

DEEP INSIDE OF A PARALLEL UNIVERSE: RELIGIOUS ELEMENTS SURROUNDING THE STUDENT MOVEMENT IN SERBIA

Danica Igrutinović¹

Abstract: Following the collapse of the concrete canopy at the newly reconstructed train station in Novi Sad, which killed sixteen people, Serbia has been witnessing the largest student movement in Europe since 1968. Students of diverse ideological, political, and religious backgrounds have come together to demand justice and accountability from a corrupt political establishment. This paper will strive to explore the religious and quasi-religious elements of the movement – rituals of silence, pilgrimage, ascetic endurance, and communal feasting – interpreted through a functional and anthropological approach to religion inspired by Durkheim. The study combines qualitative media discourse analysis of secular and religious communications (November 2024 to June 2025) with the author's direct anthropological observation of protest events. This dual perspective enables an examination of how collective rituals and moral symbols emerged both in representation and in practice. The protests drew strong reactions from Serbian Orthodox Church dignitaries and other public voices, which will be examined through critical discourse analysis, focusing on how church-state relations and religious or ideological divisions were framed. The question of various collective subjects fulfilling the usual societal functions of religion will be posed.

Keywords: anthropology of religion; media discourse analysis; student movement; Serbia; Durkheim; civic ritual; religion; politics.

¹ Faculty of Media and Communications, Serbia, email: danica.igrutinovic@fmk.edu.rs

1. Introduction

On November 1, 2024, the concrete canopy at the newly reconstructed train station in Novi Sad, Serbia, collapsed, immediately killing 15 people, many of them young. In March 2025, the 16th victim succumbed to injuries. This tragedy starkly highlighted high-reaching corruption rampant in the country, especially within the construction business. Starting with candlelit vigils at the site and the holding of 15 minutes of silence before the Faculty of Drama in Belgrade, a minute for each victim at the time, the reaction of students across the country has since grown into the greatest student movement Europe has seen since at least 1968. Students of all ideological and political persuasions have come together to demand justice, honesty, and integrity from what is increasingly seen as a criminally and lethally corrupt government.

This paper will strive to note religious elements perceptible in the protests organized by the students' movement, both explicit and implicit. For instance, the fact that many students carry icons and crosses on their long walks to their destinations has been observed by many, theologians included, and likened to pilgrimages of sorts. Other religious and ritualistic elements of the student protests will also be explored and analyzed through the lens of the functional approach to religion.

1.1. Theoretical frameworks

In his seminal book *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim notes that

religion is an eminently social thing. Religious representations are collective representations that express collective realities; rites are ways of acting that are born only in the midst of assembled groups and whose purpose is to evoke, maintain, or recreate certain mental states of those groups. But if the categories are of religious origin, then they must participate in what is common to all religion: They, too, must be social things, products of collective thought (Durkheim, 1995 (1912) p. 9).

Building on Durkheim's view, this paper will approach religious (and quasi-religious) phenomena as social realities, potentially, among other things, fulfilling certain needs and performing certain functions within a society. In Durkheim's approach (following the traditional Catholic sacramental system in which there are two major sacraments, baptism and the mass) there are two major functions of religion, the active and the cognitive. A number of other, minor functions, like minor Catholic sacraments, are added to these. While the active function of religion helps foster social cohesion through ritual, the cognitive function offers meaning and purpose. These two are, of course, connected, given that forms of collective conduct can be seen as collective representations in action – and both major functions of religion are in turn connected with the minor functions, as shared values and beliefs help maintain conformity and control, and construct a shared ethics (Pickering, 1984, p. 305). Common beliefs and rituals integrate society offering it "a system of controls mediated by religion", fulfilling what has been termed the integrative function of religion (Pickering, 1984 p. 311; see Tole, 1993; see Durkheim, 1995 (1912)).

Another key Durkheim's insight, relevant throughout this analysis, is the distinction between the sacred and the profane, a duality which is a fact of religious life (Durkheim, 1995 (1912) p. 37). The sacred denotes what is set apart and imbued with collective reverence; the profane encompasses the ordinary, practical realm. Yet, as Durkheim emphasized, the two must remain connected for religion to sustain meaning. The paper adopts this distinction as a heuristic device to interpret how sacred symbolism and ethical language re-emerge in civic contexts such as the student movement.

