




The State, the Church, and the Demarcations of the Occult in Serbia¹

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Abstract

The paper examines the complex social dynamics of publicly articulated attitudes toward esotericism in present-day Serbia within the last three decades of its history. The focus of my analysis is twofold: the changing attitude of the State towards esotericism, and the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church in shaping its public perception. I am interested in the ways the Church articulates its impact on the State and the public and how it delineates the phenomenon of the occult as a menacing Other, a threat to the traditional Orthodox Christian and national values posed by the processes of globalization and liberalization. I argue that, in some of its aspects, public discourse on esotericism in Serbia is dominated by an exclusivist, anti-modernist, and totalizing approach that views all the alternative forms of spirituality as harmful and potentially dangerous. The paper, thus, contributes to a better understanding of the complex web of interactions between the Church, the State, and the public concerning the phenomenon of the occult.

KEYWORDS: *Serbia, Serbian Orthodox Church, perception of esotericism*

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: *Serbia, Serbska Cerkiew Prawosławna, percepcja ezoteryki*

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1. Introduction: The virus and the spoon

A recent event in Serbia might have attracted the attention of sociologists and anthropologists, but also of the regional scholars of esotericism. A vehement public debate, with subtle esoteric overtones, broke out within the Serbian Orthodox Church (henceforth: the SOC), concerning the issue of using a single spoon for the Holy Communion during the COVID-19 pandemic. The debate has revealed a rift within the SOC concerning the issue of a fundamental ecclesiastical practice, that of the Eucharist. A seemingly simple question – whether SARS-CoV-2 can be transmitted through Christ’s body – initiated fierce theological debates, which occasionally included the mention of magic. Several liberally oriented clerics recommended necessary adjustments, such as single-use plastic spoons or alcohol disinfectants, whereas the more conservative clergy, which eventually prevailed, insisted on the traditional practice, arguing that the holy body of Christ cannot be affected by any earthly pollutant. This conclusion was cemented with a lengthy treatise by Irinej Bulović, Bishop of Bačka, one of the most influential present-day theologians in the SOC.² However, some critics within the Church pointed out that such an attitude suggested a ‘magical’ worldview. Thus, Vukašin Milićević, a priest and assistant professor at Belgrade Faculty of Theology, stated that “if the Eucharist implied any sort of chemical, biological or other *natural* transformation [resulting in the elimination of viruses], it would amount to magic, not to faith and theology.”³

In addition to the contested theological interpretations of the Eucharist, something else is significant here. Throughout the controversy, the conservative wing of the SOC enjoyed the tacit but unflinching support by the State. While in the first phase of the pandemic the State imposed drastic measures on other segments of the society, including rigorous curfews and measures of social distancing (Stajić et al. 2021, 593–608), the regular Church liturgies with the one-spoon-Eucharist were broadly tolerated and allowed.⁴ This instance clearly demonstrated a high level of concord between the Church and the State in present-day Serbia. Moreover, it proved inspiring for considering the attitude of the Church towards the cultural phenomenon of esotericism, taking into account the role of the State and its bonds with the

² <https://eparhijabacka.info/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/EP-BACKI-IRINEJ-O-PRICES-CU-KORONA-2020.pdf>.

³ <https://www.vreme.com/vreme/kasicica/>.

⁴ For a comprehensive review of the nascent academic topic of the COVID-19 pandemic in Serbia and the region, see Trifunović and Đorđević 2021, 519–530; see also Srđan M. Jovanović 2020, 95–108.



national Church. On the one hand, it revealed a significant degree of confusion within the Church concerning its perception of magic; on the other, it once again pointed to the fact that the public position of the majority church is often supported by the State.⁵

2. The synergy between the Church and the State

It has long been argued that the SOC is one of the most prominent political players in present-day Serbia, with ambitions ranging from the economic and diplomatic influence to shaping the spiritual identity of the nation (Radić and Vukomanović 2014, 189–211; Barišić 2013, 301–5; Vukomanović 2008, 237–69; Ilić 2005, 40–57; for a more general and comparative approach see Kalkandijeva 2011, 587–614). Many scholars have noted that “the Serbian Orthodox Church enjoys a privileged position” (Barišić 2013, 301) and that “the lack of regulation regarding the legal position of religious communities in the country [after the political transition] has left a vacuum, which has been to the clear advantage of the Serbian Orthodox Church” (Ilić 2005, 42).

