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THE SACRED, SACRILEGE, AND SYMBOLIC BOUNDATIES IN POSTSECULAR, POSTSOCIALIST SERBIA

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Abstract: *This paper will strive to address the novel manifestations and roles that sacrilege plays in the postsecular world, and especially how it figuresin the symbolic battles waged in Serbia after October 5, 2000 over which current has the indisputable right to form its postsocialist collective identity – ethnic, ethical, ideological, religious.The focus will be on concrete incidents in Serbian public space involving accusations of blasphemy and the ensuing debates, which have arguably helpedestablish and maintain the symbolic boundaries in a society. The sample includes cases which are mentioned in news portals available online and this corpus of empirical material consisting of media content will be contextualized and subjected to discourse analysis. Of special interest will be the ways in which both accusations of blasphemy and defenses against these accusations can serve to draw lines around respective collective identities in symbolic divisions usually closely corresponding with geopolitical ones. The sociocultural problems that will hopefully be further illuminated are the modalities of the secular status of the state, freedom of religion and freedom of speech, collective identities (most pertinently ethnic nationalism, especially when combined with Eastern Orthodoxy in a postsocialist country), geopolitical influences, and postsecular hybrids (especially establishing which are permissible in a community, and which are perceived as impure mixing and as such sacrilegious).*

Key words: *sacrilege/blasphemy/desecration, the postsecular, symbolic boundaries, religion and identity (ethnicity/gender/sexuality).*

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Introduction

The very subject matter of this paper is difficult to define. What has originally constituted sacrilege or blasphemy, and how are these phenomena now manifested in the public media sphere of the postsecular world? An all-encompassing definition and explanation of the functions was offered by Levy: blasphemy is an "intolerable profanation of the sacred" which"affronts the priestly class, the deep-seated beliefs of worshippers, and the basic values that a community shares". "Punishing the blasphemer [serves] social purposes"because it "reaffirms communal norms", whereas "toleration endangers the unity of society". Blasphemy, being a "form of high treason against the highest powers in the universe" (Levy, 1993 p. 3) and the powers that be, requires a scapegoat which will be ritually purged from community (Levy, 1993 p. 8).

This is in keeping with the social roles of blasphemy accusations. As "blasphemy is fundamentally about transgression, about crossing the lines between the sacred and the profane in seemingly improper ways" about "an impure mixing" (Plate, 2006 p. 43-44), it is therefore "a litmus test of the standards a society believes it must enforce to preserve its unity, its peace, its morality, its feelings, and the road to salvation" (Levy, 1993 p. 9). "Where identity and security", Nash notes, "have been threatened, questioned, or in the process of being forged, then blasphemy as concept has flourished" (Nash, 2007 p. 233) and this is certainly true of Serbia.

Blasphemy is thus closely associated with identity politics: Sherwood (2011 p. 3) has noticed that blasphemy accusations have evolved from offending God through offending institutions representing God and finally to offending the feelings of believers, and this is connected with what Anshuman Mondal has called the 'marketplace of outrage', the new flipside of the marketplace of ideas. Mondal also notes that the cry of 'blasphemy!' is a "performance of power, and a display of dominance" within broad society or a marginalized group – the accuser is claiming a leadership role, protecting the community from violations by outsiders (Mondal, 2014 p. 20-21). As Korte notices, as "a form of identity politics in the public space", both accusations and defenses of blasphemy serve as "a measurement for what religion 'really' is", or, what a society of a smaller community sees as truly sacred – and these can be very different things, but they form the core of identity (Korte, 2015 p. 83). Blasphemy cases reveal the faultlines where symbolic boundaries are created.

Since the breakup of Yugoslavia and after the fall of Milošević, Serbia has been forging its new national identity. Being liminal, Postsocialist, post-Ottoman, postsecular, post-war, Serbia can forge its national identity in opposition to many elements, but always closely aligned to the Serbian Orthodox Church, as opposed to the state – asmany states were historically seen as inimical to ethnic identity (see Igrutinović *et al*, 2015). The Two Serbias, two groups vying since the 90s for the right to define Serbian national identity – the 'First' and 'Other' Serbia, nationalist and cosmopolitan, conservative and liberal (Naumović, 2009) – have also increasingly been aligned with Russia and 'the West' respectively since the war in Ukraine started.