Following Byzantine traditions, Eastern Orthodoxy in particular has been known to rehearse the oft critiqued notion of 'symphony' between the church and the state. In its idealized form, even this

controversial notion calls not for a cynical acceptance of the church and the state being in cahoots as partners in crime, but instead for emulating the kingdom of God on earth wherein “religious and political leaders should imitate the kingdom of God by transforming their societies into a pre-figuration of Christ’s communion” (Leaustean, 2008 p. 422). Certainly, the connection between the political and the religious seem to be especially relevant in Eastern Orthodoxy. Religion in these societies is not merely a private matter, but a collective institution expected to perform its social and moral functions.

In the Balkans in particular, religious figures have historically been known to take an active part in various uprisings and wars of independence, and even in political upheavals. The Serbian Orthodox Church has long been seen as a representative of the nation, often more so than the state(s) encompassing it, which makes religious nationalism – the various modalities in which collective identities can be connected with religion – also a relevant theoretical framework (Anderson, 1991; Smith, 2003; Leustean, 2008; Brubaker, 2012).

Finally, this process can also be understood through the novel concept of religious boredom, explored by van den Berg in “Yawning in the Face of God” (2023). This condition of disaffection is produced when institutional religion no longer offers meaningful participation. This lack of inclusion, representation, and connection leads to disenchantment and disillusionment in various religious organizations. When a group no longer feels represented, included, and guided, participation dwindles – but new forms of religiosity may emerge.

1.2. Methodology

This study applies a qualitative media discourse analysis to examine the presence and function of religious elements in the 2024–2025 student movement in Serbia. It is combined with an anthropological interpretative approach, informed by the author’s observation of selected protest events in Belgrade and Novi Sad during late 2024 and early 2025. The empirical material consists of publicly available media sources produced during this period, including national and regional news outlets (N1, Nova.rs, BBC News in Serbian, Danas), the official communications of the Serbian Orthodox Church, as well as independent and social media documentation of protest activities (e.g., 020 Media, Facebook videos). These materials were selected because they shaped the dominant public discourse surrounding the movement.

Analytical procedures followed a functional-interpretive logic, drawing on Durkheim’s sociology of religion and anthropological theory on ritual and symbolic action. Religious and quasi-religious motifs were thematically coded across both observed and textual data.

The media discourse analysis focused on how religiosity, morality, and collective identity were framed across both secular and religious media. In parallel, the anthropological component, based on the author’s observations, provides contextual insight into ritualized protest practices such as the rituals of silence, pilgrimage-like marches, and communal gatherings. These observations were used to triangulate findings from the media corpus and to ground the interpretation of ritual behavior in lived experience. No participant observation or interviews were included; all participant statements cited derive from secondary media reports listed in the References. Ethical standards were maintained by analyzing only material in the public domain and by acknowledging authorship and publication context for each source.

2. Religious elements in activities organized by the Student Movement in Serbia 2024/25

When the fatal fall of the canopy at the newly reconstructed train station in Novi Sad highlighted high-reaching corruption, especially in construction, students in several Serbian cities began protests which originally primarily involved honoring the dead by holding silent vigils, according each victim a full minute of silence. Streets were blocked during these 15 minutes of silence, which led to an escalation when violent attacks were mounted against the peaceful protesters. Blockades of universities ensued, with students engaging in direct democracy via plenums, and the movement grew, organizing several mass protests in university cities that gathered citizens in the hundreds of thousands.

Much has already been written and will certainly continue to be written about this in many aspects virtually unprecedented movement. The current question is: Can the student movement be viewed through the lens of religious studies? While not claiming that the movement is in itself religious in nature, I will still attempt to view some of the elements in the activities of the movement that resonate well with features commonly manifested in religions, which serve important societal functions.