The gradual rise of the SOC in authority and power during the 1990s and 2000s is seen mostly as a result of an ideological vacuum left behind by the collapse of communism. Radić and Vukomanović (2014, 191) aptly summarize the main areas in which the SOC apparently filled in that vacuum:

Religion was, thus, seen as follows: a fresh spiritual and emotional compensation for the dissolution of a social and value system; an efficient instrument of authority and social control (confirming a leader’s authority and promoting a new ethos); a reservoir of cultural values and collective remembrance; and a symbolical power needed to construct new national, group, and individual identities.

Through the process of restitution, the SOC has amassed significant assets in the form of land, forests, buildings, and other properties previously nationalized by the communist government (Barišić 2013, 299–300); it is absolved of paying property tax for its churches, while the State tacitly tolerates its

⁵ However, this confusion does not have any influence on the exclusively negative perception of magic in the Church. Certainly, such perception is traditional, but it may as well have been fostered by some classical anthropological definitions of magic: as Hanegraaff 2006, 717, points out, in developing their theories of magic both Durkheim and Mauss derived their assumptions from the traditional categories of Christian heresiology. See also his discussion in Hanegraaff 2012, 164–177; also Lehigh 2003, 5–6, and Szőnyi 2004, 45.



avoidance of other types of levies, such as income tax.⁶ These and many other well-documented instances indicate that “leading politicians and political parties have made a clear stand of support for the Serbian Orthodox Church and its primacy in Serbian society” (Ilić 2005, 42).⁷ In terms of identity building, the power that the SOC has accumulated allows it to significantly influence the State, whose governments appear to be too short-lived, unstable, or politically ambivalent to be able to foster a successful restoration of the damaged national identity. On the other hand, the Church is seen as a powerful tool for promoting the incumbent political leadership.⁸

Here it needs to be clarified what exactly I imply under the term ‘SOC’ when I speak of its influence in shaping public attitudes. *Stricto sensu*, of course, it refers to the clergy, but in a broader sense it also encompasses different lay social groups with varying degrees of public impact. It is often these groups, such as ecclesiastically oriented lay intellectuals, that project the values held by the Church onto the public sphere.

3. The post-communist State and the occult

How does this all reflect on the public perception of esotericism in Serbia? To begin with, the terms ‘occultism’, ‘magic’ and (to a lesser extent) ‘esotericism’ are used almost indiscriminately in the public sphere and, as I will show below, tend to be conflated with the notions of ‘sects’ and ‘cults’. The perception of esotericism is predominantly shaped by the mass media, which are in turn influenced by several factors: the voices of the State, those of the Church, a number of experts in the field such as psychologists and sociologists, as well as a curious branch of professional ‘sectologists’, who present the most interesting case in this study. Throughout the study, I use ‘esotericism’ as the most encompassing term in scholarship (Hanegraaff 2006, 336–340), but also the term ‘the occult’ in the sense of ‘rejected knowledge’ (Webb 1974, 191).

⁶ <https://paragraflex.rs/dnevne-vesti/160317/160317-vest7.html>. The pretext for the avoidance is a long-standing complaint by the SOC that the process of property restitution has not been completed. See also Radić and Vukomanović 2014, 193–194.

⁷ However, some scholars argue that the SOC has not profited from its closeness to the State, experiencing instead a mission drift; see, for example, Pavićević 2009, 1413–1434.

⁸ Taking part in the celebration of the 950th anniversary of the Monastery of St. Prohor Pčinjski, the Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić declared: ‘Without the Church there is no national unity; without the Church we cannot preserve the cohesion of the State. Those who do not understand it and still lead a state do not deserve to lead it; see <https://pescanik.net/ortodoksija-i-pluralizam/>.



Occasionally, I also refer to the term ‘occultism’ – although in its current scholarly usage it mostly pertains to a specific historical current of esotericism (Hanegraaff 2006, 887–888) – since it frequently appears in my sources (e. g. Rafail Karelin’s ‘definition’ of occultism, see below).

