CHRISTIANITY OF FUNDAMENTALISM AND SECULARISM: ARE THERE HINTS OF SOCIAL TEACHING WITHIN THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH?

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Abstract: The scientific paper before us will question the role, scope and importance of Orthodox Christianity in social issues, especially in the case of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC). The topic of the scientific work is focused on questioning the connections between the specifically Orthodox experience of religion and its place in contemporary (Serbian) society. Therefore, the views of church dignitaries of the Serbian Orthodox Church regarding the role of the Orthodox faith in social issues were selected as the subject of research. Through his research, the author has set himself the goal of predicting the possibilities of establishing and building the social teaching of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The increasingly active role of religious communities and churches in contemporary society: from culture, through politics and economy to the natural environment points to the legitimate social significance of the basic assumptions of this scientific paper. The questioning of theoretical assumptions, religious conceptions and spiritual-political phenomena: fundamentalism, integralism and secularism on the example of an isolated case study in the ideas and value positions of dignitaries and theologians of the Serbian Orthodox Church leads to an indisputable innovative contribution and scientific justification of the research. After all, the SOC has always been the foundation of the national rallying of the Serbian ethnos, and the main lever of national identity, so the overall justification of the topic is greater. In the paper, the author started from the initial assumption that the current opinion in the Serbian Orthodox Church is not favorable towards the establishment of the social teaching of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The research was based on numerous methods in social sciences, such as: observation, case study, content analysis, comparative approach...

Keywords: Eastern Christian Orthodoxy, Serbian Orthodox Church, secularism, fundamentalism, integrism.

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Introduction (Problem situation)

Recently, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America (Ecumenical Patriarchate) published an official document entitled: "For the Life of the World!", immediately adding a clarification to the title – "Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church " (Greek: *Tò κοινωνικό ἦθος τῆς Ὀρθόδοξης Ἐκκλησίας*, English: *Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church*). Thus, the Greek Church, as the most authoritative in the Orthodox world, declared its views in 2020 concerning the social issues of the modern world. Before it, the largest and most populous church in the Orthodox world, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), did the same in 2000. In 2000, it published the "Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church" (Russian: *Основы Социальной концепции Русской православной церкви*). Long before the ROC, the Roman Church adopted its official document: *Catholic Social Teaching* (CST). It is not a single document, but a collection of papal epistles that, starting from the 1891 Epistle "On new things" or *Rerum novarum*, until today, through a series of encyclicals, have created a kind of guiding light regarding values and norms, to be used in everyday life of Catholics in the modern world. Be that as it may, today the three largest apostolic churches have already made their stance towards the most important social issues of the modern world, ranging from sexual relations and marriage, technology and innovation; media, war and peace, and globalization, to health issues and the natural environment in which the modern man lives...

1. The Problematic question

Despite the clear declaration of all three largest apostolic churches regarding contemporary social issues, the place, role and position of the church in the modern world, the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) has not yet taken a stance on this issue. Pundits less informed on the situation could come to the conclusion that there is a certain "conspiracy of silence" regarding the attitude of the SOC towards the pressing social issues affecting the modern man. Several important problematic questions arise here: 1. Is there really a "conspiracy of silence"? 2. Is the SOC working on a document that would at least deal with the "social morality of the SOC", if not its social concept? 3. Why hasn't the SOC come out with its own document? 4. What is the position of theologians, high-ranking dignitaries of the Serbian Orthodox Church, professors of the Faculty of Theology and sociologists of religion (in particular: sociologists of Orthodoxy) on this issue? 5. What conclusions can we draw based on the situation and the findings that we encounter about it?

2. The Conceptual framework

The research deals with three basic concepts: Social teaching, Fundamentalism and Secularism.

Social teaching of the church "is a set of doctrines and principles that a particular religious community develops starting from its basic religious texts and traditions, in order to offer its faithful guidelines for action in social, national and public life in general" (Ђурковић, 2014). It is a "proclamation of faith" which the Church makes known while the world is facing social realities, most often through: advice, recommendations, instructions (Opus Dei, 2022). Proponents of Social learning assume that: "Christianity has never been merely a project of personal self-perfection... Jesus once said: By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:35)" (STC, 2024). It is a more or less successful attempt to integrate Christianity into the social life of the community. Society, in that case, is perceived as: every form of lasting bond between people who jointly strive to realize a value (or goal)" (Höffner, 2006, p. 25). "They view integralism as a narrative of salvation history,.." (Vallier, 2023, p. 19). Social teaching is a measure of the integralism of Christianity in a com-

munity. Through its action, it strongly encourages social and social cohesion within a society, which is basically structured on the basis of interests.

