

In the Haze of the Serbian Orthodoxy: ‘Conversion’ to the Ancestral Faith and Falling from the Church: Four Formerly Devout-to-Church Christians Speak

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Abstract: This paper is the result of research into the *road towards and the road from institutional Orthodoxy* and the experiences of four individuals, mutual acquaintances, who in the 1990s found “refuge in a search for meaning of life” in the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC). However, towards the end of the 2000s, they decided to abandon institutionalized religion and to move from the so-called theological-ecclesiastic model of Christian religiosity to an alternative model which *negotiates* between Christianity as doctrine and non-religious life-styles and “life philosophies”, as they are colloquially termed. Once torn between the conservativeness of institutional Orthodoxy and the *modernity* of their social environment (friendship groups, networks of people with similar interests, etc.), the four former members of the SOC declare that the SOC today is a community that has problems integrating cosmopolitan worldviews and is incapable of dealing with modernity and the diversity of contemporary society.

Keywords: *Serbian Orthodox Church, theological Orthodox Christianity, folk Orthodox Christianity, religious conversion, apostasy*

“Back in the early 2000s Jovana and I shared a flat in Belgrade. One day we were expecting Father Andrej to come over for lunch, and while waiting for him we were knitting rosaries. Dressed in long black skirts and shirts with long sleeves, we greeted Father Andrej and set the table for lunch. However, when I sat down, Jovana went to her bedroom and brought Ohridski prolog, a collection of biographies of the saints written by Nikolaj Velimirović, and asked me to read the biography of the day. So, she sat and ate with Father Andrej, while I was reading, just as if we were in a monastery. It looked like one of those hilarious scenes from Almodovar’s films.”
-- A 33-year-old non-institutional Orthodox Christian from Belgrade on her experience with the Church

Introduction

What does it mean to be a member of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC)? The criteria of the national religious institution of the Orthodox Serbs in this respect are somewhat peculiar. Someone may publicly label themselves an atheist, and still be respected and accepted by the SOC for opportunistic reasons (as in the case of Zoran Đinđić, late PM of Serbia). One might not know anything about the SOC doctrine, live a ‘sinful’ life, and still be perceived to be Orthodox, based only on the fact that he or she officially belongs to the SOC, and complies to Orthodox cultural customs such as celebrating Christmas and Easter by observing Serbian Christianized folk customs (oak tree veneration etc., painting eggs etc.), or revering a patron saint as a protector of the family. Furthermore, the SOC administration has never given up on those Serbs who do not with their open hearts endorse all the teachings of the SOC. For example, the SOC claims a membership of more than 8 million, even though the research (Blagojević 2008, 2009; Simić 2011), and the situation on the ground reveal that only a small portion of those baptized are devoutly observant, and that folk *Christian* practices of many Serbs often collide with the

official teachings of the Church fathers. In this paper I aim to examine the distinctiveness of ‘conversion to’ and falling from (or *conversion from*) the SOC, an institution perceived by itself and the public to be the stronghold of the Serbian national identity. Contemporary converts to institutional Orthodoxy, as well as contemporary *apostates* from the SOC, are people whose experiences have not yet been explored academically. Thus, this paper is an attempt to begin shedding light on the narratives of those who *converted* to institutional Orthodoxy and later left it - not due to phasing out of their religious belief, but because of their dissatisfaction with SOC conservatives and the strategies the Church uses to keep its followers together.

The basis for this paper comes from experiences of four formerly devout Orthodox Christians (Ivan, Ana, Nenad, Vojin-pseudonyms) who distanced themselves from the SOC, and from institutional Orthodoxy, without spiritually departing from Christianity. Four interviewees, of course, do not form a representative sample; therefore, the purpose of this paper is not to present clear tendencies or a general picture about falling from the SOC, but rather to obtain initial insight into the narratives and experiences of four people who were deeply involved in the religious and cultural life of the SOC (attended religious services, spiritual music concerts, took part in charity events, volunteered in Church run organizations etc.), and who broke with the Church on political and doctrinal grounds.

Two of the four people I interviewed are childhood friends, and they met the other two through the SOC (who also met through the SOC). I personally know all four of them. During the past 13 years, I have been meeting with them in churches and shrines throughout Serbia, have travelled multiple times with them to various Orthodox monasteries for major SOC feasts and holidays, and had discussions with them about the political and spiritual direction the SOC went in, and about my own dissatisfaction with the SOC’s identity politics and doctrinal inconsistency. Most recently, I meet two of them (Ivan and Ana) at multiple parties organized by mutual friends who belong to and still identify with the SOC. At one of the parties, a vivid discussion about *apostasy* from the SOC occurred when I commented aloud that most of the people present at the party were once active members of various SOC parishes and communities from throughout Serbia.

One of the party invitees, and an acquaintance of mine who later declined to be interviewed for this paper, suggested that since I just defended my Ph.D. thesis in Social Anthropology I should write a book about people falling from the SOC. A few other friends supported the idea, claiming that since I had been ‘on the *ecclesiastical scene* for quite a long’, and knew many people who left the SOC, I should start researching the reasons why people leave the spiritual community they once thought would guarantee them a slot in the Kingdom of the Lord. I agreed to undertake writing a paper based on interviews with four of the most vocal critiques and former members of the SOC I knew and were in touch with. Hence, this paper comes out of an *unintentional* longitudinal ethnographic observation (based on my own memories) of the lives of the four people whose stories are presented here, finalized with four separate, open, unstructured interviews I carried out in the period of November 2011- March 2012. The interviews started with the question “*Why did you join, and why did you leave the Church?*” and continued in the direction desired by the interviewee. In this paper, I use pseudonyms to protect the real identities of my interviewees, even though no one had any major problems revealing their identities. They also read and approved the final versions of their “Church biographies” that I present here.

The Serbian Orthodox Church: Religion and Ethnic Identity



An Orthodox Church: With the revival of Orthodoxy in the beginning of the 1990s many formerly dilapidated churches have undergone renovation and refurbishment. In this photo the author visits one of those churches that was "rediscovered", as the Church puts it, as "an important spot for Serbian Orthodoxy", even though no important historical event is related to this particular church, and even though it was built before the 19th century. At that time the idea of Serbian Orthodoxy as such did not exist.

Human rights NGOs operating in Serbia, along with some politicians and independent intellectuals, claim that Serbia's constitutional secularism lately has been threatened by the involvement of the SOC in the public discourse, and by its conservative agenda. Censuses and public opinion surveys reveal that more than 90% of Serbs label themselves as Orthodox, and say that they believe in God (Simić 2011: 15). This data differs to a great extent from the data from surveys and censuses conducted prior to the fall of the communist regime in former Yugoslavia, a period when the Church's political and social influence was significantly muted (Blagojević 2008, 2009).