3.1. Esotericism in the era of Slobodan Milošević

The attitude of the post-communist State towards esotericism is ambiguous and has fluctuated over time. The last decade of the 20th century – marked by the rule of Slobodan Milošević (1941–2006), an autocratic ruler with communist background – was a period of occult boom in Serbia. A lack of clear legal regulations, coupled with a sharp rise of interest in esotericism that followed the demise of the official communist ideology, created a tolerant and even conducive atmosphere for the activities of all kinds of occult-minded groups and individuals, ranging from the publicly advertised astrologers, psychics, and clairvoyants to spiritual groups and schools.⁹ Moreover, the prolonged period of wars, uncertainty, and economic crisis – which brought about a special and powerful kind of ‘disenchantment’ – stimulated an intense development of alternative religious perspectives.

Not only did the State ignore the concerned appeals coming from the SOC, but some parts of the political elite in the 1990s even appeared to favour esoteric lifestyles. This was the case with Mirjana Marković (1942–2019), Milošević’s wife and leader of the Yugoslav Left, a small but powerful political ally of Milošević’s Socialist Party (Radulović L. 2007, 141–42, 147). Marković and her party were allegedly staunch supporters of the Transcendental Meditation movement in Serbia, which was characterized as clearly occult by the media and intellectual circles close to the SOC.

Related to this was the emergence of a curious political party called *Partija prirodnog zakona* [the natural law party], which participated in parliamentary and local elections in Serbia in 1996. Better known in public as the ‘Yogi Flyers’, the members of that party did not conceal their links with the Transcendental Meditation movement (and, consequently, with the Yugoslav Left) and openly advocated yoga practice as a form of political action.¹⁰

There was yet another sphere in which Milošević’s regime not only tolerated but even promoted certain forms of esotericism: the prominent media

⁹ Some sort of legal regulations will appear only at the beginning of the 2000s (see below).

¹⁰ These links were thoroughly investigated by the journalist Slavoljub Djukić in his book *Ona i Mi: kraj srpske bajke* [“Him, Her and Us: the End of the Serbian Fairy Tale”], cited by L. Radulović 2007, 143–44.



appearance of various astrologers, seers, and psychics who openly supported the regime (Radulović L. 2007, 146–48; Radulović 2019, 180). Often framed as messianic and Manichean narratives (the evil West against the innocent East), the ‘visions’ and ‘prophesies’ of these seers portrayed Milošević’s rule superlatively, thus providing a sort of supernatural legitimization. The most famous example of the kind was the astrologer Milja Vujanović (1941–2005), who, from 1993, had a regular prime time slot on the National Television RTS, when she interpreted astrological constellations in a highly politicized context (Radulović L. 2007, 147; Radulović 2019, 180). Unlike these occult media stars, other occult groups and schools (without an openly articulated political agenda) did not receive such a public attention but were generally tolerated.

Throughout the 1990s, the public sphere was saturated with psychics, prophets, astrologers, etc. who were, so to speak, called upon to interpret the horrible everyday reality. In various TV shows with local, regional and national coverage, in newspapers and magazines, the public was occasionally exposed to a few basic tenets of this new exegesis: 1) the dissolution of Yugoslavia was the result of a grand international conspiracy aimed against the Serbs as a nation belonging to the sphere of Eastern Orthodox Christianity; 2) the new Yugoslav wars had their deeper, non-physical, esoteric dimensions that were no less important than physical reality.

These two ideas led to the formation of a curious esoteric group called ‘Grupa 69’ [Group 69], allegedly created and supported by The Yugoslav Army with the sole purpose of studying and exploiting paranormal and occult phenomena related to military matters (Radulović L. 2007, 151–52). This team of ‘experts’, consisting of active army officers, astrologers, psychics, and self-styled theoreticians of esotericism, was never officially recognized by the Army, but neither was its existence denied. The group operated on the assumption that the ‘New World Order’ was fundamentally hostile to *Slavia Orthodoxa*. The members of the group claimed the power to take down the enemy aircraft, destroy their ground objects and eliminate their leaders who were hundreds kilometres away.¹¹ The activities of Group 69 still remain insufficiently researched in scholarship.¹²

¹¹ Thus, Colonel Bogosav Stojmenović claimed that the first successful taking down of an enemy fighter plane took place on April 13, 1994, when an F-16 fell into the sea immediately after taking off from the aircraft carrier USS *Saratoga*; <https://arhiva.glas-javnosti.rs/arhiva/2000/01/04/srpski/R00010303.shtm>.

