



Petar Atanackovic:

**Religious education in public schools.  
About the problem of Church ideological offensive in transition societies**

I

Ideas of civil society and political state represents two most important ideological products of the *Age of revolution* – entire later, *post-revolutionary* history is dedicated to their implementation, but it's also marked with frequent negation of them and with some attempts of overcoming. Realization of those ideas is happening through process of political emancipation, through which state becomes totally separated from all particular interests of society – because society is one Chaos of arbitraries, with lots of confronted interests – and constitute it self as something universal above them. In other words, influence of any of private interests (those particular interests from civil society area) on functions of political state, automatically leads to degradation of State, because possibility for this is very clear manifestation of unfinished character of state, so it lose its political meaning.

Relationship between political state and religion is same as relationship between state (as public area) and any other particularity of civil society (as area of private interests): with transfer of religion from public to private area, human/individual becomes politically emancipated from religion; this transfer is possible only if the state becomes politically emancipated, and that can happen only if state does not accept any religion as state principal. So “political emancipation of Jew, Christian, religious person in general” represent “state’s emancipation from Judaism, Christianity, from religion in general”, and state can be emancipated from religion only when its “emancipated from state religion i.e. when state refuse to recognize any religion, and instead of that it recognize only her self as state”<sup>1</sup>. With transfer of religion from public (state) area to private area (civil society area) political emancipation is finished – so, it has to be clear that through this process religion is not abolished as phenomena, in the first place because there is no similar ambition in this process<sup>2</sup>.

When we take in consideration everything what is previously said, we can point out that one important moment of political emancipation is separation between public (state) schools and religious education. So presence of religious education in public school system is exactly manifestation of unfinished political emancipation. There are some societies in which political emancipation is not yet finished, but because those societies are basically progressive i.e. they are trying to follow *paths of History* there is clear consciousness about this defects – so, sooner or later, there is practical action for finishing of unfinished emancipation. On the other hand, in some other “not so progressive” (basically, not progressive at all, or even contra-progressive) societies with same problem, there is no consciousness about this problem – even more, there is clear presence of some fake self-satisfaction with situation in society, even self-conceit whit it. In this

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, *Zur Judenfrage* in: K. Marx, F. Engels, *Early works*, Zagreb, 1985, page 61.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* page 65-66.

case is very obvious correctness of opinion that “we can judge about size of spirit’s loss according to what satisfied it”<sup>3</sup>.

On this place we have to analyze two illustrative examples from history: from one side, society with lots of lacks but with consciousness about it, society which step by step is going forward and overcome them. On the other side, society in which we can see *essential epochal – civilization clash with world history*<sup>4</sup> in everyday practice. We are talking about two societies, French and Serbian, which are formally part of the same civilization, but between them are differences big and deep as abyss.

Civil society and political state in France had been built during period of more than 100 years, because most of results of Revolution 1789-1794 have been canceled only one decade after. Relationship between church and state was settled by agreement with Papal state in 1801: Catholicism by this arrangement was not defined as state religion, but as “religion of majority of population in France”, and this definition was followed by restitution of expropriated church property. In the same time, catholic priests are again included in public school system. So, government of Napoleon, although basically not interested in religious matters, have set foundations for strengthening of Church and its influence on French society<sup>5</sup>. Agreement from 1801 was very often criticized during next 75 years, and during last quarter of 19<sup>th</sup> century government bring some measures against this contract: in 1882 religious education was forbidden in ground schools, in 1884 parliament made divorce legal, in 1886 religious education was forbidden in all public schools<sup>6</sup>. This process culminated in 1905 when state canceled agreement from 1801 – with this act, separation between state and church was finished<sup>7</sup>.

100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of finishing of this process was marked with renewal of this problem, through one similar controversy. It was conflict based on presence of different religious symbols and part of clothes with religious meanings in public schools in France. There was lots of pressure on French state, but anyway, state has manage to solve this problem in only possible way – by forbidding all religious symbols in public schools. State did not yield in front of the different blackmails and accusations for so called violation of civil rights – it simply demonstrated its seriousness and its political character. In this case French state point out one important moment: the common (general) interests are always above particular interests, so religion can be only personal question of citizens and because of that there is no place for religion in public schools.

On the other hand, situation in Serbia is completely different: civilization lagging is obvious in every way, and also in the way of (un)realization of ideas of the French revolution. Entire 19<sup>th</sup> century and major part of 20<sup>th</sup> century was spend mostly on efforts to solve some insignificant problems, from dynastical conflicts to pointless political struggles; in the same time all attempts of radical solving of the civilization lagging problem was condemned or disrupted or openly sabotaged. Consequence of this historical experience was creation of very specific (but anyway very primitive) political culture, in which mediocrity represent ideal, and wasting of time has a role of favorite sport, equally for political elite and for “people masses” (because we can’t really speak about citizens on that level of progress).

