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RELIGIOUS INDIVIDUALISM, SPIRITUALITY AND ALTERNATIVE RELIGIOUS CONCEPTS OF GAYS AND LESBIANS IN SERBIA*

Abstract: This work presents experiences and practices of gay men and lesbians who opted for alternative religious concepts, self-spirituality or an individual concept of God. Marginalized gay men and lesbians in Serbia are forced to consciously choose between religious traditions to which they belong to by birth and for which their same-sex orientations and behaviours are unacceptable, and alternative religious concepts, non-institutional individual eclectic religious practices and beliefs they create on their own. Search for that particular expression on the spiritual market which would in the best possible way allow harmonization of sexual desires, behaviours and religious identity, the search for forms of religion and spirituality which are compatible with the gay and lesbian sexuality, goes on outside of formal institutions within vary different movements of the New Age spirituality.

Key words: Religious individualism, alternative religious concepts, gay and lesbian identities, sexual orientation, spirituality.

Introduction

The statement of Pope Francis got huge media attention worldwide, “*If someone is gay and believes in God and has good will, then who am I to judge him*”?² Pleading for integration and against discrimination of homosexual persons, the Pope has actually referred to Catechism of the Catholic Church and his statement contains no hints, regardless of how much some would wish it was, about changes in the relation of the Catholic Church to homosexual persons. However, undoubtedly, this is about a change in tone and the Pope with “a human image” reminding us and publicly talking about

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² <http://www.vesti.rs/Parada-ponosa/Istorijska-izjava-Pape-Franje-Ko-sam-ja-da-su-dim-gejevima-8.html>; <http://www.vesti.rs/Pride-Parade/Historic-statement-of-Pope-Francis-Who-am-I-to-judge-gay-people-8.html> (visited in July 2013).

fundamental Christian values – about restraining from judgment and exclusion of people from the community. Christianity does not accept homosexual behaviour, which also Pope Francis points out later on in his statement, but in line with its teaching about equal relation to all people it does declaratively accept homosexual persons, which means that it judges the sexual act as a sin, but not the sinner (him or her). Christian churches practice pastoral work with believers (him or her) who address the church and in this way every sinner gets a chance to change him/her and return to the acceptable heterosexual way of living.³ Stances of Christian churches, Islam and Judaism are essentially not different in regard with their relation to persons of same-sex sexual orientation. Melton's study shows that 72% of Churches and religious organizations that were canvassed in America condemn gays and lesbians and their sexual behaviour (Melton 1991, cited according to Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000). In a fast changing world, the Catholic and Orthodox Church(es) show no concrete shift in accepting gay men and lesbians like, for example, the Anglican Church which announced that it will allow blessings of same-sex unions or the Reformed Evangelic Church of the Canton of Vaud in Switzerland in which, since January 2014, a festive liturgy is organized during the wedding ceremony of same-sex pairs.⁴

I shall present some results of a wider research of the relation toward religion and religiousness of gay men and lesbians in modern Serbia in this work (Ivanovich and Radulovich 2014: 164-189), reviewing one aspect of the everyday life which he or she as a pollee were linking to religious individualism and alternative religious concepts. Relation to religion changes fast in the modern society, the ways in which individuals can create their religious lives, or remain indifferent towards religion, vary and depend on motivations, individual preferences, offers on the market of religious ideas and practices, but also on the position which an individual has in the society. What characterizes postmodern religiousness, as some researches believe, is that religious ideas and practices are delocalized and a matter of free choice. An individual can adopt Christian practices and beliefs without getting attached to any Christian denomination or local Christian community, choosing to combine them equally with even completely different traditions like yoga or thai chi (Harrison 2010: 965). Some "liberal" postmodern religious thinkers view religious "truths" as a product of individual creativity of religious people. In that sense, they believe that religious "truth" was radically subjective as much as it is a product of individual desires and preferences (Cupitt 1997, cited according to Harrison 201, 967). Therefore, this work discusses the issue of the manner in which some gay men and lesbians use certain non-traditional religious concepts and construct their individual approach to religion. The aforementioned research of the relation to religion and religiousness of gay men and lesbians in Serbia showed that they are making these choices more frequently in comparison to the general population (Ivanovich and Radulovich 2014: 164-189).

³ Reorientation therapies proceed from the notion, first of all, that it is possible to alter the sexual orientation of believers, that a man can have homosexual desires, but that a Christian cannot identify as a gay person and remain a Christian (Carlton 2004)

⁴ <http://www.jutarnji.hr/anglikanska-crkva-ce-blagosloviti-istospolne-zajednice/1143095/> (visited in July 2013).