Other theoretical frameworks that will be helpful are postsecular hybrids (Asad, 2003), envisaged as new connections between the sacred and the secular. Especially interesting is the question of which postsecular hybrids are acceptable, and which are blasphemous – andwho decides this. Also useful are various theoretical associations betweensexuality and nationalism such as the concepts of heteronationalism and homonationalism (Sabsay, 2012), and perhaps most important for this analysis, religio-sexual nationalism (Sremac, 2015). In Serbia, First Serbia representatives tend to level accusations of blasphemy against Other Serbia actors because they dare promote and create postsecular hybrids not in line with heteronationalism.

The method used is media discourse analysis. The sample consisted of public accusations of blasphemy in news portals after 5 October 2000 where an actual agent makes the accusation – andnot an anonymous journalist for clicks, or an anonymous commentator for likes. There is also to have been

no actual damage to holy objects, so the infraction can be said to be purely symbolic. Over adozen cases have met the criteria, but this paper will briefly present only a shorter selection of cases which are especially illustrative.[2]

1. The St. Ceca case: an ironic sacralization of the secular

In early June 2010, the image of turbo-folk star and widow of Arkan (war criminal/Mafioso) Svetlana Ceca Ražnatović, depicted according to traditional rules of iconography, started circulating on the Internet and stirring various passions. Turbo-folk has, especially in the war-torn Serbia of the 1990s, stood out as a symbol of parts of the 'first Serbia' and its belligerent nationalism, and Ceca is generally seen as an icon of this particular subculture. Partly because a decidedly 'unholy' personage was portrayed in a fashion reserved for holy figures, and partly because the icon showed the singer's signature cleavage, the artist was instantly accused of having "committed sacrilege". The author, Vladislava Đurić, a young female art student who had exhibited the painting as part of a class project, explained that she merely depicted what Serbia was in fact already venerating: "I had no need to choose Ceca, as the people had already done that, calling her 'the mother of Serbia', as a synonym for a person who was in some ways a victim, a widow, for some a heroine, a single mother" (Alo, 2010). A mildly critical ironical stance is apparent.

Professor Dragiša Bojović, dean of the newly formed Theological faculty in Niš, found the use of Church symbols for 'such purposes' – 'inappropriate' (Babić, 7.6.2010). Đurić actually mentions this case in his book about icons, referring to it as an "abuse of elements of the icon for secular purposes" (Đurić, 2013 p. 286-7).

What was iterated in the wake of this case was that it was unacceptable to represent *anyone who is not a holy figure according to the rules of iconography* if one did not wish to be accused of sacrilege.

2. Ecce Homo: Jesus bans the parade[3]

Belgrade Pride Week 2012 commenced on the day the Serbian Orthodox Church celebrated Holy Martyrs Faith, Love and Hope, and their mother Sophia, and a panel entitled "Who do Faith, Love and Hope belong to?" was held during the manifestation. The most provocative event by far was the exhibition *Ecce Homo* by Swedish photographer ElisabethOhlsonWallin. In this exhibition, the author, who is a Christian as well as a lesbian, depicts twelve moments from the life of Jesus Christ, mixing the imagery and symbolism of church art and queer culture while positioning Jesus in contemporary Sweden.

Even before the exhibition, there were strong reactions from Dveri, a far right group affiliated with the Serbian Orthodox Church, who demanded that the exhibition be banned because it is a 'blasphemous mocking of Our Lord and Savior' which shows that LGBT activists are 'ultimately against God' (Dveri, 2012), ignoring the complex message of the exhibition, along with the complex identity of the author. Notably, this incident pushed the formerly fringe group into prominence, helping it grow into a parliamentary party. The appeal is taken on by Patriarch Irinej, who then publicly demands from the Prime Minister to ban not only the 'scandalous' exhibition, but also the Pride Parade (Irinej, 2012). On

[2] This paper is based on the book *Sveto i svetogrđe u postsekularnoj Srbiji* by Danica Igrutinović (Biblos Books, Belgrade, 2023).

[3] Parts of this subchapter appeared in the co-authored paper Igrutinović, D., & van den Berg, M. (2020). *Ecce Homo* in Sweden and Serbia: State, Church and Blasphemy. In: M. Derks, & M. van den Berg (eds.), *Public Discourses about Homosexuality and Religion in Europe and Beyond* (pp. 261-283). Palgrave Macmillan.

the day of the exhibition, Prime Minister Ivica Dačić announces that the Pride Parade will be banned and elides the representation of the figure of Jesus accompanied by sexual and gender minorities with – 'mocking' it. So *Press* has as a heading "Dačić: Why not arrest those who mock Jesus?" and in the body of the text the assertion that "the exhibition mocks Jesus Christ" (*Press*, 2012), and even *Danas*, a reasonably civilized and 'liberal' daily, claims that *Ecce Homo* has "Jesus Christ mocked" (*Danas*, 2012).