After 1945 there was attempts to overcome this civilization gap, with state initiative to “speed up” historical progress. In “socialist” Yugoslavia government organized industrial revolution, political emancipation etc., with which it basically was founding the civil society, although political system was clear negation of civil society (because socialist i.e. communist

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<sup>3</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Zagreb, 1987, page 8.

<sup>4</sup> Miloš Perović, *The Critique of Clericalisation of Serbia: analysis of Church/Modern State relationship*, *The Critique of Clericalisation of Serbia*, Novi Sad, 2007, page 74.

<sup>5</sup> Franklin L. Ford, *Europe 1780-1830*, Belgrade, 2005, page 204-207.

<sup>6</sup> J. M. Roberts, *Europe 1880-1945*, Belgrade, 2002, page 171.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, page 178.

society can exist only with overcoming of political state and civil society). But it was only one of the many paradoxes in Yugoslav society of that time. Also, "socialist" Yugoslavia was secular society: church and state were separated in every way and status of all religion communities was regulated in the same way i.e. without any regards on history and tradition of this religious communities or on number of their believers. So, in that time there was no religious education in public schools. But, situation start to change somewhere at the end of 1980's - that change of climate was connected with weakening of dominant ideology and crisis of Yugoslav society.

Collapse of bipolar ideological system, which was dominant in the world until end of eighties, resulted with appearance of ideological gap in east Europe - filling of this gap was just a matter of time, and there was a large number of pretenders for this *job*. Substitutes for communist ideology are chosen on entire ideological spectrum, from copy-paste of western liberal models to different reactionary ideologies, based on nationalism, chauvinism and racism. In that sense rise of influence of religious organizations in some societies (catholic church in Poland and Croatia, all 3 major religious organizations in Bosnia etc.) was very obvious, so we can conclude that religious organizations had most success in filling of ideological gap, which appeared after 1989.

After 1989 in Serbia communist ideology is retreating in front of one new ideology, which was real postmodern mixture, but based mostly on national mythology and local-imperialist practice, which also contain some elements of nazi ideology (for example, thesis about so called national living space i.e. *Lebensraum*). Collapse of war policy of Serbian state during 1990's lead to repeating of crisis of identity, similar to those from the end of 1980's. Like in case of Polish society ten years earlier, ideological gap in Serbia on the crossroads of centuries was filled by dominant religious organization, Serbian Orthodox Church. But, there was one difference: Catholic Church in Poland was satisfied with minimal conservative correction of system reforms (with introduction of religious education in public schools etc.), and it keeps its influence on society without direct interfering in political life. On the other hand, Orthodox Church in Serbia appear in front of society with maximal program, clearly underlining its wish to transform Serbian society in to some kind of orthodox Iran and to take the leading political role in it. It's not excluded that Catholic Church in Poland had some similar ambitions, but policy of Polish state definitely made this ambitions impossible; policy of Serbian state, on the other hand, is in harmony with church ambitions. With this kind of practice, with accepting of different principals as its own, Serbian state clearly shown its unfinished nature, and clearly it's not any more what it think that it is - and that's political state.

Rising of church influence on Serbian society and even more on state can be followed as phenomena since late 1980's, when Church has taken important role in renewal of nationalism and imperialism as dominant moods in society. By manipulation with national and religious feelings of largest nation in ex-Yugoslavia, Serbian Orthodox Church participated in attempt of implementation of Serbian nationalistic program; consequences of this attempt are visible on almost entire ex-Yugoslav area, and would not be eliminated in next few decades. But, during 1990's there was no intimate collaboration between church and state - church was very interested in this collaboration, because it wanted to take role of state ideological apparatus i.e. it wanted to become something like central comity of Communist Party. However, opportunity for closer collaboration between state and church became possible after change of government (so called revolution) in year 2000.

New government in Serbia was trying to strengthen process of de-secularization, which started during 1990's, and institutionalized it, because state desperately needed replacements for exhausted ideological solutions. Point was to find new factor of social integration in Serbia<sup>8</sup>, which will be the new basis for Serbian national identity and basis for integration of all Serbs, in Serbia and in other countries. Because of that, opinions of Orthodox Church are present in public in different ways, especially because church officials wants to impose them self as some kind of

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<sup>8</sup> Zoran Petakov, *The diary of Church insults 2000-2006. From de-secularization to clericalization, The Critique of Clericalisation of Serbia*, page 77.

high arbitration in every important social question. However, ambitions has no limitations, and they are not stopping only on influence on society – their real ambition is to influence on state politics, and political elite is not opposing to this ambition, even more – she’s willing to collaborate. Because of this relationship, typical practice of government is organization of meetings between state and church officials, whenever there is opportunity for this. On the other hand, there is some other examples of church influence on state: presence of church/theological vocabulary in state laws, imposing of new taxes from which is profiting only Orthodox Church, and finally there is also church influence on foreign policy (example for this can be appearance of so called state & church foreign delegations, or transformation of problem of inter-church relations in Macedonia in to inter-state problem, or consultations between church and state officials about political strategy in the case of Kosovo and so on).