The resurgence in identification with the SOC came in the late eighties and early nineties, concurrent with the upsurge of nationalism and the wars on the territories of the former Yugoslavia.¹ The industry of hatred run by the nationalist political parties in the former Yugoslav republics paved the way for the shift in identification from a politically unifying, religiously secular regime towards a *re-churching* of politics. This '*return*' to the roots (Serbian: *povratak korenima*) simultaneously produced a qualitative change in worldviews of many Serbs, who had, since the end of World War II, either shown little interest in the SOC and/or Orthodoxy or officially disguised their real religious and cultural orientation.

In the early 1990s, a significant number of people who never went to church during Communism got baptized, religious wedding ceremonies (almost inexistent in Communism)

became very popular, and church attendance increased (Blagojević 2008, 2009). These represent increases in participation in rituals – decisions which reflect personal identification (like the fact that more than 90% of the Serbs label themselves Orthodox) but in fact say little about the doctrinal strength of the SOC or the influence of doctrinal Orthodoxy in the practice of the SOC. The question here is, actually: To what extent does Orthodox Christianity shape the worldviews and decisions of the followers of the SOC?

To date, no comprehensive exploration of this issue has been conducted. More general research, however, suggests that most of the SOC followers observe so-called *folk* Orthodoxy (*narodno pravoslavlje*), a phenomenon that has more to do with folk customs and traditions than with the Christian doctrine. Furthermore, many people label themselves Orthodox because of the SOC's historical role as a strong ethnic identity marker, a *differentia specifica* distinguishing Serbs from other cognate South Slavic groups.² This specificity makes it possible for one to label herself Orthodox without actually observing any Christian doctrinal requirement (*culturally Orthodox*). The SOC itself often complains that the people are nominally Orthodox, that there are not enough people coming to church on a regular basis, that people have become 'westernized', and that they come to church only when they are in trouble (*bez nevolje nema bogomolje*).³

Serbian sociologist of religion Mirko Blagojević claims that, as of the fall of Communism, religion gained more significance in the lives of Serbs both on the level of cultural religiosity as well as on the levels of religious consciousness and ritual practice. That said, Blagojević argues that conventional (doctrinal) religiosity is the weakest link in the Orthodox revival in Serbia (Blagojević 2008, 2009). The research findings of Dragoljub Đorđević, another sociologist of religion, also suggest that the vast majority of Serbs labeling themselves as Christian Orthodox have little doctrinal knowledge about Orthodoxy, and that most of the rituals practiced by Orthodox Serbs are reduced to repetitive customs, without much thought about their meaning (Đorđević 2009). Furthermore, in the early 1990s anthropologist Dušan Bandić explored *folk Orthodoxy* among the inhabitants of 30 villages throughout Serbia and came to the conclusion that the vast majority of them knew very little about the Christian doctrine, and also had very little knowledge and understanding of Serbian national myths (Bandić 2010).

Examining these realities, anthropologist Ivica Todorović has produced a three-fold classification of Orthodox religiosity among the Serbs in Serbia. His approach delineates religious practices that intersect in the Serbian religious context and identifies them as belonging to *theological-ecclesiastical model* (regular church services attendance, doctrinal awareness), *folk Orthodoxy model* (occasional church services attendance, loose knowledge about the doctrine, Orthodoxy understood as an ethnic identity trait), and/or *alternative model* (influenced by non-Christian ideas, philosophies, life styles and spiritual orientations). All three models exist in correlation with each other, and at times they separate from each other, drawing a 'clear line' of demarcation between each other (Todorović 2008: 67).

There are many ways people observe Orthodox Christianity, and doctrinal *zeal* differs from parish to parish, and diocese to diocese. The revival of nationalist Orthodoxy was in the early 1990s accompanied by a revival of spiritual doctrinal Orthodoxy, especially among the relatively young population (at the time younger than 40). As a theological awareness in observing the Christian doctrine became more prevalent, many of these new or returning believers took an active role in educating themselves in Orthodoxy through books and SOC lectures and religious tourism. They also worked to develop trans-local networks of believers with strong ties with the clergy (especially monastic clergy) and Serbian monasteries. This

resurgence of theological-ecclesiastical Orthodoxy in Serbia, therefore, brought about a somewhat novel theological consciousness among lay Serbs.

As this population became interested in the theological life of the SOC, many started to change their lifestyles to correspond to Orthodox doctrine. On the level of everyday life and practices, the SOC and its doctrine have become a reference point and a spiritual guide. Changes in lifestyles have, for example, become incarnated in the changes of colloquial speech (frequent reference to God, conversations about religion and its doctrinal requirements), in the changes related to networks of friends (Church friends given priority over childhood friends or cousins), and in the changes in clothing styles (modest robe, long skirts, beards among men). These conscious changes have, to an extent, made some of the Orthodox recognizable on the streets of Serbia as 'religious people'.⁴ Despite the growth of this group and its very dynamic and ethnographically interesting characteristics, no comprehensive research on the theological-ecclesiastical model of the Serbian way of observing Orthodoxy has been conducted within the Serbian academic arena. Ethnography of devout Serbs would certainly offer an opportunity to get into their views on the SOC's involvement in politics and its strategies, which aim at ethnic self-realization of the Serbness. The result, it is hoped, would be a more multi-faceted understanding of the ecclesiastical dynamism of the SOC.

This *apostasy* also has not yet been explored academically. The voices of those who devoutly took part into the ecclesiastical life of the SOC, and at some point distanced themselves or left the SOC are yet to be heard. *Apostates* or *converts* from institutional Orthodoxy are also an interesting group for sociological and anthropological research, especially in a secularized society in which the Church as a protector of ethnic identity still plays a major role. The phasing out of religious consciousness among doctrinally 'educated' former observant and devout Orthodox believers who at some point decided to 'stand up' and dissociate themselves from the SOC is qualitatively different from that of traditional-folk members of the SOC. Folk Orthodox Christians rarely go to church, do not know much about the doctrine, and primarily see the SOC as the guardian of the historical consciousness of the Serb nation. As a result, when folk Orthodox declare themselves atheists or no longer associated with the SOC – often because of corruption or because of pedophile affairs (child molestation case involving Vranje Diocese Bishop Pahomije, and corruption and sexual harassment case involving Zvornik-Tuzla Diocese Bishop Vasilije)⁵ – the motivation usually is quite different from the *apostasy* of those who have been taking an active part in ecclesiastical, liturgical life of the Orthodox community.