2.1. *Rituals*

The most notable ritual which is an obligatory part of every protest is honoring the dead with a full 15 (later 16) minutes of silence. Many participants in the protest with have described the experience of the period of silence as mesmerizing: being completely silent and still for such a long time in a mass of people has apparently repeatedly induced a meditative state in some. Some participants report praying throughout the period of silence, while others simply end the silence with prayer.² This 'positive rite of mourning' appears to be very powerful in terms of fostering solidarity and unity (Kalaba, 2024; see Durkheim, 1995 (1912), also Ephratt, 2015), and it could be the reason why it was precisely during these moments that violence against the students was most often perpetrated. It was during the performance of this ritual at the largest protest to date, on March 15, 2025, that the silence was violently interrupted by a yet to be identified sonic weapon (BBC, March 2025).

Another obligatory feature in the student movement manifesting a ritualistic tone is the participation in the plenum to make all decisions. An absolute dedication to direct democracy has led to the development of the plenum as a daily ritual with clear rules of communication including non-verbal signals only the devotees are familiar with.

2.2. *Processions and Pilgrimages*

Rituals that involve mass physical movement from one place to another have been studied extensively by scholars of religion as potent expressions of joint purpose. Anyadi usefully conceptually connects processions and pilgrimages, terming both "sacred mobilities" (Anyadi, 2023; see also Davis & Coningham, 2018). Prayer processions and other 'sacred mobilities' are increasingly difficult to extricate from political purposes, especially in the Balkans (Igrutinović *et al.* 2014; Igrutinović, 2025), and the inverse could also apparently be true.

² Frequently reported in comments on social media, especially in the wake of the interruption during the protest on March 15. The interruption of the broadly revered ritual of silence was seen as particularly galling, but it was also widely theorized that a stampede did not follow precisely because the participants were in a particularly peaceful state, induced by the silence.

The students of Serbia have traversed impressive distances on foot in order to join their colleagues in different university cities in mass protests organized there in late 2024 and early 2025. Novi Sad, Kragujevac, Niš, Novi Pazar – all have welcomed rivers of student protesters who had previously walked, sometimes for days, from their homes in order to arrive to the events. Organized groups of students have also ridden bicycles to mass protests, often singing together along the way (Radenković Jeremić, 2025).

A notable version of such sacred mobilities in the student movement were the long-distance tours performed by groups traveling from Serbia, a EU candidate state, to Europe to address EU institutions and inform them of the struggle for justice. Cyclists participated in the "Tour de Strasbourg", commencing in Novi Sad on April 3, and finally arriving on April 15 in Strasbourg, where they delivered documents and reports to the Council of Europe and addressed several other EU institutions (Tura do Strazbura, 2025). Following this, a group of ultramarathon runners took turns running from Novi Sad to Brussels, a feat that necessitated 18 full days. Upon arrival, they took off their running shoes and placed a flower on each pair, 16 in total, to commemorate the loss of life. Then they addressed members of the EU Parliament and discussed the situation in Serbia (BBC, April 2025).

2.3. Asceticism and martyrdom

These epically long sacred mobilities also have a particularly ascetic element. In *The Elementary Forms*, Durkheim notes the 'ascetical function of ritual', where 'acts of an unpleasant or painful kind' are performed with the intention of 'purgation or purification' (Durkheim, 1995 (1912), Pickering, 1984 p. 310). In the case of Serbian students, these ascetic rites are seen as being performed by pure sacrificial lambs in order to purge and purify not themselves, but their country of corruption.

These purifying rites range from the mildly ascetic renunciation of any celebration of New Year's Eve 2025, which was instead welcomed in silence at a mass midnight protest (N1, 2024), to the serious injuries many young students have endured on their long walks, often choosing to continue with bandages and on crutches (Marković, 2025). One of the students in fact carries an actual wooden cross on his back, but all of them, walking undeterred for days through rain, sleet and snow (Nedeljnik, 2025), evoke a similar sacrificial image.