Religion vs. homosexuality: In the context of discourse of traditional Churches and religious communities in Serbia

In modern societies religion has no crucial influence in determining the everyday life like it used to have in the traditional and premodern societies. However, despite various influences, the influence of religion indirectly and of the Church as an institution directly, on heteronormative sexuality in Serbia is not negligible and it seems that it can have even very serious consequences. Traditional Churches and religious communities reached an agreement and act united in condemning “the promotion of homosexuality”. Even though Churches have no exclusive power, nor the right to define cultural meanings of sexuality, on several occasions they have been given a (too) large space in public debates on issues regarding the relation to persons of same-sex sexual orientation and their rights, usually on the occasion of organizing the *Pride Parade*⁵ or on the occasion of the *Discrimination Law*⁶, and their representatives publicly talk about same-sex sexual orientation as a disease and threat to moral values.⁷ In their joint interview for the daily *Danas*, representatives of traditional Churches and religious communities were asked about the official stance on persons of same-sex sexual orientation; however, it turned out that the official stance either does not exist, or “has not been voiced heretofore, or was elided, like in the case of Archbishop of Belgrade Stanislav Hočevar.⁸

The *Discrimination Bill* was revoked just one day before it was supposed to be included into the parliamentary procedure, at the request of traditional Churches and

⁵ When the Pride Parade was cancelled in 2012, media broadcasted the statement of Patriarch Irinej: <http://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/patrijarh-irinej-homoseksualnost-je-bolest-tim-ljudima-treba-pomoc-kako-bi-prevladali-svoje-anomalije/640000.aspx> (visited in July 2013). Appeal of Orthodox clerics from Nis on the occasion of organizing the Pride Parade in 2010: <http://www.pravoslavlje.spc.rs/broj/1046/tekst/homoseksualnost-je-neprirodna-i-gresna/> (visited in July 2013); The Pan-Orthodox Council made of nine local Orthodox Churches intends to object to legalization of homosexual marriages in Europe in a “clear response”. See at: <http://fakti.org/orthodox-point/svepravoslavni-sabor-ce-odreagovati-na-homoseksualne-brakove-u-evropi> (visited in July 2013).

⁶ In the past few years a large number of officials of the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church, Islamic and Jewish community agreed in their statements on this issue (Jovanovich 2011). See: “Joint statement of representatives of traditional Churches and religious communities,” *Pravoslavlje* no.1008; *Nin*, 12.3.2009, p.14., (*Janjich*). *Standard*, 13.3.2009, p.9; *Ekonomist* 13.3.2009, p. 8; *Nin*, 12.3.2009, p. 16; *Ekonomist* 13.3.2009, p. 26.

⁷ See: “The dance of death in the streets of Belgrade,” *Pravoslavlje* no. 1046; “Homosexuality and violent judiciary,” *Pravoslavlje* no. 920; “Homosexuality is unnatural and sinful,” *Pravoslavlje* no. 1046; “Sin or lifestyle,” *Pravoslavlje* no.936; <http://fakti.org/orthodox-point/svepravoslavni-sabor-ce-odreagovati-na-homoseksualne-brakove-u-evropi> (visited in July 2013).; <http://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/patrijarh-irinej-homoseksualnost-je-bolest-tim-ljudima-treba-pomoc-kako-bi-prevladali-svoje-anomalije/640000.aspx>; http://www.pravoslavniodgovor.com/Svet_oko_nas/greh_homoseksualnosti.htm (visited in September 2014).

⁸ “The law should protect the right, Interview: Archbishop of Belgrade Stanislav Hočevar.” *Nin*, 12.3.2009, p.16. Official stance of the Catholic Church presented in the document titled *Persona humana. Statement on some aspects of sexual ethics* 1975. More information in: Ivanovich and Radulovich 2014, 170). See statement of Rabi Isak Asiel at: http://www.danas.rs/danasrs/drustvo/terazije/da_pokazemo_sta_nas_spaja.14.html?news_id=264472 (visited in September 2013)

religious communities in Serbia. Namely, the joint communiqué read that they consider possible “collision between some rights covered by this Bill and rights of free possession and expression of religious beliefs, preaching of religious teachings and protection of moral values”⁹ as the main flaw of the Bill. In other words, disputed articles 18 and 21 are interpreted as an obligation of the cleric to perform weddings of two persons of the same sex, contrary to canons and the canon law.¹⁰ Even though no article refers to the obligation of a cleric to wed two persons of the same sex, signatories to the communiqué refer to the *European Convention* on protection of human rights and basic liberties, particularly article 12 which says, “From the moment they are eligible to marry, a man and a woman have the right to get married and start a family according to national laws which regulate the realization of this right.” Obviously, referring to the *European Convention* in this manner becomes pointless, because the *Constitution of the Republic of Serbia* defines marriage as a community of persons of the opposite sex. If a cleric would still perform the wedding for a couple of the same sex, then that marriage would be invalid. Collision of disputed articles of the *Discrimination Bill* could implicitly be interpreted actually as another kind of collision or that believers of the same-sex orientation cannot be also members of religious communities.¹¹

Opposing any attempt at expressing the right to visibility and the right to publicly display the homosexual identity, traditional Churches and religious communities contribute with their social and political actions to discriminatory behaviour towards persons of same-sex sexual orientation.¹²

⁹ “Joint statement of representatives of traditional Churches and religious communities,” *Orthodoxy* no. 1008.