¹² I took some initial steps in this direction in my paper ‘Occultism, Politics, and Public Imagination in Post-Communist Serbia’, delivered at the Second CEENASWE Conference held in Belgrade, May 27–28, 2016.



3.2. Occultism after the democratic changes

Slobodan Milošević was overthrown in 2000. The broad political coalition that dismantled his regime, the Democratic Opposition of Serbia, included a number of anti-communist politicians who were declared believers. Thus, as part of a significant step forward in the process of democratization, the changes also entailed the rise of conservatism and traditionalism, which further strengthened the political power and authority of the SOC (Radić and Vukomanović 2014, 190–97). For instance, the new constitution and laws allowed the Church to perform religious services in schools, hospitals, state institutions, the army etc. In 2001, after almost half a century, religious education returned to public schools.¹³ In 2004, the SOC's Faculty of Theology returned to the University of Belgrade, with state funding provided for its students. The Orthodox Holy Friday, Easter, and Christmas were proclaimed state holidays.

These few examples indicate that, paradoxically, the status of occult movements and practices in the newly democratized state has become more insecure. The secular privileges of the SOC came together with spiritual dominance in a large part of society. As Radić and Vukomanović (2014, 193–94) aptly put it, the public discourse of the Church has introduced “a dualistic, Manichean division [...] between a pro-Testament and anti-Testament Serbia, in which the former is the preserve of the Serbian saints, and the later of [...] the so-called ‘ideologues of the New Age’ and ‘new atheists’”.

Certain restrictions were legally introduced too. Thus, the 2005 Law on Public Order, Article 13, stipulated that “those who engage in soothsaying, prophesying, the interpreting of dreams and other such acts of deceit [...] shall be penalized to the amount of 20.000 dinars or 30 days of imprisonment”.¹⁴ Save for the ordinary astrological columns in specialized magazines, the first years of the new millennium in Serbia saw an ‘exodus’ of occult professionals from the media, some of them even moving to Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the legal regulations were less stringent (Radulović L. 2007, 108; Radulović 2019, 180). Moreover, in the new Law on Public Order from 2016, Article 15, the financial penalty was raised to 50.000 dinars, more than twice.¹⁵

¹³ It should be noted that all the officially recognized religious communities received these privileges and use them in their own interest, but given the vast dominance of the majority religion, the SOC has benefited from them the most.

¹⁴ http://www.advokatsimic.rs/assets/applets/Novi_zakon_25_ZAKON_O_JAVNOM_REDU_I_MIRU_REPUBLIKE_SRBIIJE.pdf.

¹⁵ https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon_o_javnom_redu_i_miru.html. It should be admitted, though, that the penalty of imprisonment was replaced by that of compulsive work in public service for up to 5 days.



Signs of a shift towards the clericalization of Serbian politics could also be seen in the Draft Law on Religious Freedom and Religious Organizations and Associations of July 2004, in which the State anticipated a number of concessions to the SOC. For instance, one article of the draft law stipulated that local governments were obliged to call a referendum if so requested by a religious organization. Although the final version of the law, passed in 2006, limited these concessions, its Article 11 stipulates that the SOC ‘has an outstanding historical, *state-building* and civilizing role in shaping, preserving, and developing the identity of the Serbian nation’.¹⁶

4. The input of the Church

The SOC must have been satisfied with the 2005 Law on Public Order, and even more so with its 2016 version, as these laws purged the society from ‘professional’ occultists. But the other component of the esoteric subculture in Serbia, as classified by Lidija Radulović (2007, 16–26), remained: it consisted of various spiritual groups and ‘schools’ of alternative thought without clearly expressed political or commercial agendas. Since these were considered by the SOC to be even more dangerous for the identity of the Serbian nation, the Church took steps to persuade the State to pass a law on sects: in 2017, the annual Council of the SOC officially established a “Department for monitoring the destructive activities of heretical organizations, sects and non-canonical groups” and it also decided to issue an appeal to the government to consider drafting a law on sects.¹⁷ So far, the SOC has not succeeded in its intention.

4.1. “The glassy eyes of India”: Lay intellectuals vs. occultism

Despite these efforts, not many Church dignitaries have offered a detailed theoretical articulation of their stance towards the alternative spiritual currents and religions, which are commonly lumped together under the umbrella terms ‘sects’ and ‘cults’. Apart from general, cursory warnings to the faithful, there is hardly any mention of the topic from local bishops or clerical theologians.¹⁸ However, as mentioned above, the SOC in a broader sense encompasses different lay social groups with varying degrees of public impact.