Opposite the Church's social Teaching are two other social and political phenomena: Religious fundamentalism and Secularism.

Religious fundamentalism is "a return to the original foundations of faith", (Станковић, 2010, стр. 112): "a return to the essence of faith" (Guolo, 2006, p. 6). The word fundamentalism comes from the Latin word *fundamentum*. "*Fundus* is a basis, a base or a foundation, so in a literal translation, fundamentalism would be: "foundation+ism" = *fundamentalism* (Станковић, 2015, стр. 761). It is therefore something that is: attached, fixed, something that is: *in the Foundation of something*. Fundamentalism, therefore, is *groundedness-in-something*, but also a return to the roots. "Fundamentalism, on the contrary, is seen as an ideological commitment to the roots and origins of religion, in a broad sense as an attitude towards any religious concept, idea, or value, which is taken under full-scale protection" (Головушкин, 2015, стр. 87). It is also a "fight for the purity of conviction" (Ruthven, 2005, p. 12). Today, fundamentalism has basically grown into an understanding on returning to the sources of faith (Заболотная & Якупов, 2016, стр. 46): how faith was once interpreted, what it was like at its very source in the era when Jesus prayed in the desert and Muhammad preached to a small Bedouin community of Muslims. Therefore, fundamentalism tends towards a strict literal interpretation of scriptures, dogmas or ideologies (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992). In a somewhat narrower, more practical sense: "Fundamentalism, is type of conservative religious movement characterized by the advocacy of strict conformity to sacred texts." (Munson, 2003, 2024). In the social, especially political, sciences: fundamentalism is seen as the Politics of response to globalization processes. One of the fundamental characteristics of fundamentalism is its opposition to the modern world. Those who act in the name of religion believe that the goals they achieve are given by God. "One of the fundamental characteristics of fundamentalism is its opposition to the modern world. Those who act in the name of religion believe that the goals they achieve are given by God" (Матевски, 2019, стр. 165). The idea of the purity of faith is always present in fundamentalism: especially the tendency to cleanse faith of ideological and social deposits that have accumulated over time and that corrupt it (Nagata, 2001).

In principle, fundamentalists are those who believe in certain non-negotiable fundamentals of faith. The basis of faith in Orthodoxy is founded on the Holy Scriptures and the interpretation of the Holy Fathers, but only in the parts that were confirmed at the Ecumenical Councils. Given that the Holy Fathers also differed on various points of view, the approach of the fundamentalists is extremely reductionist: only what was confirmed by the Ecumenical Councils has the force of dogma. Christian-Orthodoxy, therefore, takes the assumption that those opinions about which there is agreement of the Holy Fathers confirmed at the Ecumenical Councils and they are undeniable. It is the fundus or base, that is, the essence of faith, and in that case fundamentalism is reduced to: "fossilized set of propositions used in self-promotion" (Demacopoulos, 2015).

It follows from this that Christian-Orthodox fundamentalism strives to "distill the faith only on the Holy Scriptures and the Universal Councils" (Fr. Jeremy, 2017). Therefore, Orthodox fundamentalism is reduced to a reductivist and ritualized observance of church dogmas that were declared indisputable at the Ecumenical Councils. "(...) all other ideas belong to the category of theologoumenon (non-doctrinal theological opinion)" (Ibidem). The fundamentalist commitment does not apply to them. However, those who deny the fundamentalist worldview argue that it cannot be assumed that the Holy Fathers of the Church agreed on all theological and ethical issues. On the contrary, Ecumenical councils did judge, but only on controversial points of view. These views have passed the test of scrutiny and their set is the foundation or fundus of faith. The fundamentalist point of view insists that if something does not match this indisputable foundation of faith, then it is a novelty that should be rejected without thinking.

Secularism implies the process of separating religion from the affairs of civil society, as well as the separation of religious affairs from state activities (Galen, 2016, p. 22-23). "[...] separation of religious institutions from the institutions of the state and no domination of the political sphere by religious institutions; freedom of thought, conscience, and religion for all; and no state discrimination against anyone on grounds of their religion or non-religious worldview" (Copson, 2019). Secularism removes or at least significantly reduces the role of religion in any public sphere. It is, therefore, about extracting religion from social and political processes. "(...) separationism, on its most basic level, constitutes a state neutrality toward religion where the state, at least officially, gives preference to no particular religion but does not restrict the presence of religion in the public sphere; in contrast the secularist-laicist model specifically declares that not only does the state not support any religion, it also restricts the presence of religion in the public sphere..." (Fox, 2011, p. 385). The division into public and private, as one of the basic achievements of modern society, is adopted here as a division into religious and political spheres, where religion is in the domain of privacy and politics grows exclusively into *Res publica* or public activity (Calhoun, 2008, p. 7). In a somewhat narrower sense, secularism expresses the tendency of ecclesiastical circles to withdraw their activity from the public sphere, to limit churchliness to the church and church activities. This last interpretation can be of utmost importance to us when constructing a basic hypothesis.