The following pages are an attempt to grasp a specific type of *conversion to* and *apostasy* (or *conversion*) from Orthodoxy, i.e. to present and examine the process of affiliating with and growing apart from the Church, based on ideological and worldview grounds. Here I present experiences and views of four people born in the late 1970s, who spent a significant part of their lives observing the SOC doctrines, educating themselves in Orthodoxy, and who, ultimately, on their own accord decided to distance themselves from the SOC, without joining any other religious community and without spiritually distancing themselves from Christianity.

Their family backgrounds and religious experiences are different. However, commonality is found in their religious shift from the theological-ecclesiastical towards the alternative model of Orthodox Christianity (or ecumenical cosmopolitan non-parochial Christianity). These four people know each other and share many mutual friends; they have been involved in a number of SOC observant-community networks, and are still friends with people who regularly go to church.

Ivan

In 1997 Ivan visited a medieval monastery in Serbia. He came with Jovana, a friend of his, to attend the service for a major Orthodox feast. At the time he was a recently baptized Christian. Jovana was his godmother. They befriended the monks who at the time lived at the monastery, and that same year Ivan and his friends moved to Belgrade for their studies. However, only a few months after the school year began, Ivan left his studies and joined the brotherhood of the monastery he visited that summer.

Ivan is an only child, in a family which was until the 1990s middle class and atheist, with no interest in religion. Ivan's decision to leave the World and become a monk shook his family, prompting a strong and emotional reaction in his parents. It took Ivan's mother more than three years to accept her son's choice. At one point in her transition phase she would say: 'I am ok now with his choice, but I will never believe that Mary was a virgin when she gave birth to Jesus'. Eventually, however, she herself was baptized, and she began bringing her friends to the monastery to show them where her son lived. Ivan's mother is still a frequent visitor of Orthodox services, and is a supporter of far right political groups informally affiliated with some priests and bishops of the SOC.

Ivan was visited often by his close friends and often had long conversations with them about life in the SOC, matters of salvation, and theology. With a socially progressive background, having a vibrant childhood, and well-educated in popular culture, he also, however, could not 'resist' discussing 'worldly' matters such as politics, music, movies, etc. Unlike most other monks in the monastery, Ivan appeared to his friends as a monk who had kept his very open-minded attitude towards the outside World and was curious about diverse topics outside the SOC spectrum.

Two years after his arrival to the monastery he was ordained as a monk, taking an official oath that he would remain pure from profanity of this world, and that he would live in poverty for the rest of his life. In compliance with SOC practice, the local bishop changed Ivan's name, naming him after a saint from early Christianity. A few years after his ordination as a monk, Ivan became a deacon, and soon after became ordained to be a priest – a progression allowing him to receive 'the gifts' of the Holy Spirit by serving liturgy in the altar.

In 2010 Ivan struggled to decide whether to leave the monastery or stay. After long discussions with his godmother, he ultimately decided that monasticism "was not his story any longer"; he left the monastery, removed his black robe, and dressed as a civilian for the first time in 13 years. He first moved in with his mother, and not much later moved to Belgrade, fell in love with a friend of Jovana's, and moved in with her. Ivan currently works with youth with disabilities, serving as their mentor and life coach. He says that he does not regret spending almost 13 years in the monastery, viewing the experience was an important life lesson. He said that he joined the brotherhood on his own accord, after a thorough consideration, and that he also left his former 'brothers' after much thinking.



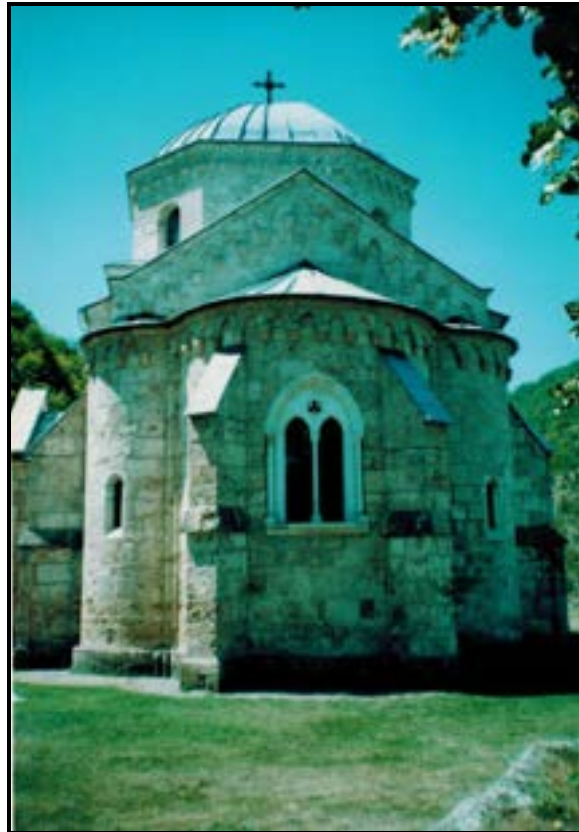
Sopoćani Monastery, South-West Serbia (Ras-Prizren Diocese), in the 1990s was one of the most attractive places for future monks, and a shelter for "God seeking souls". The corruption affairs and the schism in the Diocese in the mid-2000s prompted more than a third of the monks so far to either leave monasticism for good or to transfer elsewhere in Serbia.

The oppressive structure of the monastery, the hypocrisy of the SOC leaders, the deviation from Church doctrine, the corruption of the belief, and the false piety made him decide to discard his oath and go back to the World. The monastery was very well-off, providing monks with "a comfortable, easy life, good food and wine, frequent travels, etc". Donations and the state support also equipped the monastery with technology. "Whatever you needed, the only thing you needed to do was to press the button, so we would often forget we were monks who should be living in poverty... nothing was actually ours, but we behaved as if we were the owners of the monastery". This corruption of the monastic life and the feeling that he became a part of it by turning a blind eye to it made Ivan start questioning his calling. It was even more so, however, the hypocrisy of the leaders of the monastery, emotional harassment of the lower ranking monks, and the lack of freedom with regard to expressing one's belief and thoughts that prompted Ivan's disenchantment with the Church. Because Ivan was known as someone with more diverse interests, emotionally stable, and not easily rattled, he at some point became a thorn in the side of the abbot. Ivan says that he went through years of 'mental harassment', and different types of perfidious harassment. He was, for example, removed from the tasks he was assigned to by the previous abbot. His opinion was rarely taken into account. The supporters of the abbot loathed him, which made him feel uncomfortable.