¹⁶ https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon_o_crkvama_i_verskim_zajednicama.html [italics mine].

¹⁷ *Politika*, 4.06.2017, <https://www.politika.rs/scc/clanak/382121/SPC-trazi-zakon-o-sektama>.

¹⁸ An important exception is Lazar Milin (1914–2001), a prominent clerical theologian who, already in 1976, wrote about magic and occultism in the first volume of his book *Naučno*



The group of particular interest for the present discussion is that of lay intellectuals, whether theologically trained or not, who often articulate the attitudes and directions of the SOC in more detail and with more liberty than the clergy, who seem to be more strongly bound by societal and political considerations. As regards esotericism, a notable example is a collection of essays *Izbavi nas od lukavoga: pravoslavlje i magija* [“Deliver us from the evil one: Orthodoxy and magic”, several editions from 2002 to 2014], in which a group of Serbian authors attempted to theologically articulate the Orthodox Christian view on magic, occultism, astrology, and yoga.

By far the most important among these authors is Vladimir Dimitrijević (1969–), the co-editor of the volume, who has authored and edited numerous texts and given many public lectures on the dangers of occultism. Dimitrijević, a prolific scholar of Serbian literature, is a prominent member of the Orthodox Missionary School, a preaching centre established in 1985 at the Church of St. Aleksandar Nevski in Belgrade. This Church and its clergy are a rare example of an ecclesiastical structure dedicated to anti-sectarian activism. Dimitrijević was one of the founders and the deputy editor-in-chief of the magazine *Beogradski dijalog* [“The Belgrade dialogue”], published by the Church of St. Aleksandar Nevski and committed to the struggle against ‘totalitarian and destructive religious sects’.¹⁹ One of his main achievements is the editing of seven volumes of essays (some authored by himself) titled *Pravoslavlje i sekta* [“Orthodoxy and sects”, 1997–1998], a scathing attack on almost any form of religiosity other than Eastern Orthodoxy. This can be illustrated by the titles of several volumes: *Od sajentologije do satanizma* [“From scientology to satanism”, vol. 4, 1998]; *Čovek je viši od zvezda: okultizam, astrologija, magija* [“Man is more exalted than the stars: occultism, astrology, magic”, vol. 6, 1998]; *Carstvo praznine: Pravoslavlje i duhovnost novog doba* [“The empire of void: Orthodoxy and the spirituality of the New Age”, vol. 7, 1998].

The attitude of Dimitrijević and the other contributors to his volumes (mainly Russian authors) is characterized by what I term a totalizing approach to demarcating esotericism. Thus, as already indicated by the volume titles, the authors see no genuine differences between, for instance, astrology and

opravdanje religije [“A scientific justification of religion”]. An interesting present-day exception is Father Rafailo Boljević (1975–), known for his regular fervent preaching in the Monastery of Podmaine, Montenegro. His “spiritual evening sermons” are regularly followed online by thousands of followers. Father Rafailo is especially critical of yoga and other Eastern spiritual traditions, which he views as satanic; see, for instance, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YNv_GDG84HM.

¹⁹ <https://www.vladimirdimitrijevic.com/sr-rs/biografija-dr-vladimir-dimitrijevic.html>.



satanism, or between neo-Protestant churches, ecumenism, and scientology. All these phenomena are simply hallmarks of the process of Western cultural and spiritual colonization, which aims to eradicate the authentic and indisputable Eastern Orthodox tradition. In other words, the over-generalizations of Dimitrijević and his colleagues are based on an ideology of exclusivism, antimodernism, and westernophobia that does not leave much room for critical judgement and fine tuning. This Manichean imagery is best expressed by Dimitrijević himself in an autobiographical statement, where he formulates his intellectual engagement as follows:

From the very beginning of his life in the Church, he joined the fight against ecumenism as [a form of] pseudo-religious globalism, which has nothing to do with religious tolerance that the Serbs are known for, but instead paves the way for establishing a unitary world religion of the New Age syncretism.²⁰