2.4. The feast after the fast

In religious practice, asceticism is often followed by the enjoyment of a holiday, sacrifice is followed by a communal meal (Durkheim, 1995 (1912)), and the fast is followed by a feast. As Dietler noted in "Feasting and Fasting" (Dietler, 2012), the two alternative ways to mobilize the symbolic power of food and drink, through either ritualized commensal consumption or refusal of consumption, are inextricably connected, and this applies to other combinations of renunciation followed by indulgence.

After their epically long and draining walks to the locations of mass protests, students are welcomed by the locals and offered homemade food. Food is shared in a joyful communal meal and protests tend to involve music, singing, and dancing – often resembling festivities (Kosović, 2025).

In the student movement, all these elements are connected. The ritualistic manifestations of the activities organized by the student movement facilitate community building, offer a sense of shared meaning and purpose to participants, and bring them together in a struggle for an ethical cause to build a better society together. Durkheim's social functions of religion seem to converge in the quasi-religious rituals performed by the protest participants.

3. Parallel universes: unity and divisions

3.1. Protests – unity of ideologies and faiths

While united by what they term their 'ideological minimum', the protesting students of Serbia in fact come from a variety of ideological and religious backgrounds. A mixture of left, right and center, Christians and Muslims, agnostics and atheists, they are connected by the common denominator of the struggle against crime and corruption.

This recognized connection has led to moments of actual interculturalism. Students from the University of Novi Pazar, which has a majority Muslim population, who have taken an active part in the movement, were at one point welcomed by their colleagues in Niš with halal Iftar dinners during the Ramadan fast, and separate dormitories for male and female students (Saletović, 2025). This was reciprocated when Orthodox students were offered Lenten food during their stay in Novi Pazar. Blockades of the National Broadcasting Service that took place over Orthodox Easter were attended *en masse* by students from Novi Pazar so Orthodox students could spend the holiday with their families. During the event, a war veteran of the Serbian Army active during the wars of the 1990s apologized to the Muslims for believing the propaganda disseminated against them by the very same people from the very same building (Martinović, 2025).

A viral video showed students of different faiths (or none) walking together and stopping to honor the dead in silence. After the period of silence was completed, some students crossed themselves, some performed a symbolic face-washing gesture common among Muslims in the Balkans, and some displayed no religious behavior (020 Media, 2025). This shows how the movement converged into a religion above religions, uniting all in a perceived eschatological struggle between good and evil.

3.2. Reactions – sowing division

On the other hand, reactions from within the official Serbian Orthodox Church appeared to be geared towards sowing division between the students, employing a 'divide and conquer' tactic. Employee at the Patriarchate of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Dušan Stokanović, in a text published on the official website of the church, entitled "Parallel universes or the contribution of student protests to contemporary science" notes that, while some students are laudably observant Orthodox, others are blasphemous 'globalists' (Stokanović, 2025). Following public outrage, the Church officially distanced itself from the text, stating that Stokanović's views are his own. However, only reactions similarly critical of the students were allowed to appear on the official website even after this – official denunciations containing virulent defamatory language penned by Bishops David and Fotije were published, while the letter of support signed by six of the other bishops was only available in other media (D.D, 2025).

Positions held by members of the clergy were also mediated in other ways, such as sermons, and varied greatly. On the one hand, in a suburban church in Niš, during the Sunday liturgy following the mass protest there, the Great Entrance included prayers 'for the students', and a sermon at a later date held there focused on the verse "Your hands are filled with blood" (Isaiah 1:15) – a nod to the slogans and symbols used by the students demanding accountability for the deaths of innocents. On the other hand, sermons by the Patriarch and other members of the clergy employed fascinating hermeneutical maneuverings juggling various interpretations of what it means to be in/of this world. Some lauded an ideal Eusebian symphony with the state while declaring that it is 'of this world' to seek 'earthly' truth and justice – *realpolitik* combined with gnostic twists worthy of a Marcionite.

