses and disorders (International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems - ICD) on May 17 1990, and since then it has been regarded as a variation of human sexuality. In 2008, the Ethical Committee of the Serbian Medical Association publically expressed the view that homosexuality is not a disorder.

24. Translated by *Path of Orthodoxy*.

for the most of its part, a call for refraining from violence²⁵ against the participants of the “noisy, distasteful, utterly provocative and sacrilegious parade”, since “[i]nstead of diminishing and conquering evil, violence only multiplies it”. (Irinej 2010: 5).

Davor Džalto, an artist and art historian, writes that “[h]ating the sinner because there is hate for the sin equals suicide for the Christians” (Džalto 2011: 53). In the appeal issued by 29 priests from Niš regarding the Belgrade Pride Parade in 2010, “forgiveness” and “love” figure prominently (Cvetković et al. 2010: 10-11). Hieromonk Nikodim stresses that the Church condemns the sin, but “keeps its doors wide open for all those who by the gift of God’s providence become aware of their sinfulness, and to those who sense the desire within hearts to clean their polluted souls with the tears of repentance” (Bogosavljević 2005: 18). The priest Dr Srboljub Bulić, a clinical psychologist at the Orthodox Pastoral Advisory in Belgrade, despite considering homosexuality as “somehow contrary to the divine laws”, stated the following:

It is still not wrong for me to see homosexuals as my Christian brothers, who have problems. I do not look at gays and lesbians with anger. If a gay person comes to me, I would not try to convert or judge him/her, I would rather simply try to hear, offer my guidance and be a friend to such a person. (Đorđević and Sokić 2002)

5 Our religious freedom and the human rights of the Others

As religious denominations engage with homosexuality – a “torn in the flesh” for the churches – the struggle shifts to the sphere of human rights. The members of the LGBT population are facing opposition by those who invoke freedom of religion and belief against the legal ban of discrimination based on sexual orientation (Endše 2010: 214-245; Ghanea *et al.* 2007; Hunt 2010; Loughlin 2004; Nathan 2009; Newlands 2006; van der Ven 2010; van der Ven *et al.* 2004).

A similar conflict was present in Serbia during the public debate regarding the draft and passing of the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination. Seven “traditional”²⁶

25. “On the very day the Gay Pride was held, the SOC declared, with the blessing of its leader - Patriarch Irinej, that the *moleban* (prayer) in the Temple of Saint Sava against the *prelest* * of homosexuality, drug-abuse and other forms of zeal and addiction, scheduled for that day, was cancelled. This was followed by the statement for the media by Atanasije, the Bishop of Hvosstan and the Vicar of the Patriarch Irinej, in which he pointed out that anyone who objected to the law enforcement services does not have the approval of the Serbian Church for such an act. Živica Tucić, an analyst of religious developments, perceives this statement as the most important among the statements that could be heard from the Church orders: this was so both due to the fact the statement was given with the blessing of the Patriarch and the fact that it clearly expressed the views of the Church that there would not be any blessing for those that inflict violence” (Čalija 2010b: 9).

* The term *prelest* in Orthodox theology relates to the condition of spiritual deception, to an act of wounding of human nature by falsehood; etymologically, the word is derived from the term *lest* (deception, lie, delusion) in Church Slavonic. The theologians maintain that because of the Original sin all people are in such a state.

26. Labelled so by Article 10 of the Law on Churches and Religious Communities: “Traditional Churches are those which have had a historical continuity within Serbia for many centuries

religious organisations exerted considerable pressure on the authorities to withdraw the draft, which previously reached the deputies in the Assembly and went through all relevant parliamentary bodies. The main targets of critique were the implementations of transsexuality and homosexuality as specific grounds for discrimination, with the request by the “traditional” religious organisations for the adjustment of Article 18²⁷ of this law to make reference to religious beliefs, as well as the removal of Article 21²⁸, which prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation (Mršević 2013: 69)²⁹. They jointly stated that the law “could lead to collision among certain rights stated in the draft and the right to practice, express and teach religious beliefs freely (...), and the protection of the moral values” (Irinej *et al.* 2009a).