Such intensely anti-Western sentiments might create an expectation that the Asian East would be viewed with a greater degree of sympathy. However, Asian traditions receive the same treatment, being labelled delusional, deceiving, and demonic. This is emphasised in Volume 3 of the *Orthodoxy and Sects* series, titled *Staklene oči Indije: Pravoslavlje i duhovnost Dalekog Istoka* [“The glassy eyes of India: Orthodoxy and the spirituality of the Far East”, 1997], where the ‘hell of polytheism’ is depicted as utterly irreconcilable with the Truth of Christianity.²¹ Accordingly, the activities of various eastern spiritual traditions in Serbia – such as yoga, Buddhism, even martial arts – are seen as profoundly inimical and threatening to the core of the Serbian national and religious identity. The most striking element of this kind of interpretations is a wholesale identification of yoga, Buddhism, and various Eastern schools of meditation with occultism *stricto sensu*. The same totalizing logic that ties astrology to sectarianism proclaims the ancient Indian, Tibetan, Chinese, and other traditions as ‘occult’, without trying to critically examine them in relation to this qualification. Thus, ‘occultism’, ‘sects’, and ‘cults’ have become interchangeable catchwords for denoting a threat coming from the Other, whether from the West or from the East. Such an exclusivist perception of alien religious traditions strongly evokes the process of diabolization of various indigenous cultures by the European missionaries, ecclesiastical writers, and the Inquisition in the early modern

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ <https://svetosavlje.org/staklene-oci-indije-pravoslavlje-i-duhovnost-dalekog-istoka-pravoslavlje-i-sekte-knjiga-iii/4/>.



period (Sz. Kristóf 2012, 164) – something many Orthodox Church intellectuals have often resented about the Roman Catholicism.

Another lay social group of considerable influence is found in the blurry point of intersection between the State, the Church, and the media: it is a peculiar category of ‘experts’ and ‘professionals’ in the war against sects, cults, and occultism. In spite of the genuine threats that certain cults or deranged individuals with occult ideas might pose to any society regardless of its dominant religious, social, and political values, what strikes the eye is that a number of such experts in Serbia are former or active members of police forces, often engaged as analysts and with close relations to the SOC.

The available space allows me to mention only the most important representative of this group, Zoran D. Luković (1961–), the author of an influential study on sects titled *Verske sekte: priručnik za samoodbranu* [“Religious sects: A manual of self-defence”, several editions since 1998] and of other works on the same subject. Since the 1990s, Luković has been a prominent anti-cult activist, publishing books, articles, and papers, giving public lectures and appearing in the media. He is one of the founders of the Centre for Anthropological Studies in Belgrade.²² Luković conceives his publications as scholarly works, presenting them at conferences and publishing in scholarly journals. What makes his approach worthy of closer scrutiny is that, in addition to the already discussed elements of the non-selective ‘Orthodox worldview’, he brings in elements of public security, state intelligence, and forensics. As the menacing Other, all forms of esotericism and alternative religions are basically the same; occultism is only a form of sectarianism, which is viewed not only as a radical aberration, but also as a form of pathological behaviour potentially leading to criminal acts.

In a paper titled “Ritualni i kulturni zločini i karakteristike njihovih izvršilaca” [“Ritual and cultic crimes and the characteristics of their perpetrators”, 2015] Luković argues that all ‘sectarian and manipulative activities’ should be viewed as ‘security issues’ (119).²³ Without explicitly mentioning the Orthodox Church, but repeatedly criticizing ‘the modern democratic society with its secular principles of separating religion from the state’ (124), Luković and his co-authors give their prescription for treating all forms of sectarianism:

²² Luković’s role in the Serbian anti-cult movement was analyzed in detail by Milan Tomašević in his unpublished thesis *Anti-kult pokret u Srbiji* [“The Anti-Cult Movement in Serbia”], University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy, 2010. Tomašević’s work is a pioneering study of the historical development and activities of the anti-cult movement in Serbia.

²³ It is important to note that the paper appeared in the *Journal of Criminalistics and Law*, published by the University of Criminal Investigation and Police Studies in Belgrade.