3.3. *The Colored Revolution*

If it was still unclear what the position of the Patriarch was towards the student movement, it suddenly became much less mysterious when footage emerged of the meeting between Putin and Bartholomew on the one hand and the Serbian Patriarch Porfiriije and Bishop Irinej on the other during their trip to Moscow in April 2025. During the encounter, Patriarch Porfiriije expressed a wish for Serbia to be part of the “Russian environment” (promptly corrected by Irinej into “Russian world”, which he accepts as “Russian world, Orthodox world”). Then he mentions that Serbia is experiencing a “revolution” (only to be corrected again by Irinej: “Colored Revolution”, a term introduced to denote a Western-funded regime change resulting in a puppet government) (NSPM 2025).

Shortly after this, the Serbian Orthodox Church started an official podcast, whose first episode focused on the ‘colored revolution’ of the students, claiming that it is funded from abroad, and is attempting to bring down the Church (Pravoslavlje, 2025). In the wake of these events, a sense of inversion became palpable: while the Church appeared to retreat into political rhetoric, the streets and squares of Serbia began to echo with ritual forms once reserved for the sacred.

4. The Marginalized Majority? Conclusion

The findings reveal that the student movement in Serbia cultivated a ritualized moral community that temporarily assumed the traditional social functions of religion. Through shared practices the movement generated solidarity, moral purpose, and collective identity, and reactivated the Durkheimian integrative and meaning-making functions of religion. Also, relating to the concept of religious boredom, the student movement can be seen as a grassroots response to institutional disengagement, reanimating religious forms in public life.

The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) has faced continuous critique, particularly concerning its entanglement in religious nationalism – a critique spanning the socio-political implications during periods of conflict (Vukomanović, 2008, 2011), the religious dimensions (Sremac, 2015), and the intersection of both (Milićević, 2022). Currently, however, the SOC can be perceived as effecting a functional departure from even the parameters of religious nationalism, as it increasingly fails to adequately represent and include the majority of adherents who look to it for any form of guidance, not necessarily spiritual. A frequently cited exemplar of this desired guidance is the late Patriarch Pavle, who, in 1997, led a prayer procession – comprised mostly of protesting students – through a police cordon, effectively and ethically resolving a protracted and tense standoff. For many Serbs, the expected role of a religious leader entails this kind of decisive, ethical engagement, not a retreat into monastic tranquility as the purely ‘spiritual’ element of Orthodoxy appears to be insufficient or perceived as less relevant. So to speak, they express a desire to be led by a Gandalf, not a Saruman – otherwise they might disengage.

This growing disconnection underscores a wider sacred–profane divide: the sacred has become isolated from the ethical and communal life of the majority. This became patently and painfully obvious during the Ascension Procession 2025. The traditional Ascension procession, organized by the Serbian Orthodox Church and held annually in Belgrade, had taken place in Belgrade from 1862 to 1947, when participants were stoned by (Communist) passers-by and the procession was subsequently banned for ‘security reasons’ after that year. The Church-led manifestation was reinstated in 1993, as part of the desecularization process in Serbia and the region (see Igrutinović, 2025). In 2025, the low turnout was unprecedented. Many social media users have noted that even when participants had stones thrown at them during Communism, more were willing to show up than during this particular crisis.

On the other hand, protests organized by students were enthusiastically attended in the hundreds of thousands, and many participants carried visible markers of religiosity, such as icons and crosses, reclaiming them, as it were, for the movement. Citizens of all ages, ideological positions, and belief systems came together, responding to the invitation of the students, and there was mass committed participation in the student-led rites such as honoring the dead with the period of silence. A powerful movement with religious elements, such as daily rituals, processions and pilgrimages, asceticism and martyrdom, and communal feasting after periods of deprivation, and yet both above and beneath actual religions, seems to have emerged. In some ways it could tentatively be termed a temporary popular religion of sorts, fulfilling the functions perceived as lacking in the Serbian Orthodox Church, such as the sense of community, the sense of meaning and purpose, and adherence to a common system of ethics, all connected with the tangible reality of daily life.

The sacred and the profane must be kept at least connected, if separate, for religion to be meaningful to humans. When the sacred purports to have nothing to do with the profane – with the earthly lives of vulnerable human beings, with ethics, justice, and truth that keep societies basically functional – it is no longer seen as relevant; it also perhaps ceases to be experienced as *sacred*.

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