The abbot at some point left the monastery and moved to guide another brotherhood. Ivan had endured all the harassment and did not leave the monastery during the abbot's tenure. Around the same time the abbot left the monastery, a corruption scandal linked the local bishop to financial embezzlement became known to the public and the faithful of the diocese, and resulted in a schism between the bishop and his followers from the SOC. This affair triggered within Ivan thoughts of departure from the monastery. He felt his ideals were betrayed and that his stay in the monastery had lost its meaning. Contemplating this and also reflecting on the

years of mental harassment and intellectual harassment, Ivan felt the best thing for him to do was to leave the monastery – he had lost his faith in the SOC and the doctrine he had believed in was no longer good for him.

Ivan lost his faith in Church, but not in Jesus. He still considers himself Orthodox and still maintains that Jesus is the Son of God, who was resurrected from the dead and will come again to establish the Kingdom of the Lord. In Ivan's opinion, the SOC should be providing the people with comfort and shelter as they seek meaning and should neither oppress nor suppress their needs and wishes. He believes that salvation does not necessarily come through Orthodoxy, and that members of other religions may also be saved – with or without a belief in Christ. The current SOC is, in Ivan's view, too corrupt, too close to the state structures, too nationalist, too obsessed with controlling people's sexuality. Moreover, Ivan argues that the SOC has grown apart from "true Orthodoxy and its primary purpose, which is to prepare the faithful for the Kingdom of the Lord." So, even though the SOC itself considers Ivan a child who went astray and succumbed to the sins of this World, and avers that such sinners end up in Hell, Ivan views himself as Orthodox Christian, true to himself and others. According to Todorović's classification, Ivan now falls within the alternative model of Orthodox doctrinal practice.



Gradac Monastery, South West Serbia (Žiča Diocese), has for almost two decades now been attracting "God seeking" young educated women. Most of them are converts, i.e. newly baptized women raised in formerly atheist or non-practicing families. The author of the article and his interviewees are friends with some of the nuns living in this place, who "discovered" God in their adult age. Unlike in Sopoćani, the drop-out rate in this monastery is minimal, which is credited to "an open-minded and easy going leadership", as one of member of the SOC put it.

Ana

Ana is friends with Ivan. They met through Jovana in the late 1990s. At the time when they met, Ana was also one of the recently baptized '*converts*' to Orthodoxy who became a regular visitor to church services. Ana went to church regularly for many years, read books on Orthodoxy, attended classes and public lectures by Orthodox famous priests such as Jegar Bishop Profirije, or Braničevo Bishop Ignjatije sung in an Orthodox chorus, and visited monasteries in Serbia and surrounding countries.

Having grown up in a secular Serb pro-Yugoslav family, Ana did not have the chance to learn about Orthodoxy as a child. When she enrolled at university she met and befriended Jovana (Ivan's godmother), who also helped her on her way to Orthodoxy. Sudden changes took place in Ana's life. Ana changed her apparel, starting to dress herself in 'appropriate clothes' (long skirts, in dark colors), and also occasionally wearing a head-scarf at services while at church. Her elder sister, a journalist and film commentator, supported her in her decision to join the SOC, but could not truly understand what was going on with Ana, since her '*conversion*' was a clear diversion from their staunchly secular upbringing.

Even though Ana's lifestyle changed, she, unlike some other 'truly Orthodox people,' did not break away from her pre-Church friends. She says that parties at her house were always an interesting fusion of people of different ideological and religious orientations, an environment which produced fruitful discussions and exchange of ideas (I myself took part in many of these discussions). Ana frequented alternative cultural events, educated herself in pop culture, film and the music industry, and read different types of books, all in addition to leading an active Church life. She successfully managed her two-path life: one in which she was surrounded by strict zealous Christians (who were, as she says, "policing" her and others), and the other in which she was surrounded by atheists, non-believers, protestants, agnostics, and gays and lesbians, among others. It is important to note that Ana's political and social views had remained liberal, which was often met with suspicion by other churchgoers from Ana's then new social environment.

After many years of being a devout Christian, Ana reached the point at which she admitted to herself that even though she liked and enjoyed Orthodox services, she also felt deep in her heart that she had seemingly become "an accomplice of the conservative and nationalist SOC agenda that condones violence and hatred towards all those lifestyles and ideas that do not fit into the picture of Orthodox purity." Ana's strong anti-nationalist orientation contributed to her departure from national Orthodoxy, which was kind of a first step towards her complete separation from the institutional Orthodoxy, which came after a series of scandals featuring the SOC leadership. The nationalism of the SOC, denial of the atrocities committed in the name of Serbdom, the relationship between the Church and politics, Orthodox kitsch, and the "dumbing of the nation performed by some SOC leaders" made Ana begin to reconsider her religious orientation and the lifestyle.

Besides 'outside factors' for leaving Orthodoxy, Ana had 'internal reasons' for breaking away from the SOC. She realized that her SOC 'friends' did not contribute much to her personal development. She felt that the feeling of being a member of the community of believers had disappeared, that the people from Church she knew did not present themselves the way they were in reality, and that many would pretend to be pious and full of Christian mercy, whereas they were in reality selfish and used the Church for personal promotion, or for bringing a sense of uniqueness to their personalities.

When Ana got a chance to look deep into the SOC structures, she was “appalled” with “uneducated, narrow-minded, and shallow priests who were not able to provide answers to modern man’s dilemmas, and who were exceptionally good at discarding anything coming from the outside, and not capable of seeing the inner flaws of the culture they belong to”. She says that she got tired of the people who read only ‘church books’ and who felt that they were educated enough to comment on the modern cultural phenomena, but who actually knew nothing about popular culture and the outside world. Particularly annoying to Ana were people who, as she says, would have been totally anonymous had not they joined the SOC (lay SOC members close to the clergy, often working for the SOC, many of them involved in far right organizations). The SOC provided them with the leverage to speak in front of others, and spread their ideas, and Ana believes that these people present a danger to Christianity and to society because of their use of the “oppressive and rigid” SOC structure as a means for advancing their conservative agenda. Furthermore, she felt that what she often heard from the pulpits of many churches in Serbia collided with who she personally was and was also offensive to many of her friends who did not belong to the SOC.

However, the most significant trigger in her fall from the SOC was her gradual realization of the SOC’s lack of answers to the modern life, and that “it may provide comfort to people of non-authoritarian personality structure just for a while, but in the long run it can do more harm than good”. Ana no longer goes to the SOC and does not observe Lent, but considers herself Orthodox Christian, and believes in the resurrection and the Kingdom of the Lord to come after the Day of Judgment. She also believes in the salvation of people of other religions provided they have lived up to morals teaching no harm against fellow man.