3. Basic Assumption (Basic Hypotesis)

If we now cross-examine three key terms for discussing the present research procedure, then we can put forward the basic hypothesis, which reads: Orthodox fundamentalism correlates with secularism in Orthodox societies and negatively correlates with the intention of the church to make its stance regarding social morality. In order to further support this hypothesis, we analyzed the content of the statements of theologians, high-ranking dignitaries of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) and Orthodox lay intellectuals who dealt with this issue. All of them, interpreting the religious approaches of Orthodox Christianity, also took their stance towards the social morality of the SOC.

4. The Present State of Affairs (Analysis)

Arguments that are FOR the adoption of the social ethics of the Serbian Orthodox Church are based on the following. First of all, the social morality of the Orthodox Churches differs in its essential features, and its approach, from the social teaching of the Catholic Church (Ђурковић, 2014). A different approach to social morality enables Orthodox churches to preserve their authenticity and uniqueness based on their own approaches to the Christian faith. Second, "The church that exists and acts in history not only has a developed social consciousness, but also has the task of testifying to its social attitudes, among which the theologically developed ideal of social organization on earth is in the first place, although it does not aspire to secular power or statehood itself" (Мрђеновић, 2017, стр. 113) The bitter realization remains that "we failed to deeply and truly Christianize the world" (Zizioulas, 1999). "The Church is not of this world but lives in this world" (Мрђеновић, 2017, стр. 117). Therefore, it "cannot remain indifferent... Its basic duty is to point out the internal dimension of the problem and to offer a solution. (...) according to the Orthodox attitude" (Мандзаридис, 2011, стр. 172), that is, according to the Orthodox approach. It is within its jurisdiction to provide support to those imperiled, to show them the way and the way to overcome certain problems. "When a man reaches an impasse of his own creation, the Church should take advantage of the opportunity and propose a solution from its own perspective" (Ibidem, p. 173).

Arguments AGAINST profiling not only social teaching, but even social morality, are significantly more numerous in Orthodox literature, especially the one in the Serbian language. The main arguments of the authors for not adopting such a document in the form of recommendations are of the following nature: First, the message is: "Always do things according to the will of God!" (Станковић, 1927, стр. 15). It is a kind of moral commandment. "It is the believer's duty to permanently experience in his life what is the good and pleasing, perfect will of God. The awareness of God's will in every particular moment of life should be a dynamic assumption of the action of believers" (Мандзаридис, 2011, стр. 172). Orthodoxy, therefore, insists on the constant submission of human will to that of God. Second, it insists on individual salvation. The individual is the center of the universe, and everything outside of him is a construct, a nongodly creation. "Sociability is manifested in overcoming individuality" (Мандзаридис & al., 2004, стр. 108). It is not the business of the Orthodox to deal with superhuman creations. According to these points of view, there is no spirituality there, the Holy Spirit is not at work there, so it is pointless to deal with these topics. "(...) oeconomy cannot be turned into a system or an ideal." (Мандзаридис, 2011, стр. 173). Therefore, "(...) the Church... did not always pay much attention to current social problems, which in themselves were a changing reality" (Живковић, 2011, стр. 153). Third, individual salvation is the main driving force of entire eschatology. "The basic goal of the Church is not to offer the world good ideas or original systems, but its salvation and renewal" (Мандзаридис, 2011, стр. 171). "Man's participation in the life of the Church is realized in the sacraments and in lay asceticism..." (Живковић, 2011, стр. 15). Fourth, it follows from the previous points that churchliness is located within the church itself. Ecclesiasticism is interpreted as participation in the sacraments and a way of life resembling that of a Confessor of the Faith. "Confession of faith is the foundation on which the church is built and where it wins" (Димитријевић, 1970, стр. 147). The Orthodox worldview keeps the sacraments in the church, does not reveal them outside of it. "One type of priestly service, i.e. shepherding people, is direct access to personalities, e.g. through confession and the work of confessors" (Голијан, 2019, стр. 105). There is a deep-rooted awareness that the Holy Spirit can be poured out only within a church building. In a word, "All secrets take place in the Church, and are carried out in the Church,..." (Живковић, 2011, стр. 154). "The process of identifying the Church with the outside world; and instead of the transformation and elevation of the world towards God, there is the humiliation of the Church itself and its stumbling towards the world" (Мрђеновић, 2017, стр. 115). This "stumbling towards the world" is often the main concern voiced against the definition of social morality by the SOC. Fifth, "When a person reaches an impasse that he himself created, the Church should take advantage of the opportunity and propose a solution from its own perspective" (Мандзаридис, 2011, стр. 173). But that only happens when a person reaches a dead end. In all other situations, there is no need to support the person. This is a strictly individual and specific situation. It is a kind of legal casuistry: solving the situation on a case-by-case basis. Most often through confession: the problem and concrete solution through instruction and spiritual virtue.[2] Finally, sixth, little attention is paid to missionary activity in Orthodoxy. "One weakness of Orthodoxy in this regard is the lack of interest of most theologians in missionary theology, but also a kind of fear of missionary engagement" (Голијан, 2019, стр. 114) Often, Orthodox missionary work does not have the role and importance that some other activities of the Orthodox Church have.