¹⁰ Article 18 reads: “Discrimination exists if actions are taken against the principle of free expression of creed or belief, i.e. if a person or group of persons are denied the right to gain, maintain, express or convert religion or belief, as well as the right to privately and publicly declare their belief in line with the law.” Article 21 reads: “Gender identity and sexual orientation are a private matter and no one can be called upon to publicly declare on his/her gender identity and sexual orientation. Everyone has the right to express his/her gender identity and sexual orientation and discriminatory actions due to gender identity and sexual orientation are forbidden. Freedom of expression of gender identity and sexual orientation in clause 1 and 2 of this article refer also to cases of transsexuality.”

¹¹ Namely, secretary of the Riyaset Eldin Asceric stated, “... because religious communities in their laws, simply, do not accept that members of religious communities can be homosexuals... We do not deny anyone’s right to declare freely, but it has to be more clearly defined, it cannot spread towards religious communities.” *Nin*, 12.3.2009, p.14.

¹² Press release of the Holy Episcopal Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church on the occasion of the Pride Parade announcement, besides calls to non-violence, reads that gays and lesbians are with their “transgressions” against moral norms jeopardizing also public morals in the society, yet they call upon believers to condemn the sin, but love the sinner by saving him from sin. See: Announcement of the Holy Episcopal Synod of the SOC on the occasion of the gay-parade announcement in Belgrade 2010. *Pravoslavlje* 1046: 5.

Identity in the context of research and methodical procedure

In what way are persons of the same-sex sexual orientation choosing various cultural scenarios in the construction of personal identities, if the same-sex sexual orientation opposes conventional religious beliefs? Researches show the existence of negotiation strategies of various aspects of personal identity, like: 1) rejection of religious identity, 2) rejection of the gay and lesbian identity, 3) compromise between opposed aspects of identity, and 4) integration of identity (Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000: 334). Rejection of religious identity is carried out through preference or conversion into atheism, or some alternative religious concept in which there is no moralistic condemnation of the same-sex sexual orientation. Rejection of the gay or lesbian identity is mostly, for example in America, overcome by the so-called therapies for Christian conversion or psychotherapies (Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000: 334). Strategy of compromise between opposed identities means keeping them separate, figuratively speaking, for example, when a gay person goes into a gay club he will leave his notion of God in the cloakroom. Integration means harmonizing the religious and the same-sex identity in everyday life in various spheres of life, contrary to the strategy of compromise which means separate spheres of life.¹³

Researches of gay and lesbian spirituality and religiousness in Western societies show that pollees display the greatest level of integration between sexual orientation and religious beliefs by departing from traditional orthodox Churches and joining specific organizations like the *Metropolitan Community Church* (MCC), in which the majority of members come from the LGBT population (Wilcox 2009: 45; Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000).¹⁴ In France, for example, exist so-called inclusive churches which accept all members regardless of their sexual orientation or ethnic background, and they help them harmonize their homosexual identity with the Christian (Gross 2008: 79). Viewed as a dynamic category, the religious identity in lives of gay men and lesbians is constructed, defined, formed, changed and remodeled depending on motivations and individual dispositions. Melissa Wilcox distinguished three directions along which choices of lesbians are moving when facing problems of intersection of the sexual and religious identity: continuity, conversion and innovation (Wilcox 2009:82). However, these ideal types become much more complex, they often also intersect when applied onto real human lives of persons of the same-sex sexual orientation that were researched. Continuity implies that within religious traditions into which they were born and raised, they find space for themselves by interpreting dogmatic doctrines and religious practices in their own unique way. The converted are usually completely dismissing religion or

¹³ The concept of identity intersection was of significance because it accepts the existence of other identity forms (sexual, religious, national and others) besides the sexual and/or gender identity as the previously privileged in feminist theories (Crenshaw 1991, according to Du-hacek 2011: 363).

¹⁴ See: Site of the church in New York, www.mccny.org; the church was founded in 1968 in Los Angeles, but spread to 23 countries of the USA. It is a spiritual centre gathering gay men, lesbians, bisexual, transgender and intersexual Christians who left churches in which they experienced condemnation and rejection. Members of this church believe that God created each person as a unique being, that all people, without difference, can experience Gods' love through prayers and worship.

replacing it with another, usually one which is more tolerant to persons of the same-sex sexual orientation. The most common direction is usually innovation, characterized by two patterns of behaviour, on one side is the search for the divine or spiritual, for religious practices, but also the dissatisfaction with answers they received along this path, on the other side is the bricolage of elements of various religious and spiritual traditions (see Wilcox 2009:83). Experiences of persons who converted to other religious traditions, which are more tolerant to persons of the same-sex sexual orientation, and those who search for some new religious and spiritual expressions, have been presented in this work.