Nenad

Nenad is an acquaintance of Ana and Ivan. One day in 1997 Nenad went to visit a medieval monastery near his hometown, a predominantly Muslim city. The monastery is a weekend destination for local Christians, and he was often taken there by his parents when he was a child. That day he met with the monks of the monastery and found them very interesting and progressive (at that time he met Ivan as well). He particularly liked Father Andrej (from the introductory quote), who was “full of understanding for young people, well-informed about popular culture, and open to different views and perspectives”. At the time, Nenad was desperately looking forward to leaving his hometown for university in Belgrade that October. He had enough time to “wander around,” and he became a regular visitor of the monastery. Bit by bit he became *verni*, ‘truly Orthodox’. At that time, he referred to the change in his lifestyle as a ‘*conversion*’, despite the fact that he hailed from a socially and ethnically conservative Serb Orthodox family (‘folk Orthodox,’ according to Todorović’s account), and was baptized as a small child. Until this *conversion*, however, he knew little of actual doctrine.

Nenad went to church regularly for more than 10 years. At the beginning of his church life Nenad held that Orthodoxy was important for the Serbian nation and that Serbian ethnicity was an indispensable component of Serbian Orthodoxy. Nenad now attributes this perspective to his experience as a member of a small Orthodox Christian minority in a dominantly Muslim and socially conservative town. His view, however, gradually became more cosmopolitan, and he simultaneously became increasingly critical of Orthodox zealosity and policing habits toward some members of congregations to which he belonged.

After around 10 years spent following the life of the SOC, and after having a chance to learn what goes on inside the Church walls by hanging out with priests and monks, Nenad came to a conclusion that the Church did not necessarily live up to Christian values and that it was at times even ready to betray Orthodox doctrine for the sake of Church unity and political gains. Nenad began to be critical of the SOC, but remained 'truly Orthodox' long after his disenchantment with the SOC leadership and structure became substantial. He, for instance, insisted on the baptism of his then girlfriend prior to their engagement and subsequent marriage. Over the last couple of years, however, Nenad rarely went to church, eventually ceasing almost entirely. Unlike Ivan and Ana, Nenad primarily attributed his reduction in church attendance to his job, and said he would go to Sunday services more often if he were free from work that day. However, when asked how he perceived his status within the Orthodox community, he said that he considered himself Orthodox, but that he was not sure if he was a member of the Serbian Orthodox Church any longer. However, throughout the interview, and in our conversations after the interview, Nenad iterated that his "own" Orthodoxy was quite distant from the institutionalized interpretation of Orthodoxy of the Church.



Adult Baptism Ceremony: The author of the article assisting the priest in ceremonial hair-cut of a woman from ethnically and religiously mixed background who decided to join Orthodoxy at the age of 27.

Nenad 'got bored' with monotonous services and disenchanted with both literal and figurative language distances within the SOC. Because Church Slavonic remains in use, people come to church and sing without knowing the meaning of the hymns. In Nenad's view, a figurative 'language distance' between the SOC and modern man also contributes to the alienation of truly religious people from the SOC: the members of the clergy are not able to answer the questions of today's youth. Nenad claims they live in the romantic, nationally-oriented 14th century and, as a result, are not capable of attaining deep insight into the dilemmas of modern man.

According to Nenad, the SOC holy fathers of the past and those who devoted their life advocating a national version of Orthodoxy are no longer relevant. As for the contemporary clergy, he said, "As far as I am concerned, our clergy can shave their beards and remove their black robes since [the beards and robes] do not really serve a purpose, i.e. the clergy do not

educate the people about Orthodoxy; they just care for money, they are hypocrites". Nenad is also critical of the 'common' people, those declaring themselves Orthodox neither knowing nor understanding the actual substance of the religion, a specific type of ignorance condoned by the SOC and encouraged by its national orientation.

Nenad is now of the opinion that the SOC is a backward institution with little to do with the notion of the Orthodox Church as the true Body of Christ. The SOC, in Nenad's opinion, has been perverted into an administration and lost its purpose, which is "to guide the faithful through the misery of this life to salvation in the Kingdom of the Lord." Nenad also claims that the SOC has become a shelter for the ambitious and conservative people who use church structures for self-promotion and other self-interests. In his view, only a minority is truly concerned with Orthodox doctrine.

Nenad now views ethnic customs as unimportant for Orthodoxy and all who believe in Christ as "one in God," regardless of doctrinal differences. He no longer observes Lent and would not care much if his child became an atheist. He also believes that non-Christians may also be saved as long as they live up to the morals of good. Nenad concluded his interview with the following words: "Everything we do at church should make sense, but I do not feel that what we do in our SOC makes any sense."

Vojin

Vojin is a childhood friend of Nenad and is also friends with Ivan and Ana, whom he met through the SOC. Vojin says he has been religious all his life, and has always liked the ceremonies and religious music. He grew up in a Serb, non-communist, traditional (folk) Orthodox family in a small predominantly Muslim town (the same town as Nenad). In this town being Orthodox or Muslim was not only about religion but also functioned as a strong public identity marker. Vojin testifies that even though his parents and grandparents observed folk Orthodox customs and went to church a few times a year, none had a good opinion of the clergy. Vojin said that he was taught "to be a proud Orthodox who should have no trust in Orthodox priests".⁶ Vojin never found the small socially-conservative town with few highly educated people very interesting or enriching, and so his dreams revolved around the day when he would leave his hometown and never come back.

One day in summer 1997 Vojin and his friend Nenad, "just out of boredom," went to visit a local monastery, an outing which changed Vojin's life significantly. He *converted* to 'true Orthodoxy' within few months, and spent six years observing Orthodox doctrine, followed by an additional seven years of regular Church attendance but looser adherence to the doctrine. Currently, Vojin does not consider himself Orthodox. He rarely goes to Church, and, when he does, "it is just because [he] miss[es] the services, not because [he] feels that the SOC is a place of salvation."

His affiliation with the SOC began to unravel in 2003, when he came to the realization that what he heard in the SOC corresponded neither with the 'reality' outside the Church nor with the Christian teachings he read about. He started distancing himself from SOC for "ideological and political reasons: the SOC support to the nationalists and war criminals, covering up of pedophile affairs, financial corruption affairs, etc." He realized that "[his Church was not what [he] thought it was and what [he] wanted it to be, and that it did not help [him] develop and grow as a person." He became seriously depressed and unhappy with his life, and it took him more than a year to recover from his difficulties of coming to terms with his 'apostasy'.