All radically oriented doctrinal and ideological contents require a special attention of *the repression apparatus* of democratic societies, since it has been proved many times and confirmed historically that [such contents] can lead to destructive processes in the society. [...] Unfortunately, these are to a considerable extent supported by popular culture (especially the horror and SF movies and TV series), which propagates a syncretistic system of values of the so-called New Age with the purpose of relativizing every religious form and fostering ‘unrestrained spirituality’. (Luković et al. 2015: 120–21; italics mine)

The ecclesiastical background of Luković’s activism is exemplified by the fact that the main publisher of his books is the above-mentioned Orthodox Missionary School of the Church of St. Aleksandar Nevski in Belgrade. The preface to the third edition of *Religious sects: a manual of self-defense* (published in 2003, when Luković was a police captain) was written by Vajo Jović, the then head of the Orthodox Missionary School. One of Luković’s associates in preparing the work for publishing was Vladimir Dimitrijević, and the review board consisted, among others, of a police general, a police colonel, and an army colonel.²⁴

Writing a preface to a work on religious sects authored by an active police officer, Father Vajo Jović succinctly summarized the underlying idea of the desired political-ecclesiastical unity:

Seeing that in Serbia, an Orthodox country founded by St. Sava and his father St. Simeon, a seed of evil faith has started to burgeon, we are overwhelmed with grief. [...] And yet, we are also excited by joyful feelings because [...] there are [...] in the defence institutions [...] some people, serious warriors, who resist [...] the destruction caused by the sectarian seed of evil faith. [...] The book *Religious sects: a manual of self-defence*, along with the seven books published by Mr. Vladimir Dimitrijević, forms a unified, *healthy resistance* and response of the SOC to *the spiritual plague* of the present time.²⁵

Moreover, it appears that in recent years anti-occultism ‘task forces’ have been increasingly recruited from the far-right side of the political spectrum as well. Their public activities are often conducted in the form of various

²⁴ See <https://www.scribd.com/doc/45505348/Zoran-Lukovic-Verske-Sekte-Prirucnik-Za-Samood-branu>.

²⁵ Ibid. Except for the book title, italics are mine. Note the medical metaphor based on the image of health and disease. It goes way back to the early Christian anti-heretical discourse, i. e. in Augustine (Rassinier 1991: 65–83).



non-governmental organizations with links to the security sector, such as “Centar za bezbednost, istrage i odbranu DBA” [“DBA Centre for security, investigations and defence”], which is well-known for its anti-cult activism.²⁶ What strikes the eye is that, in the public discourse of this and similar NGOs, sectarianism is viewed as a national threat along with the LGBT community and the refugees and migrants coming from Asia and Africa.

4.2. ‘For those who come from occultism’: The clerical angle

As mentioned above, the majority of contributors to the numerous volumes edited by Vladimir Dimitrijević are non-Serbian: most of them are Russian authors (e. g. the Archimandrite Leonid Kavelin, the Bishop Aleksandr Mileant, Father Vladimir Yeliseyev), while some come from Greece (the Bishop Nicolaos Protopapas) and Romania (Father Cleopa Ilie). A number of their essays have been translated and reprinted or posted on the Internet. In addition to their non-Serbian origin, what attracts the readers’ attention is their clerical background. It appears that, unlike their Serbian colleagues, clerics from these other Eastern Orthodox communities are more eager to offer detailed theological refutations of esotericism, whereas Serbian Church intellectuals rely heavily on their literary production and argumentation. In this regard, mention should be made of Seraphim Rose (1934–1982), an American monk and theologian (belonging to the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia) whose book *Orthodoxy and the Religion of the Future* (1975) has had a profound influence on Serbian anti-cult and anti-occultism writers.

Within the limits of the present discussion, it is of great interest to analyse a brief essay written by Father Rafail Karelin (1931–), a monk and Archimandrite in the Georgian Orthodox Church, the author of numerous theological and polemical works in Russian, many of them related to occultism. As a young monk, Father Rafail spent some time performing exorcisms, and this experience made him acutely aware of the demonic forces pitted against Christianity.²⁷ Thus, as part of his pastoral care, he shows special concern for those who join the Church with some experience in

²⁶ See, for instance, <https://www.centarzabezbednost.org/profil-zrtve-sekte/>. On the DBA’s links to the security sector and the ruling Serbian Progressive Party see a recent research of the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN): <https://birn.rs/mreza-parapolicijskih-organizacija-pravoslavni-templari-i-veze-sa-sns-om/>. Apart from the DBA, the BIRN researches have detected a number of other similar non-governmental organizations.

²⁷ See his official website: <http://karelin-r.ru/about/219/1.html>.