NGO Gay Straight Alliance regarded this “a serious attack on the constitutional order of Serbia”, adding that “the churches justified their actions by homophobic attitudes” (Milićević *et al.* 2009: 71). Irinej, the Bishop of Bačka, responded that introducing such rights “insult public morality, religious beliefs and the basic social values as well as the right to personal dignity and respect for privacy and family life guaranteed by the international regulations, the Constitution and the official laws of Serbia” (Irinej *et al.* 2009b).³⁰

and which have acquired the status of a legal person in accordance with particular acts, that is: the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Slovak Evangelical Church (a.c.), the Christian Reformed Church and the Evangelical Christian Church (a.c.). Traditional religious communities are those which had a historical continuity within Serbia for many centuries and which have acquired the status of a legal person in accordance with particular acts, that is: the Islamic Religious Community and the Jewish Religious Community. ”

27. Compared to the draft of the proposed Law on Prohibition of Discrimination, Article 18 was amended in the first paragraph and the second paragraph was added, so in the adopted version of the Law it reads as: “Discrimination shall be considered to occur in the case of conduct contrary to the principle of free expression of faith or beliefs or if an individual or a group of persons is denied the right to acquire, maintain, express and change faith or beliefs, or the right to express, be it privately or publicly, or act in accordance with his/her beliefs. The conduct of priests, that is to say, religious officials, which is in keeping with a religious doctrine, beliefs or the objectives of churches and religious communities entered in the register of religious communities, in accordance with the law regulating the freedom of religion and the status of churches and religious communities, shall not be considered to constitute discrimination.” (Unofficial translation solicited by *UNDP Serbia*)
28. A part of Article 21 referring to discrimination based on gender identity was deleted, while the provisions banning discrimination based on sexual orientation remained in the adopted Law: “Sexual orientation shall be a private matter, and no one may be called to publicly declare his/her sexual orientation. Everyone shall have the right to declare his/her sexual orientation, and discriminatory treatment on account of such a declaration shall be forbidden.” (Unofficial translation solicited by *UNDP Serbia*)
29. Gordana Živković, senior research associate at the Institute of European Studies from Belgrade, asks of the Serbian “liberals”: “Who gives them the right to ‘tolerate’ and respect the rights of the so-called marginal groups, and at the same time treat rights of the ‘majority’ (which includes the believers of the SOC) in a totalitarian and fascistic manner?” (Živković 2007: 22).
30. If a “social credo” of Orthodox Churches could be composed, its first point, according to Ramet, would read: “God’s law is above the positive laws, and therefore the Orthodox Church has the

Bishop Irinej's advert to rights guaranteed by various legal acts might seem a bit odd when one of the rudimentary legal principles is recalled, that of equality before the law. In the analysis of the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination made by Zorica Mršević, a Professor of Law, she explains that according to paragraph 2 of Article 18 religious leaders are put above legal provisions and therefore cannot be legally sanctioned for discrimination (Mršević 2013: 70).

6 Conclusion

It does not seem likely that a more liberal attitude on the part of the Serbian Orthodox Church towards the homosexual population will come quickly. The Church's "social credo", as conceived by Ramet (2006a: 144), is not inclined towards tolerance for anything that deviates from the Church guidelines, with sexual tolerance being "the worst type of tolerance" and "all alternatives to heterosexuality" being "anathemas". Tolerance of homosexuality, ecumenism and European orientation are "organically interrelated" and "embody a threat" to the "purity" which "must be defended" (Ramet 2006b: 167). What further solidifies the Serbian traditionalist opposition to the "spectres" of (post) modernity is a portion of intense nationalism on the part of the Church. The resulting discourse constructs homosexuals as "constitutive outside" of the nation, as the nation's Other³¹. "A nationalist rhetoric centred on homosexuality promises to deliver to the nation what is most elusive: identity" (Dudink 2011: 263). Therefore, one can expect the Church to remain the strongest pillar of heteronormativity in Serbian society.

However, what can also be expected are increasingly vocal demands for mollification of the "brimstone and fire" rhetoric, and emphasis on the evangelical love for LGBT persons, be they believers or not, who understand their lifestyle as the only possible choice (therefore, not a choice at all), despite the fact that the Church regards it as a sin.

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right and duty to judge which laws and bills are sinful and to fight for the applicable laws to reflect the celestial law (as understood by the Orthodox Church)" (Ramet 2006a: 143-144).

31. "The homosexual is, for the contemporary Orthodox Church, what the Jew was in bygone days" (Ramet 2006b: 171).

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