He continued going to church regularly, but started avoiding people from his previous ‘religious delirium stage’ (the first six years following his *conversion*), since he knew they would ask him if he observed Lent, was going to confession, etc. He knew they would criticize him for his ‘blasphemous’ thoughts.

In 2003, Vojin moved to a neighboring country and spent two-and-a-half years there. He went to both Orthodox and Catholic churches quite often, a process which helped him distance himself from his previous circles of SOC friends. Upon his return to Belgrade, he had a clear idea in his mind that Orthodoxy as a doctrine was no longer his story, but he continued to attend SOC services regularly. Over the next several years he reduced his visits to the SOC and now rarely attends services. For the 2011 population census, Vojin declared Christianity his religion, but also stated that he did not belong to any religious community. At the census Vojin wanted to declare ‘no religion’ as an “act of political support to the atheists in Serbia who came across census takers who would not accept ‘atheist’ as answer because ‘atheist’ was not offered on the census form”. However, when a census taker came to Vojin’s home “something in [him] ‘forced’ [him] to say [he] was Christian”. Currently, Vojin is “a Christian without a Church,” a person who left doctrinal Orthodoxy when he realized that “staying with *Them* means tolerating nationalism, hate-speech, financial corruption, violence, ethnic cleansing, sexual deprivation, homophobia, etc.” Furthermore, he does not consider himself doctrinally Orthodox because he believes that literalist approaches to the Orthodox holy fathers are irrelevant for the modern (wo)man. On the other hand, however, Vojin sees himself as culturally Orthodox and ultimately as a ‘pick-and-choose’ Christian who, according to Todorović’s classification, may be, just like Ivan, Ana, and Nenad placed into the alternative model of Serbian Orthodox religiosity.

Three stages: (1) Meaning Seekers- (2) Executors of a Biopolitics of the Church- (3) ‘Apostates’

In all four stories we find testimonies of ‘*conversion to*’ and *apostasy*, or ‘*conversion from*,’ institutional Orthodoxy. I use *italics* here since the word ‘*conversion to*’, in its literal meaning and everyday usage, may not best describe the religious experiences of Ivan, Ana, Nenad and Vojin. At first glance, Ivan’s and Ana’s stories reflect more of a *conversion* than Nenad’s and Vojin’s: Ivan and Ana grew up in secular families which did not observe any religious customs, whereas Nenad and Vojin grew up in traditionally Orthodox families. All, however, were to a great extent secular, since no one actually observed the Orthodox doctrine.

Anthropologist Henri Gooren defines *religious affiliation* as “formal membership of a religious group that is not a central aspect of one’s identity”. If we accept this definition, Nenad’s and Vojin’s families would both be classified as affiliates of the Orthodox Church (Gooren 2010: 3). This definition, however, lacks the nuance required for defining relationships in the Serbian Orthodox context. While Orthodoxy as a doctrine meant little to Nenad and Vojin’s families, Orthodoxy as a cultural reference played a significant role in their lives, forming the central marker of their membership in the Serb ethnic group. This is true, to an extent, even in Ivan’s and Ana’s cases, where simply being Serbian is minimally accompanied by some kind of distant connection with historical Orthodoxy, as a factor in the process of preservation of the Serbian national identity in difficult periods of Serbian history. Despite the fact that Ivan’s and Ana’s families were not affiliated with the SOC, both were conscious that their ancestors were Orthodox and that the history of the SOC was part of their ethnic biographies. Even though a

doctrinal relationship was initially lacking, the Church, from birth, formed a historically central part of their identity.

Nevertheless, from a 'zealous' point of view, propagated by some low-profile clergy (primarily monks from Serbian monasteries), and within SOC ecclesiastical and liturgical life, Ivan, Ana, Nenad, and Vojin were all *converts*, even though Nenad and Vojin were baptized at a very early age and observed traditional Orthodox customs, without going to church regularly. My informants themselves say that the priests they were in touch with often called them 'obraćenici' (*converts*), and they would also refer to the time they started going to church with the words "kada sam se obratio" (*when I converted*). Nenad and Vojin regarded their previous religious practice as not Orthodox enough, and to some extent felt shame about their previous lives since 'true Orthodoxy' seemed to them much more intellectual and philosophical than the *folk* Orthodoxy they 'inherited' from their families.

In psychologist Bernard Spilka's terms, the respective '*conversions*' of these four individuals (both to and from institutional Orthodoxy) fall within the so-called contemporary, active and gradual '*conversion*' paradigm, which is defined by a free will, 'intellectual approach' looking to find the meaning of life (Spilka 2003). Gooren defines religious conversion as "a comprehensive personal change of religious worldview and identity, based on both self-report and attribution by others" (Gooren 2010: 3). In religious historian Arthur Darby Nock's view, religious conversion is "the reorientation of the soul of an individual, his deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right" (Nock 1933: 7). In the case of these four people, '*conversion*' to Orthodoxy brought about a qualitative change in their respective life orientations, fulfilling the *conversion* criteria of all of the above. Furthermore, for the four, joining the SOC meant the institutionalization of their belief in Christ, which was incarnated in the observance of prescribed teachings and doctrine, regulated through institutional disciplining of the body and thoughts, and reflected through the external and internal control of one's volition (fasting, confessions, and policing of others and acceptance of policing by others). Becoming a devout Orthodox came through the process of social learning exercises – observational socialization and the modeling of behavior prompted by the influence of peers and the institution (Hunsberger 1983: 24-27). As is visible in their stories, a whole new spectrum of social relations had been built: new networks of friends had been established, habits had changed, and the way of communication with those outside the SOC had altered. Likewise, *conversion from* institutional Orthodoxy into more personal forms of religious practices brought novelties into their life-styles, and helped open up new circle of friends for my interviewees.

These shifts in social relations confirm Buckser and Glazier's argument that "conversion is usually an individual process, involving a change of worldview and affiliation by a single person, but [also] occur[ing] within a context of institutional procedures and social relationships" (Buckser and Glazier 2003: xi). Having joined these new social networks upon their *conversion* to institutional Orthodoxy Ivan, Ana, Nenad, and Vojin had engaged in the educational activities of the SOC--public lectures for the 'general' population and discussions organized by the SOC or student bodies connected with the SOC, for example. They all also extensively spoke to others about their SOC experiences and felt that they needed to involve themselves in the mission to bring people closer to Christ.