In line with the general process of religious changes in Western societies of Europe and America which reflect in the emergence of untraditional and non-institutional forms of religion, what characterizes gay and lesbian beliefs is the emergence of religious individualism constructed on the basis of combining various religious concepts (Ivanovich and Radulovich 2014: 168; Wuthnow 1998). Individualism of the postmodernism is particularly attractive to persons of the same-sex sexual orientation, because it advocates dismissal of authoritarianism and the traditional relation to some family values and sexuality. Religious individualism is marked also by a vague border between spirituality and religion.¹⁵ Even though scientists disagree over the exact definition of terms “spirituality” and “religion” (Scott and Thumman 2005), when pollees talk about their personal experiences and perspectives, they usually treat spirituality as a form of religion, even though often spiritual practices which they describe cannot be filed under the scientific term of religion (Wilcox 2009: 10). Of course, there is no unique and exactly defined scientific term of religion, various theoretical perspectives affect the width of the scope within which a scientist will place the borders in defining religion. The diversity of religious beliefs and practices in a large part of the world is not allowing us to reduce religion to institutional forms of the Church, sect or confession. In that sense, I file individual beliefs and practices of gay men and lesbians in this work under alternative religious concepts, and they are actually an alternative to dominant traditional religions in Serbia. These are beliefs and practices which in their essence could be considered religious or could contain elements of spirituality which are closely related to religion. In some cases the difference between religion and spirituality, when used within the Christian context, represents actually the difference between the institutional religion – the Church and construction of individually based creed, identities and practices. Spirituality can be defined also as subjective-vital forms of holiness, which emphasize internal sources of meanings or sacralize the subjective life (Krondorfer and Hunt 2012: 203). Researches of spirituality have been redirected to social-cultural changes in the sphere of religiousness,

¹⁵ Authors discuss the use of the term spirituality; they believe that it is more linked to the individual, personal impression and experience, while religion is linked to institutional beliefs and practices, organization and ideology. Various researches in America are implicitly presuming that “to be religious” and “to be spiritual” are excluding each other, and show that more than 90% of pollees nominally define themselves as spiritual, and 78% per cent as religious (Zinnbauer et al. 1997: 555; Marler and Hadaway 2002: 291). Should religion be viewed as an inclusive term which includes also the spiritual, or can one be spiritual, but not religious or religious, but not spiritual? The answer is not simple at all and depends on the disciplinary, theoretical and methodological approach. When the question is formulated in a manner that is not distinguishing, 74% of pollees answered that they were both religious and spiritual; therefore a large majority has no need to choose between religion and spirituality (Pargament 1999: 8).

which is more and more turning to privatized forms and individualized nature of religious articulation in the everyday life, particularly through expressions of holistic spirituality (Krondorfer and Hunt 2012: 197). Distinction between definitions of religion and spirituality is of little significance for this work, more important is the emic perspective of pollees, their apprehensions and experience, the ways in which they construct their own religious concepts or spiritualities (Wilcox 2009: 10).¹⁶

The search for that expression on the spiritual market which would allow harmonizing sexual desires, behaviour and religious identity, the search for forms of religion and spirituality which are compatible with gay and lesbian sexuality, goes on outside of formal institutions within very different untraditional forms of religion, particularly within various *New Age* spirituality movements. Syncretic-eclectic spirituality, various new religious movements that promote self-development, yoga, mediation and other, as proved by some researches, become easily available, popular and attractive to a large number of people, in that sense persons of the same-sex sexual orientation are no exception. Emergence of spirituality forms which are reached by instant enlightenment, search for forms of spiritual self-development which correspond to individual needs, created conditions to treat spirituality as a product on the market which is equally commercial as food, cloths, beauty, status and other things (York 2001: 370; Dragun 2008: 1049).

This work presents experiences and practices of gay men and lesbians who opted for alternative religious concepts, self-spirituality or an individual concept of God. These concepts are diverse and eclectic, they include beliefs and practices of the *New Age* popular culture, experiences linked to spiritual self-development, self-help, alternative psychoanalytical techniques of self-development, includes also very diverse phenomena, ranging from elements of Eastern religions, pagan beliefs and practices, shamanism, Western esoterism, occultism, gnosis, mysticism, to quasi-scientific psychology, etc. The majority of gay men and lesbians who self-identified as religious in an untraditional manner or spiritual, opted in their youth for some alternative spiritual and religious practices, “experimented” with their own abilities, reassessed and combined various alternative religious concepts.

The research was directed towards the experience¹⁷ as a subjective dimension and internal faith, ideas of the pollees themselves of what certain beliefs and practices mean, how they are accepting them and fitting them into everyday life, whether these are and up to what degree compatible with their same-sex sexual orientation. Goals of empiric research set in this manner required various sources of information, first of all, the interview was used as the most suitable method, as well as other methodological procedures and sources of information like: online inquiries, observation and Internet forums. Persons of the same-sex sexual orientation are “vigorously” communicating in social networks, in that sense these represent a very important and relevant source of information owing to several reasons. They have partially replaced arduous finding of pollees and agreements

¹⁶ Equally important is also the self-identification of pollees, which is why, among others, there were also Orthodox atheists, European polytheists, agnostics, but also a wizard agnostic among them.

¹⁷ There is no agreement on the definition and use of the term religious experience, but neither on means by which this problem could be overcome (Throop 2003: 222).

to interviews, but have also offered a new source of data about interactive exchange of ideas, impressions, stances and opinions, which are scientifically usable and legitimate. Analyzed were several *online* forums in which gay men and lesbians discuss current issues with regard to the relation to religion, spirituality, untraditional and non-institutional religious phenomena and practices.¹⁸ Virtual space of forums represents a rich source of relevant data, because it offers options for exchanging opinions and experiences, it represents a place for establishing contacts with other gay men and lesbians, it offers the impression of belonging, more anonymity, and therefore more honesty and openness can be presumed (see Nikolić 2009).¹⁹ As concluded by some researchers, dates and communication in cyberspace can be viewed also as a form of compensation for feelings of exclusion, rejection and alienation, particularly for hidden minorities, and allows them to create and construct alternative identities in an alternative space (Van Velzen 2007: 27).