One of the first political moves of Serbian state after year 2000 was “big comeback” of religious education in public schools, after which followed decision to include faculty for theology of Serbian orthodox church in to university of Belgrade. In the first moment religious education and its opponent (civic education) were present in the first year of grade school and first year of high school, but one year later they became part of all 11/12 grades in school system. Decision about introduction of religious education in public school was announced in 4<sup>th</sup> of August 2001, without any analysis or public discussion about it. So, in this act we can search for political motives, because with it government of Zoran Djindjic wanted to minimize dissatisfaction of church, connected with extradition of ex-president of Serbia Slobodan Milosevic to International war crime Tribunal in Den Haag <sup>9</sup>. And so one politically motivated machiavellistic move (from one formally liberal, pro-European government) symbolized the beginning of institutionalization of de-secularization process in Serbian society.

## II

Since introduction of religious education in public schools in Serbia have past more than six years, so some of results can be seen, although for some time there was no serious researches about this topic. It was not because of lack of the will of the researchers, it was mostly because of the resistance of state and church, and this resistance made systematical researches impossible. Namely, state denied possibility for potential researches to introduce themselves with school program of religious education, pedagogical methods for its realization and even information about percentage of pupils who choose to attend religious education<sup>10</sup>. Only well known fact is that religious education in public schools is more like orthodox or catholic or Islamic theology than religious culture or history of religion. But, Public from time to time can find out more about incidents with religious education, mostly in connection with “alternative education methods” used by non-qualified religious teachers. Case of orthodox priest from east part of Serbia, who “educated” his pupils about Holy Trinity with a help of fire-poker is only last case in series<sup>11</sup>.

First question connected with any research of religious education in public schools is about practical influence of religious education on pupils. Has the religious education positive influence on pupils, are they becoming more intellectually and spiritually developed, and in what way confessional religious education is influencing on social integration of youth

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, page 80.

<sup>10</sup> Some information became public in the meantime: according to two separated researches of B. Bjelajac and S. Gredelj, 36,2 or 39 percent of pupils are attending to religious education. But those two are independent researches – on the other hand, ministry of education after six years still don’t want to publish official information about percentage and about results (effects) of implementation of religious education in public schools – in: Bojan Aleksov, *Religious Education in Serbia*, Religion, State & Society, Vol. 32, No. 4, December 2004, page 352.

<sup>11</sup> *Žaračem do veronauke* (With poker to religious education), “Dnevnik”, Novi Sad, 21. 03. 2007, page 8.

population in nationally and religiously mixed areas? Although church is pretending on monopoly on spiritual development of human, activities of church – we can reduce them on frightening confused believers with eternal damnation of hell – can't be recognized as positive influence to spiritual life of man. So, positive influence of religious education on pupils is completely impossible, because it does not influence on intellectual or so called moral development of youth – even opposite, influence of religious education can be described as really negative, because basics of religious education are in contrary with critical way of thinking as basic of educational system i.e. because through religious education pupils are learning how to believe and not how to think. With affirmation of dogmatic way of thinking through religious education, mostly through development of tendency for non-critical following, Church is playing crucial role in process of development authoritarian character of pupils. With the development of servant mentality, result will be production of individuals incapable for living in democratic society, because this type is presenting mass-psychology basic for foundation of dictatorships and fascist regimes<sup>12</sup>.

Last but not least question is about influence of religious education on decreasing of religious and ethnical distance between inhabitants of multi-religious and multi-ethnic areas, like in the region of Vojvodina. This is especially important if we consider history of Southeast Europe in last 20 years. One research made by *Center for development of Civil Society* from Zrenjanin is giving us lots of materials about this topic. Research results are clearly saying that introduction of religious education in public schools has become new source of problems for religious minorities in religiously mixed areas, because they find inconvenient to apply for official religious education in schools (that's the case of Islamic community in Vojvodina). Main reason for this is their wish to avoid any kind of presence in public with this question, because they have lots of bad experience in 1990's during Balkan wars. Something similar can be seen in the case of Slovakian Evangelic Church in areas where Slovaks presents minor part of population: some percents of Slovakian children have avoided decision to apply for religious education, because they don't want to declare them self publicly<sup>13</sup>. Special cases are members of small religious communities, which are not counted as members of so called "seven traditional churches" (those kind of religious communities are around 40 in Vojvodina), and because of that they are not allowed to have they own religious education in public schools. So, they are openly discriminated by state law. Children of members of small religious communities because of this reason choose to attend on civic education, and because of that they have attract big mistrust from other children<sup>14</sup>. Differently speaking, on the plan of development of tolerance and other values of civil society, six years after introduction of religious education in public schools, results are simply very negative.