‘occultism’.²⁸ The essay – a chapter in Rafail’s book *Tayna spaseniya: besedy o duhovnoy zhyni* [“The secret of salvation: sermons on spiritual life”, 2001] – bears the suggestive title ‘Prishedshim iz okkultizma’ [“For those who come from occultism”].²⁹

To begin with, Father Rafail uses ‘occultism’ as a blanket term for nearly all ancient and modern spiritual doctrines and traditions with roots outside of Eastern Christianity: from Buddhism and Tantrism, through Rosicrucianism and Anthroposophy, to Osho Rajneesh. (He even adds Baudelaire to the list.) His main thesis is that, even if one rejects occultism and joins the Church, the spiritual damage acquired from mere exposure to ‘that dirty stream flowing down from the mountains of Hindustan’ is such that the newcomer’s soul is always in danger. In his depiction of the ex-occultist-turned-Christian, Rafail sketches a psychology of a permanently deranged individual whom he compares with a former drug addict, prone to relapse at any moment. Such believers find it hard to attend church services, during which they feel an irresistible urge to leave, a strange mental burden, confusion, vertigo, etc. This is so because they still prefer the individualistic, ‘elitist’ approach to faith over the congregational, collective nature of the Church. No matter how ardently they pray, they unconsciously turn prayer into meditation, a dialogue with God into a monologue with their own self. Thus, instead of feeling ‘the living Christ’, they create a mental image of a deity they believe is God, which in reality is the devil.

The root of the problem, according to Father Rafail, is man’s intellectual hubris, which is made excessively strong by engagement in occultism and requires a long and careful process of ‘deprogramming’ monitored by the Church elders. The troubled believer, who has lost almost any sense of humility, usually shows great interest in mysticism and ‘high’ topics such as Sophiology and the apocrypha, as well as in the ‘lofty’ Orthodox philosophers such as Vladimir Solov’yev and Pavel Florenskiy, but all these are simply the masked workings of the ‘demon’.

²⁸ Such a concern is not without reason, since, in post-communist Russia and other ex-USSR states, magic, occultism and elements of Eastern religions have been broadly combined with traditional Christian dogmas (Belyaev 2012, 267). The situation is similar in Serbia: many occult practitioners declare themselves as Orthodox Christians and claim that they attend church services and ‘work through God’ (Radulović L. 2007, 24, 72, 119).

²⁹ So far, the Serbian translation of the book was published three times (in 2003, 2012, and 2014), and the essay itself has been posted on the Internet a number of times, which indicates the extent of influence Father Rafail enjoys among his Serbian and Montenegrin readers. The 2012 and 2014 editions were published by the Monastery of Podmaine, home to Father Rafailo Boljević (see n. 17).



Father Rafail crowns his argumentation with an effective image, a comparison between Plato's dialogues and the Gospel of John: the former are but a handful of ash compared to the latter, which is a dazzling flame.³⁰

Within this ideological and conceptual framework, it is not difficult to understand why the word 'magic' played such a significant role in the recent debate on the Eucharist spoon. It serves as a powerful tool for delegitimizing dissenting views, even though the very notion of magic still remains vague and evasive in the eyes of many members of the Church.

Conclusion

The area of individual spirituality and religiosity in Serbia remains free of legal restrictions, but there is a growing influence of the SOC both on the public sphere and on certain elements of the State, especially in the security sector. In the Church, the public discourse on esotericism is dominated by an exclusivist, anti-modernist, and totalizing approach that views all alternative forms of spirituality as harmful and potentially dangerous. Within the binary scheme of the Orthodox vs. non-Orthodox, in which religion is tightly connected to nationality, all forms of esotericism simply fall into the categories of false religion, superstition, and idolatry. From a historical perspective, this hardly comes as a surprise. However, given the growing influence of the Church on the State and the society at large, such evaluations go beyond the ecclesiastical sphere. As a consequence, the cultural phenomena of esoteric beliefs and practices inevitably become politicized and prone to interpretations based on the notions of cultural, political, and spiritual colonization, as well as on various theories of global conspiracy. In such a social climate, any genuine and constructive dialogue between the opposing parties becomes inconceivable. What looms large in the background is a deepening rift between the secular and the ecclesiastical concepts of society. Esotericism does not seem like a field that will help bridge that gap.

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³⁰ For one of the numerous online posts of the essay see <https://slavoslovije.wordpress.com/2008/10/24/onima-koji-dolaze-iz-okultizma/>.



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