The research included 52 pollees in total, the *online* questionnaire was filled by 40 pollees, 22 men and 18 women, while in-depth interview included 12 pollees, 6 men and 6 women.²⁰ Most of the pollees are highly educated or students, two have highschool education. Professions of pollees vary at large, most of them were students (8), most of them were highly educated, and so there were couple of designers, teachers, university professors, researchers, doctors, lawyers, journalists, etc. Of relevance for this paper is a group of 26 pollees who believe in cosmic energy or justice, a higher power, spirituality of a person, they usually do not consider themselves religious, but spiritual, or they are not religious in the traditional and institutional sense which is often attributed to this term as faith in God.

In the questionnaire in the forum *gay-serbia.com*, in which 185 forum members have participated, 47% declared to be atheists, 26% believers, 27% accepted the option 'other' (alternative, some sort of spirituality, faith in the nature, occultism...).²¹ In another poll, the question "Which is Your religion?" was asked, and 135 forum members responded by choosing besides the offered traditional religions and religious communities in Serbia (expressed in percentages: atheists 25, Orthodox Christians 30, Catholics 2, Protestants 4, Muslims 2, Jews 1) also untraditional religious concepts (expressed in percentages:

¹⁸ Site www.gay-serbia.com is one of the most visited internet portals in Serbia, most of the communication between gay men and lesbians goes through the Internet, because it provides a virtual space in exchange for less options for other forms of communication in the public space. <http://www.gay-serbia.com/forum/da-li-je-seks-poklon-od-boga--t47378.html>; <http://www.gay-serbia.com/forum/bog--t36657.html>; <http://www.gay-serbia.com/forum/crkva-kao-institucija-i-verovanje-i-duhovnost-t46223.html>; <http://www.gay-serbia.com/forum/koja-je-vasa-religija-t18752s120.html> (visited in July 2014).

¹⁹ See: Research of Dragan Nikolić about the role of Internet communication between gay men in Serbia. Communication in the Internet was of major significance in accepting sexual diversity for 41.6% of the pollees, 72% log in to get to potential partners in this way, the network of acquaintances was expanded for 51% of the pollees (Nikolić 2009: 114).

²⁰ Their names have been replaced with pseudonyms because of the anonymity of pollees. Age structure of pollees was ranging from the youngest pollee, age 15 to the oldest pollee, age 46. From 15 to 23 years old were 6 pollees, from 22 to 32 years old were 29 pollees, and from 33 to 46 years old were 17 pollees.

²¹ <http://www.gay-serbia.com/forum/jeste-li-vjernik--t30474s30.html>, (visited in July 2014).

Wika 2, other forms of Paganism 3, modern Satanist 3, traditional Satanist 1, Buddhist 4, Hindus 0, and other 21). Therefore, 35% of pollees opted for untraditional and non-institutional forms of religion.²²

Alternative religious concepts and spirituality of gay men and lesbians in Serbia

The relation to religion and church is by gay men and lesbians in Serbia formed at large on the basis of tensions existing between open non-acceptance of expression of sexuality of gay men and lesbians by traditional Churches and religious communities, and their right to freely choose and express their both religious and same-sex sexual orientation. Most of them are therefore opting for non-institutional forms of religion and spirituality. The main argument of many gay men and lesbians, even those who participated in this research, is that the Bible was nowhere explicitly condemning same-sex relations and that over the course of history various wrongful explanations and interpretations need to be viewed within the historic context which surely cannot be valid also for the Christian sexual ethics in the modern society. The usual opinion on the relation of the gay and lesbian population to religion, which is often prevailing in the modern culture in Serbia, is that the majority could be classified as atheists and antitheists.²³ If you are gay and lesbian in Serbia and if, on top of that, you are religious, then that represents for many a major contradiction. A large part of the population, particularly those who consider themselves Orthodox believers, as well as gay men and lesbians who are identifying themselves as atheists and antitheists, are guided by stereotypes and prejudice toward religious persons of the same-sex orientation, and “conjoint” in that manner they form an intolerant environment for gay men and lesbians who define themselves as religious persons. Non-religious gay men and lesbians openly do not accept and are even discriminating persons who have religious experiences. Religious examinees testify in this research about the position of multiple marginalizations both due to their same-sex orientation and their religious choice. Of relevance for this paper are examples of examinees that have opted for alternative religious concepts and religions that are tolerant to the same-sex orientation, as they are also met with misunderstanding within the gay community while clerics and some believers of the SOC often proclaim them Satanists.²⁴ In that sense they were often accused of representing danger to young people both due to

²² <http://www.gay-serbia.com/forum/koja-je-vasa-religija-t18752s120.html>, (visited in July 2014).

²³ Researches in America show that 62% of gay men and lesbians believe that religion is not an important aspect of life (Singer and Deschamps, cited according to Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000).