The Christian-Orthodox clergy remains preoccupied with ritual acts that satisfy the needs of the faithful, while the monks (1. Hermits, and 2. Kinovites, brotherhood in monks community) are focused on individual salvation. "Caring for the social problems of the flock, although it is not bad in itself (if it does not imply some purely secular, e.g. political goal), cannot be of the greatest importance for the Orthodox clergy" (Голијан, 2016, стр. 52) The consequence of this is a narrowed research

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[2] In Orthodoxy, confession has more of a ritual feature of being absolved from guilt and sin, than an individual insight into sin and a suggestion towards good deeds. (On this topic, also see: Станковић, 2015, стр. 213-214)

field in the domain of sociology of Orthodoxy. "As if the sociologist and the sociologist of religion have nothing worth conveying to the Orthodox theologian, the hierarch, the priest, the believer, the church as a whole?" (Ђорђевић, 2010, стр. 50). The social side of Orthodoxy remains a neglected field of research. In recent times, there have been attempts by certain Christian-Orthodox churches to define themselves regarding certain social issues.

5. Final Considerations

The Eastern Church considered itself well equipped for handling otherworldly or sacred things, whereas the state was entrusted with worldly or secular things (Chryssavgis, 2024). Despite the fact that the largest Orthodox Churches expressed their position on social morality, first the Russian Orthodox Church (of the Moscow Patriarchate) in 2000, and then the the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America (of the Ecumenical Patriarchate) in 2020, the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) still hasn't made a comment on the issue. My research indicates that there is a certain "conspiracy of silence" regarding the social teaching of the SOC. Only sporadically, a scientific article stands out in public, which in one way or another touches on this topic.

Although there is a general awareness that the church should also deal with the needs of ordinary believers, the prevailing attitude is that it should be done in concrete situations, conclusively: on a case-by-case basis. The justification for this attitude lies, first of all, in the Orthodox interpretation of the norms, according to which the norm is merely an educational tool for introducing believers to the path of knowledge of God and deification. The strong eschatological dimension to Orthodoxy does not allow the spiritual drama to take place anywhere outside the church and anywhere outside man (Станковић, 2023, стр. 323). It is an all-pervading solipsism, alignment with the will of God. It is constantly underscored here that it is not the job of the church to deal with superhuman creations, nor to pass judgment on society. In general: any condemnation of another is considered a mortal sin. Therefore, the church should not "step and stumble towards the world". Its mission should be limited to the narrow field of ritual actions.

Taking all of the above into consideration, we can conclude that the Serbian Orthodox Church still insists on the point of view that it should not make a final judgment on social issues. It remained trapped at the source of faith, in its basis. With no ambitions to step out into the outside world, it leaves it to secular influences, showing no intention of ennobling it with its attitudes, guidelines and recommendations.

It is believed that the decisions of the first seven ecumenical councils preserve the faith. "Orthodox Christianity, in its various forms and local contexts, appears nowadays to be a religious system much more bound to tradition and to the Christian past, bequeathed by the early Church, the Church Fathers and the Church Councils. From an Orthodox perspective, fidelity to tradition and its intact preservation are an element of self-identification, a source of authenticity, and a cause of concomitant pride" (Makrides, 2022, p. 22). All faith is founded on that invariable fact. The dogmas of faith that were established at that time cannot be challenged – they are unchangeable. Any flexible interpretation of these dogmas is treated as sacrilege and heresy. A conservative approach tends to nonchange. Ecclesiasticism does not leave the local church municipality, the local parish – provincialism. Everything is focused on the "living faith of Christ", on the faith as Jesus lived it – fundamentalism. Withdrawal from the lay sphere – secularism. Christianity oriented towards fundamentalism leaves faith to: the internal, individual and private, and social relations to the secular.

Are there any space for social teaching?

Judge for yourself...

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