An important word in the discourse surrounding the *Ecce Homo* debate was "provocation," at times also used in a positive context, and it could be argued that it was precisely this *positive* provocation that was seen as so threatening, as it openly strives to undermine the foundations of the authority of the heteronationalist powers that be.Dveri openly seem to acknowledge this, as can be inferred from their appeal to the patriarch: "The organizers are also planning for October 4 a provocative panel on the relationship between LGBT and religion entitled 'Whose are love, faith and hope?' Your Holiness, tell them whose" (Dveri, 2012). The message is clear: the Christian faith is the trump card of the "first Serbia" – aligningitself with patriarchal authority, tradition, and heteronationalism – whilethe "other Serbia" cannot be allowed to claim it. *Ecce Homo* served as a great excuse to ban the pride parade – andthus appeal to the majority of voters who oppose it – toreaffirm the heteronormative "us" of the nation and to reassert the authority of the state, all the while representing Jesus as the "bad cop" in the situation. This is wonderfully illustrated in the headline chosen by *Večernjenovosti* to report on the decision to ban Pride: "Jesus bans the parade" (*Večernje novosti*, 2012) (see Igrutinović & Van Den Berg, 2020).

3. Say: Money (and read yourself into the piece)

A little over a year after the *Ecce Homo* exhibition was held in Belgrade, in October 2013, a seemingly much more innocuous work of art was preemptively removed – before the opening of the art students' exhibition – from the Novi Sad Cultural Center by its new director, Andrej Fajgelj, previously of Dveri fame. The censored painting shows a faceless human figure crucified by holding firmly onto bundles of cash. The face being cut out of the painting would suggest that anyone could read themselves into the scene, as one crucified by the pursuit of money. The author of the censored work, young female artist DanijelaTasić, adamantly claimed that she had had no intention of offending anyone and that she was merely representing the "materialistic crucifixion of each of us" (Šuljagić,2013).

Curiously, no one seemed interested in what the artist had to say, and despite both her protestations and visual evidence, the painting was generally described in the media as simply a representation of Jesus grabbing cash. Some found the painting to be a critique of money-grabbing dignitaries within the Church.Church PR Bishop Irinej described it as a "sacrilegious depiction of Jesus Christ" which has caused "offense and pain" because the artist had dared to put "wads of money into the bleeding, pierced hands of Crucified Christ" (Irinej, 2013). This vivid description produces a strong visual effect quite different from the actual art work in question.

What was iterated in the wake of this and the *Ecce Homo*case was that it was unacceptable to represent *holy figures without following the rules of iconography* if one did not wish to be accused of sacrilege – even when the artist expressed no interest in actually representing a holy figure.

4. The Parliament toilet paper blasphemy case

After activists of right-wing movements "Naši", "Obraz", and "Nacionalni stroj" trample on the flag of the liberal leftist party League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina (LSV) in Novi Sad in November 2015, media publish that toilet paper bearing the logo of "Obraz" (which itself incorporates a cross) has appeared in the toilets of the Serbian Parliament. Although it is obvious to the naked eye that the

image is photoshopped – and despite the fact that it is an obvious joke anyway – the Serbian Orthodox Church reacts to this 'scandal' at lightning speed.The official PR of the Church, Bishop Irinej Bački, signs a press release published on the website of the Church, in which the Holy Synod issues a protest on account of the news that there is "toilet paper with Christ's cross drawn on it" in the Parliament and demands that the responsible parties be found. The media take up this press release, reporting on it in the strong terms received from the Church (Irinej, 2015). So *Blic* has as a headline "SOC looks for the culprit for BLASPHEMY" (*Blic*, 2015) and *Politika* "SOC: Christ's cross on toilet paper is blasphemy" (*Politika*, 2015). Obraz react speedily as well, on the very same day and publish on their website a text entitled "Support for the protest of the SOC on account of the sacrilege of Christ's cross in the Serbian Parliament", sternly denouncing the "blasphemous sacrilege" committed in the Parliament (Obraz, 2015).

While the use of the symbol of the cross by a violent right-wing group for its logo had never been even questioned by the SOC, the mocking of the logo – not the symbol itself – by way of a jocular photoshopped image is verboten and causes a prompt official reaction from the Church. It is clear that, in the eyes of the SOC, representatives of the 'first Serbia' can lay claim to any religious symbol they please, while these – and they – must remain off limits to anyone from the 'other Serbia'.