²⁴ <http://www.pravoslavna-srbija.com/forum/index.php?topic=1461.0>; <http://dverisrpske.com/sr-CS/vesti/2013/jun/homoseksualizam-i-okultno-1-deo.php> (visited in July 2013).; Informant Dejan (28 years old) identified himself as a pagan and was thrown out of a gay club due to his apparel. He said that gay men were getting up and leaving the table when he was talking about his religious affiliation to the international pagan association. On the other hand, he experienced that at a public lecture, in a discussion he joined, he was referred to as a Satanist by a cleric.

their religious affiliation and due to their same-sex sexual orientation.

“Religious gay men, you must be kidding, that is an endemic species”, are words of pollee which serve as the best illustration of the stereotypic model that is present also in the population of persons of the same-sex orientation in Serbia. However, that is only one of the auto-stereotypes which, besides numerous other stereotypes and prejudice, exist in the society in which any difference causes feelings of embarrassment, fear, labelling, open or hidden condemnation. Persons of the same-sex sexual orientation do not fit into the commonsense idea of “normal” and “natural” of the majority of Serbia’s citizens. Public opinion polls on homophobia in Serbia, organized by the Gay Straight Alliance, show an extremely high level of homophobia, 70% of pollees believe that homosexuality is a disease, while 51% believe that these persons should be confined in specialized institutions (Vuković *et al.* 2008). In that atmosphere, it comes as no surprise that gay men and lesbians are still treated as a hidden minority or one of the difficultly approachable populations with regard to scientific research.

Research results that were published in the paper about research of religious identity of gay men and lesbians in Serbia show that out of 52 pollees up to 38 were baptized and the majority of them (30) were baptized in their early childhood (Ivanovich and Radulovich 2014:179). This fact corresponds to information referring to the general population and testify about mass increase in the number of baptized persons in the 1990s in Serbia.²⁵ At the moment when they face contradictions of the same-sex and religious identity, choices of gay men and lesbians move in the said three directions: 1) they remain in Churches to which they belong by birth, but usually hide their identity; 2) they decide to leave traditional Churches and religious communities, even though they may have been only formally members on the basis of baptism, convert usually into atheists or choose some alternative or new religion that is present in Serbia, which is tolerant to persons of the same-sex sexual orientation; 3) or, more frequently, while searching for the appropriate religious or spiritual expression, they opt for a bricolage²⁶ of various religious traditions and spiritual practices, depending on motivations and personal preferences. Often they learn about some religions and concepts while staying abroad and then they transfer them to Serbia or join existing communities. Two pollees are also religious functionaries in the respective branches for Serbia.²⁷

More than a half of the pollees made some experiences with alternative religions and/or spiritualities while trying to reassess their own relation to the religious and spiritual, to seek answers to essential questions of life, among other things, to understand reasons

²⁵ Research confirms that the number of baptized in the St. Sava church in Belgrade in 1992 was increased by up to 82.8% in comparison to 1982 (Radulovich 2002: 82).

²⁶ The term bricolage is usually, but not quite adequately, translated as ‘domestic handi-craft’. It means taking apart an object, idea, thought to elements and putting these elements together into something else. In that sense, some religious concepts, beliefs and practices are put apart into pieces and then combined into a “new” concept, while that is not an entirely new concept, but is combined in a new way.

²⁷ An informant was the national secretary of O.T.O. (Ordo Templi Orientis) for Serbia, the other deputy coordinator of the international pagan federation in Serbia; he defines himself as a pagan, i.e. neo-pagan “on the level of a bard in the druid society or shaman cleric in our old tradition.”

of contradictions between their own same-sex orientation and religion they belong to by birth. "Haven", even if sometimes temporary, was found within notions of some individual creed and practice, which they created on their own and which would harmonize the entire life. However, the question of how much the sexual identity of some gay men and lesbians who say that they have accepted paganism, oriental religions, Western esotericism, various spiritual practices or postmodern spirituality has affected their opting for more tolerant religious systems while reassessing their own sexuality, remains open. Actually, it is characteristic for a number of young people in Serbia, of different sexual orientations and identities, to be attracted to nothing else but religious practices and beliefs, modern forms of the *New age* spirituality, and therefore young gay men and lesbians are not so different in that regard from their peers of heterosexual orientation (see Radulovich 2007).

Religious individualism is characteristic for gay men and lesbians who have chosen alternative religious concepts or spirituality. Usually they point to nothing else but the individual approach, *"I have my beliefs, but these are not believing in God as presented by the world of today"*; *"I couldn't say that I do not believe in God. Simply, I have my own understanding of it"*; *"Something mine, inspired by the concept of Brahmins"*.²⁸ Therefore, the trend of religious individualization and pluralisation, which is present in modern societies of Europe, can be recognized in the preference of the majority of gay men and lesbians for non-institutional or non-church religiousness, which will not be a burden with its dogmas and conservative stances. They develop a personal relation to religion which is conditioned by personal preferences and life styles, that what would be specific for them, as Grace Davie would emphasize, would be *belief without belonging* (Davie 2005: 15). Internet forums have on-going discussions on religious belonging that illustrates various directions in which their choices are going: *"I have been baptized as an Orthodox believer. But I believe in the energy of 'all' because everything is energy. Isn't it"*; *"Independent believer"*; *"I am still searching for my religion... I think that I am closest to Buddhism: Peace"*; *"I am a pagan woman... actually, I am creating my own direction which is similar to paganism"*; *"Orthodox Christian woman with a Buddhist view of the world and respect for Protestants, while according to my belief... a member of the New Age... in brief, I like to free-combine, so that as a result you could say – an electrician"*.²⁹

Out of 26 pollees who opted for alternative religious concepts or spiritualities, half of them believe that it was a phase in their individual search and reassessment of spirituality and/or religiousness, and that they are no longer consistent in religious practices and beliefs.