Their lives, therefore, had a specific purpose: to head towards salvation and to help others (especially those nominally Orthodox) on their way to salvation and the Kingdom of the Lord. All four of them today say that coming to the conclusion that they had joined *the community of*

saints had made them feel special for becoming part of a ‘loving’ eschatological enterprise they, as Ivan said in his interview, „believed would remain strong and cheerful forever (in this and in the after-life)”. Furthermore, being Christ’s witnesses on Earth gave them an additional purpose in life, which was to challenge everything what they thought was in opposition to the Orthodox doctrine.

So, just as others (the monks, new friends) ‘proselytized’ to them, they also, at least for some time, engaged in ‘missionary’ activity, and thus had become executors of a specific biopolitics which, in Foucauldian terms, administers the bodies and executes the management of life (Foucault 2005). They say that they were told many times by their Church friends (who positioned themselves high in the informal ecclesiastical structures) and by the monks they used to hang out with, that they were obliged to testify to Christ by living the Christian way of life (i.e. to be role models) and by their mouths (i.e. to preach about the Lord to others), which was a practice to get people involved in the maintenance of a specific regime of representation.⁷

This regime of representation is a regime of power in which the powerful are able to validate and impose their own definitions of normality, and draw boundaries aiming at excluding, enclosing or exploiting others, which as Solomos (2001:109) argues, “defend privilege either directly or through the operation of codes, norms and rules that may appeal to universalism, but which actually represent the social interests of dominant groups”. In these cases, however, being at the forefront of the theological religiosity had actually facilitated the individuals’ rejection of the current structures and their falling from the SOC. Because they were able to see and experience the inconsistencies within the official regime of representation – often driven by SOC internal power struggles-- Ivan, Ana, Nenad, and Vojin began to focus on the non-institutional Orthodoxness (*pravoslavnost*), which paved the way to their shift from the theological ecclesiastical model toward an alternative model of religiosity.

Ivan, Ana, Nenad, and Vojin described their lives within the SOC and their time “hanging out with the faithful of Orthodoxy” as a specific and unique cultural experience, ‘a world within a world’ in which they were tacitly or self-tasked to both accept and promote SOC structures asserting and hoping to maintain the power of the ‘appropriate’ worldviews and ideological positions. Ivan, Ana, Nenad, and Vojin all suggest that the SOC works on creating a specific group sentiment facilitating unity but also encouraging critique of the mores of this corrupt World. At the same time, however, the SOC, in the experience of the four, had no problems getting involved in that same ‘corrupt and dirty World’ through politics and financial enterprises. As it willed its flock to turn a blind eye to these ventures, it was also willing to accept theological ignorance and non-doctrinal behavior from self-identified believers as they kept paying baptism and funeral taxes. It is such a social environment, claim all four informants, which made them fall from the religious community to which they devoted one-third of their lives.

Concluding Remarks

Once torn between the conservativeness of institutional Orthodoxy and the modernity of their social circles/surroundings (groups of friends, networks of people with similar interests, etc.), four former members of the Serbian Orthodox Church testify to the contemporary Serbian Orthodox Church and both the challenges it, as a community, has in integrating cosmopolitan worldviews and its inability to cope with the modernity and diversity of contemporary society. For my interviewees, joining the ecclesiastical life of the SOC was a meaning-seeking

activity. They wanted to find a particular place to arrive at (the Kingdom of the Lord after death, the community of 'saints' here on Earth), and for a certain period of time they believed they found that place. They found the place they looked for by socializing within a community of believers and by assimilating themselves into the doctrinal strictness of institutional Orthodoxy. Ivan, Ana, Nenad, and Vojin agree that they did experience a personal change in worldviews and identity by *converting* to 'true Orthodoxy'. Their '*conversion*' was a kind of 'passage' which included a quest for a meaningful place in this World in which they would be surrounded by the people with whom they believed they will share eternal life.

As explored above, the four of them did have different paths towards doctrinal Orthodoxy. Even when they were regular SOC visitors, their views of the SOC and of the doctrine greatly differed. Alongside the above-mentioned reasons for falling from the Church, each one of them had their own personal and individual reasons for breaking away from the administration of the SOC. Nowadays, they claim they do not feel a strong nostalgia for the past sense of security found within 'the embrace of the Church'. However, they all admit that leaving the Church did not go smoothly. In her interview, Ana said that when she left the Church "in her heart," she felt lost. Ivan went through a trauma of being considered "a betrayer of Christ," who broke his celibacy oath. Nenad felt left alone in this world when he realized that the Church did not represent a secure shelter for him. Vojin experienced a severe depression that lasted "for a couple of years." Notwithstanding the traumatic experience of falling away from their ancestral faith, they maintain that they are not a part of the SOC while claiming that they did not leave the faith itself, but distanced themselves from the corruption of ecclesiastical life of the SOC.

It is the consistency of their post-SOC views of the Church and the ecclesiastical Orthodox life in general that is most interesting – their shared feeling that they are no longer members of the SOC, even though they feel that something was taken away from them the moment they realized they can no longer support the identity politics and the structure of their former religious community. They all quote *ethnophiletism* (ethnic nationalism of the SOC), corrupt bishops and nepotistic married priests as triggers for their *apostasy* from the SOC. Furthermore, all four of them believe that the Orthodox doctrine itself remains stuck in the distant past, and does not correspond with modernity and the needs of 21st century men and women. This is the primary reason why they feel that they did not only leave the Church, but that they also *converted from* the institutional Orthodoxy into a more personal form of Christianity.

The answers of Ivan, Ana, and Nenad indicated, however, that they view their own personal "Orthodoxness" with a high level of ambiguity due to their awareness that the values they live up to clash with the teachings of classical Orthodox Church fathers. Nevertheless, with the lone exception of Vojin, the other three (Ivan, Ana, and Nenad) all find that one can be an Orthodox Christian without being affiliated with the SOC. Despite discarding Orthodoxy as a doctrine Vojin, however, maintains that he is culturally Orthodox, attributing this self-label to his specific family experience (being member of a Christian minority in a dominantly Muslim environment, and being from an anti-communist family). What is also particularly interesting about these four people is that all four of them would like to have an official Orthodox priest perform their funeral service after they die.

It seems that Ivan, Ana, Nenad, and Vojin fell from the SOC in its current state, but all four of them, more or less, maintain loyalty to the Orthodox Church they have in their minds-- to an idealized and individualized image of the Orthodox Church. Apart from this shift from institutional towards normative loyalty to imagined Orthodoxy, there have been shifts in the overall religiosity of these four people. My informants' new lifestyles, ideological orientations

and worldviews have undergone qualitative changes as of the time they decided to distance themselves from the SOC. They embraced the alternative model of religiosity marked with their constant negotiation between what they believe in and the complexity of the outside world.