5. Desecrating the secular: the case of the folk costume

The scandal of the 2018 Pride Parade was occasioned by Dita, drag queen, wearing the Serbian folk costume, with the message "Love is the traditional value, not violence and hatred – this is what I wish to say with my outfit". Rage on social media ensues, followed by headlines in independent media such as "SHAME! The Parade is fine, but this isn't: GAYS DESECRATE FOLK COSTUME".

MilicaĐurđević, president of the far-right Zavetnici movement – interestingly enough, also later a parliamentary party – isquoted as saying: "A few years ago [2012, *Ecce Homo*] they mocked Christ, then our Church, and now the time has come for the Serbian folk costume to be mocked." (*Republika*, 2018). Three inferences can be drawn from the discourse used here: 1) a drag queen *wearing* the folk costume is equated with *mocking* it (as was the case with *Ecce Homo*, where Jesus was similarly 'clearly' mocked just by association with LGBT bodies); 2) Serbian ethnicity has been sacralized to the point where there is no longer a need to even symbolically and vaguely associate it with religion – it is now possible to 'desecrate' a fully secular item; 3) 'LGBT' is fully seen as discursively opposed to 'Serbian'.

6. The Priest's Wife and the list of 'Other Orthodox' traitors

EuroPride 2022 was held in Belgrade amid increasing geopolitical strife and various incidents, some of which were declared to be sacrilegious. Despite the Patriarch having participated in prayer processions whose aim was to stop the manifestation from taking place, the official Church has largely remained silent since the actual parade. Then another opportunityarose to censure sacrilege and perhaps vent frustration– the sitcom entitled "The Priest's Wife" airing soon thereafter on national TV. Bishop Fotije was the first to condemn the show, in a speech where he decriedthe "blasphemy and mocking of the Church" (Fotije, 2022). A humoristic depiction of a fictitious family of a young priest (and perhaps more importantly, of the meddlesome wife of the old priest, now retired) is here equated with blasphemy against the Church. In a similar vein, Bishop David joins the condemnation of sacrilege and blames for it those who are – 'other Orthodox', which is the first time this discursive gem makes it into the public arena, at least in writing. The 'other Orthodox', modeled after the 'other Serbia', are according to David, "bullies and despisers of morals", and also "the fifth column from within the Serbian Church" (David, 2022).Slobodan Stojičević takes this rhetoric over and offers a detailed

etymology and etiology of the phenomenon, followed by a list of nine prominent examples, 'other Orthodox' theologians who are "traitors in our midst" (Stojičević, 2023).

The rhetoric in this case seems to finally lay bare anessential function of accusations of sacrilege found in Serbian public space:the most dangerous enemies are those often practicing, faithful Church members who dare to question the instrumentalization of religiosity for the purposes of (geo)political needs of so-called 'first Serbia'.

Conclusion

Which fusions of the sacred and the profane are acceptable and which are deemed blasphemous? Which postsecular hybrids are an acceptable instrumentalization of religion, and which encounter rage and misunderstanding for – beingessentially a criticism of the former? Based on this brief analysisof prominent cases, several rules of blasphemy in Serbia can be inferred:

It is unacceptable to *mix & match the sacred and profane in terms of representation* – a secular person cannot be represented using iconography, as was seen in *St. Ceca*, and a holy figure cannot be represented in a secular context without following the rules of iconography, as was seen in *Ecce Homo*and *Say: money*. Another rule seems to be that it is unacceptable to *mix & match the political paradigms ofthe two Serbias*. Anyone invoking religion – a traditional paradigm – from a liberal standpoint is apparently more troubling than those people 'clearly' othered by the first Serbia, such as *atheist* leftists, feminists, and LGBT activists.Apparently, another blasphemy rule in Serbia is that there are some profanations of the sacred that are acceptable – those committed by representatives of the 'first Serbia', who fully own religion and all its holy images. The *'Parliament toilet paper'* case illustrates this point beautifully. *Religion is associated with heteronationalism and belongs to the 'first Serbia' who have the right to use it for profane purposes*.Several cases demonstrate that *metonymic femininity and/or homosexuality are inherently offensive* to any figure or even object that is considered worthy of veneration, and 'blasphemers' are usually women and gay men, perceived as unworthy of full membership in the dominant identity community and ownership over its symbols,and therefore censured for attempting to claim it. On the other hand, an object need not be sacred in order to be desecrated – mere association with ethnic identity suffices, which is a consequence of an apparent sacralization of ethnic identity. It seems that the true holy of holies is *ethnic identity* and its clear *boundaries*, drawn around nationalist hegemonic masculinity.

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