"Combination of Taoism and Thelema, Pantheism, at first I was a Christian, I liked the Old Testament, but it seemed to me that the Church was limiting and that everything was going to the wrong side, then I started searching for answers and stepped across the magic of Crowley and I liked that, because he has an intellectual approach. Magic, to me as a teenager, was interesting and exciting; be-

²⁸ <http://www.gay-serbia.com/forum/bog--t36657.html> (visited in September 2014)

²⁹ <http://www.gay-serbia.com/forum/koja-je-vasa-religija-t18752s120.html> (visited in July 2014)

hind it was the desire to control life, situations, and the future in order to realize occult powers. Later on I evolved and read more Crowley... I read also others involved in Hermeticism. The Golden Dawn may have been the first I encountered, Wicca³⁰ was becoming to me, but later on I realized that it was the same story, just wrote differently". (Nenad, 26 years old)

Preferences for holistic spirituality and practices of self-development do not differ in any regard from preferences of the rest of the population, however, the choice of alternative religious and spiritual expressions is often stirred by the repudiation of gay men and lesbian rights by traditional religious institutions and communities, contrary to the more tolerant stance of alternative religions to their sexual orientation. Often, however, dismissal of institutional or organized religion expands also to alternative religions,

"I would define myself as a wizard agnostic, because I do not believe in the image of God, I believe in some mundane things and forces of nature, and that does not have some theological connotation. It is a belief, but not organized religion; I am not seeking enlightenment in any way. I joined O.T.O... but I did not like the idea of a cult, I do not like religious organizations of any kind, immediately you have a leader there and there are many intelligent people who did not agree to this. I do not wish some authority, we met as friends, made parties at home and dealt more with mundane things, spirituality happened only in Gnostic masses". (Damjan, 24)

"I do not belong to any tradition, because my idea of paganism and what I do cannot be identified somewhere. Simply, some individual path, my will, my love and my happiness directed to the Nature and what it is offering and giving. It is difficult to talk about it (particularly in this way through the Net) because it is something personal".³¹

Internal integration in regard with spirituality and/or alternative religiousness means, first of all, integration of diversities and has a valuing connotation, and in reality it differs in intensity and happens on various levels.

"Spirituality, after additional reading, if I would exclude myself from all that I knew when I started with spirituality, meant for me coming in touch with my spiritual potential through the conviction that every man possesses a certain spiritual potential and can separate spirituality in various ways through certain practices. I believed that spirituality is an internal eternal potential..." (Damjan, 24 years)

Gay men and lesbians in this research stand out not only in regard with their sexual orientation and religion, but also in regard with other aspects of life that are connected to it. Namely, those who accept diversities on one level are also more easily accepting diversities on other issues that are contrary to conformist norms of behaviour of the majority of people in their environment. Some gay men and lesbians move within a wide spectrum of individual choices of spirituality which includes various ideas, beliefs and practices while aiming to explain various aspects of live without dogma, individually and

³⁰ Editor's note: Wicca is e abbreviation of the International Association of Witches.

³¹ <http://www.gay-serbia.com/forum/paganizam-t38187.html> (visited in September 2014)

without opting for ideas from the dominant cultural matrix, but at the same time keep that as part of their privacy, just like sexual privacy.

“I cannot hide love, it is very difficult to find the measure of internal fear and dignity, champion oneself, people are likely to give up from same-sex relationships, because the milieu is inadequate, condemning, which is frustrating, I do not know whether I outed in that regard, I am a vegetarian, I do not talk about it and the story of religion is my intimacy”. (Ena, 45)

Why are the majority of gay men and lesbians referring to themselves as spiritual persons? Trendiness is certainly partially present; the influence of Western culture, globalization and commercialization is unavoidable. Certainly, spirituality and alternative religious choices realize positive influences in their lives, but acceptance of these concepts resulting from various influences of the social and cultural context should not be neglected either. Spirituality and alternative religious beliefs and practices can be part of the protest of gay men and lesbians in Serbia, as minority and discriminated individuals they share similar or the same destiny of members of alternative spiritualities, new religions and alternative religious cults and concepts which have been proclaimed destructive sects by the SOC, guru-movements, cults and satanic organizations (Radulovich 2007: 144-5, 159). Those who adopt or refuse to self-identify on the basis of sexual identity and/or orientation, who do not accept to clearly define themselves as religious and/or spiritual, should be viewed as persons for which any type of identification is actually a process that as any other process is dynamic and changeable. Concepts of religion/alternative religions/spiritualities made it possible for them at some point in life to reach for an explanation of the cause of the same-sex sexuality, everyone had the need to answer the basic question of identity, “Who am I, am I and why am I that what I am”?