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Notes

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¹ The common perception in Serbia as regards the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church and Orthodox Christianity in the historical preservation of the ethnic and national being and existence is that, had not the SOC been there to guard Serbness (*srpstvo*), people who label themselves as Serbs would have perished. This perception is championed by the education system (via the Serbian language and literature curriculum, history textbooks, etc.) and the media, and it is overwhelmingly present in the political discourse that shapes Serbian cultural policy. Simultaneously, the SOC spurs discourse that not only supports this perception of the Church as a historical and cultural guardian not only in the Ottoman period, but also in the present, postulating that the current plight of the Serbian people (i.e. defeats in all wars waged in the 1990s and the loss of Kosovo) comes as a punishment for the Serbian nation's weak connection to true Orthodoxy and their betrayal of the SOC during the socialist-communist period. The SOC claims a more active role in daily politics and the overall management of the state, which makes it vulnerable to political manipulation by conservative and right-wing political parties, and even mainstream civic parties that use the SOC for the sake of political gains. At the same time, the SOC uses this connection with political parties and its privileged position in Serbia's public space together with its moral capital to further its conservative agenda. This agenda is often in clash with so-called European course in politics and societal reform that Serbia at least nominally took upon the fall of the Milošević regime in 2000.

² State-incentivized secularization after WWII made a significant number of Serbs detach themselves from the SOC. After the revival of nationalism and national Orthodoxy in the 1980s and 90s, the return to the roots came in big numbers as many people again began to at least nominally affiliate themselves with the SOC. Nevertheless, secular habits, many researchers suggest, remained strong, meaning that only a minority of the faithful took a theological position in their beliefs. Some of these people say that they do not believe in God, but that they are members of the SOC as a result of their desire to be connected with their nation and tradition. Despite the lack of belief in the doctrine, the SOC also labels this latter group as Orthodox.

³ Research by Josip Ivanović of Novi Sad University reveals that out of 169 interviewed high school students self-identified as ethnic Serbs, 143 did not have any doctrinal Christian knowledge, 25 had some knowledge about Christian doctrine, and only one read the Bible on a regular basis and had a (self-identified) good understanding of Christian doctrine. On the other hand, out of 324 surveyed high school students self-labeled as ethnic Hungarians (but Serbian nationals), 103 did not have any doctrinal knowledge, but 102 said they had a developed understanding of the Christian doctrine (almost a third of the sample) (Ivanović 2010). In a survey I conducted among 16 to 17 year-old high school students there is also substantial evidence that most self-identified Orthodox Serbs visit church service only occasionally. Of 34 students from 18 communities in Serbia, two said that they had no religion, two were atheists, and the remaining were self-declared Orthodox Christians. Of the last group, nine never attend church services, 20 attend church occasionally – typically less than once a month, and only one attends services every Sunday. A research on religiosity in Serbia conducted in 2010 under the auspices of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (a representative sample N=1219), out of which around 93% identified with a confession) shows that 27.8 percent of the surveyed consider themselves doctrinally religious (i.e. accepting the teachings of their religion), 16.4 percent view themselves as religious but do not accept all the teachings of their religion, and 39.1 percent said they were religious and take part in religious rituals but do not take part in the life of their confessional community. The remaining interviewees were either atheists, non-religious or unsure of their status. Simple math calculation here reveals that around 11 % of the interviewees identified with a confession, but could not tell if they were religious at all (Sample 1219: 63,7% Orthodox, 9,4 Catholic, 8,5% Protestant, 9% Muslim, 3,3 % Jewish). Both the above data and insights into everyday discourses on Orthodoxy suggest that the Serbian Orthodox Church plays an important role in the lives of Serbs, but functions more as a perceived protector of the national identity and culturally Christian character of the nation than as an eschatological guide to Heavens. As a closing anecdote of support to this statement, the abovementioned KAS research shows that 59.4 percent of the surveyed Orthodox Christians see a close connection between the nation and their religion (Simić 2011: 15).

⁴ A specific kind of religious tourism developed as well. On major feast days, such as those of patron saints celebrated by popular monasteries, one might see familiar faces of people from all over Serbia. Here people who otherwise might not meet gather, meet, and befriend one another. Through such gatherings, a sense of community has been developed, which has consequently paved the way to a specific type of social networking among the

faithful. For example, if someone from Belgrade wanted to spend a weekend in Čačak, he or she would get a recommendation for who to get in touch with and would have accommodation or food for free. General gossip and information, whether of new marriages and births or information an individual would rather not have shared, also flow easily among the faithful; so many Church members remain informed without the usage of online social networks. Such exchanges of information help develop a specific type of social control and 'peer' pressure among the faithful, or as one member put it: "We are policing each other." As an example, if someone marries a non-faithful (someone who may be an Orthodox Church member, but not observant), that person is likely to be subjected to extensive gossip and disapproval.

⁵ Information about involvement of the Vranje bishop Pahomije in pedophile affairs and sexual harassment of minors can be found at the Center for Research Journalism: <www.cins.org.rs> (Accessed July 15, 2012); Corruption affairs, accusations of sexual harassment of low ranking clergy involving the Zvornik-Tuzla bishop Vasilije have been the subject of wide media and public attention, which prompted the SOC governing body (Sinod) ask bishop Vasilije leave his diocese and retire. Source: Deutsche Welle news in Serbian on November 11, 2012. <www.dw.de> (Accessed November 18, 2012)

⁶ None of the members of either Vojin's or Nenad's extended families (all of whom are self-labeled Orthodox Christians, were baptized in early childhood, and the majority of whom never had anything to do with Communism), know the biography of the saint they celebrate; no one (apart from Vojin and Nenad) knows liturgy by heart; no one attends church on a regular basis; no one can tell the doctrinal difference between Orthodoxy and Catholicism; and no one understands nor can explain the notion of Holy Trinity.

⁷ The lay people who have become positioned high in the informal ecclesiastical structures are, the four claim, those who are close with the monks or priests, who serve at the altar or read epistles at the liturgy, and who often speak in a specific 'churched' vernacular and are dressed in an Orthodox manner (i.e. modest dress, beards and long hair for men, and no makeup for women). Ivan and Ana say that these people would usually direct conversation from 'worldly matters' towards Christian matters and were there to 'correct' blasphemous thoughts and deeds, i.e. to warn their 'brother' and 'sister' when they have been perceived to have gone astray.