Concluding observations

Despite an increase in scientific research of lives of persons of the same-sex sexual orientation in the past few decades, little is known about their spiritual and religious life today (Halkitis *et al.* 2009: 251, Ivanovich and Radulovich 2009). On the basis of research and relevant sample of 52 pollees, as this is a marginalized, discriminated and hidden population, only a few of many questions have been presented and problematized, which could be dealt with by an anthropologist in studying the relation of persons of same-sex sexual orientation to religion, alternative religious concepts and spirituality. Ethnographic evidence, at my disposal, contains sufficient material for offering answers also to questions about atheists and non-religious gay men and their view of the world and life in which there is no room for religious issues; about fundamentalist stances and behaviour, both of atheists and religious gay men; about religiously dedicated believers, etc. Relativism in defining terms: spirituality and religiousness, alternative religious concepts and religions, cannot be considered a flaw, but as the current state of affairs in science, which can be at least partially overcome, as it has been done in this work, through adequate operationalization within specific social circumstances and contexts.

Marginalized gay men and lesbians in Serbia are forced to consciously make a choice between religious traditions to which they belong by birth and for which their

same-sex sexual orientation and behaviour are unacceptable, and alternative religious concepts, non-institutional individual eclectic religious practices and beliefs which they create on their own. The premise that there is no room for religion and spirituality in their lives proved wrong, for approximately 60% of gay men and lesbians this is a very important aspect of their lives, even though they do not consider it crucial in constituting their own identity. On the path of their relation to sexuality and diversity, same-sex sexual orientation and choices they make in regard with religions are only different aspects of identities they are intersecting, integrating or making compromises with. None of the identity aspects is considered immutable, quite the contrary, their religious and spiritual choices are fluid and strategies are interchanging or changing, their personal biographies testify that this is a process of identification, that they are letting religious messages through filters of their own experience which changes over the course of time.

And our search for the religious and spiritual expression has opened another important question for future research and consideration: Are we onto distinctive characteristics of gay spirituality? On the basis of research the answer would surely be negative. Should we reassess aspects of sexuality of the pollees who wanted to say only a few words about their sexual practices in the context of spirituality? Were they open to discuss only those aspects of spirituality, which are not differing them from heterosexual seekers for spirituality? If we accept that “sexual orientation is a cumulative experience of interaction between erotic fantasy, romantic emotions and sexual behaviour directed to one or both sexes” (Kauth and Kalichman 1995, cited according to Wilkinson and Roys 2005: 66), as well as one of the stances that persons of the same-sex sexual orientation are trying to create a culture which “makes sense only in relation to the sexual experience” and a special kind of relation which separates the pleasure of sexual intercourse and pleasure (Interview with M. Foucault 2010: 121), it is possible to talk also about a particular queer spirituality. However, pollees in this research usually did not want to identify with a special “gay culture” or some special kind of sexual intercourse, quite the contrary for the majority of pollees more important were emotional relations. A pollee who was in this manner talking about his partnership emphasized, among other things, that he did not out to his parents due to the stereotype of linking a gay man to the same-sex sexual behaviour and promiscuity. In regard with gay men and lesbians in Serbia, we cannot talk about the existence of distinctive characteristics of gay spirituality. Due to many variations and forms in which spirituality and sexuality appears in the lives of gay men, sexual desire and pleasure should not be taken as features of gay spirituality. If that, for example, would be valid for a member of the “Radical Fairy” movement in America, then it does not have to mean that a gay vegetarian will accept to identify with gay spirituality.

Search for that particular expression on the spiritual market which would in the best possible way allow harmonization of sexual desires, behaviours and religious identity, the search for forms of religion and spirituality which are compatible with the gay and lesbian sexuality, goes on outside of formal institutions within vary different movements of the New Age spirituality.

Homosexuality existed in almost every society and culture, however, homosexuality as an identity category is a new phenomenon, as well as the efforts of same-sex sexually oriented persons to fight for their identity rights. The relation to homosexuality has not changed in traditional religions and communities (Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Judaism and Islam), from a historic point of view since their beginnings. In accordance with what

they are “preaching” today, condemnation of homosexual behaviour and not gay men and lesbians as such, they should accept also their rights to express their sexual same-sex orientation.

In the end, a digression on lives of gay men and lesbians in Serbia. Many parents and teachers were once persistently putting pens of left-handed children into their right hands, and today children are free of that coercion. Gay theologian J. Alison compared the left-handed to gay men, and more authors are optimistically foreseeing, using analogy with left-handed people, a future in which same-sex sexual orientation will be considered normal, just like being left-handed.³² However, today in Serbia, and as it seems the same goes for, at least, the near future, many parents would prefer “putting the pen into the right hand” of their adult children in order to reorient them on the basis of the heterosexual normative. But, would they still write in the same language, would they understand each other even less?

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³² Theology as Survival, An interview with James Alison: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/alison> (visited in September 2013).

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