Speed up and partially confusing introduction of religious education in public schools, as also political background of that process, official representatives of minor religious groups find especially problematic – some officials of Catholic church are thinking that is already clear that introduction of religious education would not have any positive results. Even more, some officials are afraid that religious education will follow example of Marxism as school subject in every aspect. Because of that their suggestion is complete change of actual concept: confessional religious education in their opinion should be moved from public schools back to churches and religious communities, and instead of this in public schools should be left only some kind of basic education from history of religion<sup>15</sup>. It's a very reasonable suggestion, but it seems that authors of this proposal are forgetting ideological meaning and importance of religious education in public

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<sup>12</sup> Wilhelm Reich, *Die sexuelle Revolution. Zur charakterlichen Selbststeuerung des Menschen*, Zagreb, 1985, page 110.

<sup>13</sup> *Influence of religious education on development of democratic processes in Vojvodina*, CDCS, Zrenjanin, page 2.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, page 3-4.

<sup>15</sup> Bojan Aleksov, *Religious Education in Serbia*, page 346-347.

schools, especially for Serbian Orthodox Church, who insisted mostly on this, but also big importance for political elite.

With introduction of theology in public schools, state was working in interests of Serbian Orthodox Church (which is dominant religious organization) and its political plans, which are became transparent and public in year 2000: in one public addressing church officials asked from state some kind of declaration about orthodox religion as state religion, because with that "our state should be verified as a orthodox state"<sup>16</sup>. With introduction of religious education in public schools state have done one big step in ideological unification of members of dominant nation, with obvious plan to find new factor of social integration. So, from the beginning was obvious, and practice only confirm it, that purpose of religious education was not introduction of pupils with religious culture or history of religion, as also was not planed that religious education have positive influence on civil society values and tolerance. Introduction of religious education in system of public education was result of political decisions and it was ideologically motivated.

Introduction of religious education, planed as important contribution to process of national "waking up" and fixing of national conscience between dominant nation in Serbia, can't have positive influence on decreasing of ethnical and religious distance in society i.e. on increasing of social integration in nationally mixed areas (except if under the term of "social integration" is some other meaning, like violent assimilation). Quite opposite, only result of religious education can be increasing of religious and ethnical distance, especially because the basics of divisions are set up between school children.

So, function of religious education in public schools is mostly ideological, and that is logical because of ideological role of religion and religious organizations in class society - their function is basically consisted of reproduction of dominant ideology, which is very important for further existence of class society<sup>17</sup>. In the process of reproduction of dominant ideological model of class society, key role belongs to transformation of human psychological structure, and if this transformation wants to be successful it needs to have shape of systematical repression, to be practiced through all possible institutional and out-institutional forms, during entire life of every individual. Because of that ideological repression of children is most important and sexual education present one important part of it. This conclusion is confirmed also by one thesis of Wilhelm Reich, who discovered that "history of ideology-making learn us that all social systems are using conscience or non-conscience influence on children of all age... so that they can be fixed in human structure" and also if we follow historical development of ideology and its practice to fix it self in children mind, that we can find out that "in the middle of its influence is sexual education of children"<sup>18</sup>.

Through negative influence on children sexuality - in other words, with sexual repression of children (with forbidding of masturbation and sexual games with other children) - there is clear influence on transformation of their character, with which they are becoming reserved, distanced and afraid. With this kind of transformation children becomes more afraid and humble in front of authority, more introversive, and after all, that is basic for development of neurosis. On this type of platform children are developing more intensive connections with parents (instead of independence) and finally they are developing religious tendencies<sup>19</sup>. Religious education is important because of this: teaching about existence of higher intelligence, problematic by itself, contains one especially problematic moment, concerning presence of the same higher intelligence, God or whatever, in every moment and aspect of our lives, presence

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<sup>16</sup> Zoran Petakov, *The diary of Church insults 2000-2006. From desecularization to clericalization*, page 79.

<sup>17</sup> Petar Atanackovic, *From Psychopathology to Political programs: Clerical Offensive on the Treshold of 21<sup>st</sup> century, The Critique of Clericalisation of Serbia*, page 67.

<sup>18</sup> Wilhelm Reich, *Die sexuelle Revolution*, page 282.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, page 282-283.

from which nothing can be hidden. Intention of this thesis is to make children to be afraid, to develop fear from *sin a priori*, because it sends hidden but in the same time clear message that “sinful” actions would not be unnoticed, and so it would not be unpunished. In other words, religious education in first few grades of grade school support the educational measures of parents, because parental prohibitions which are intending to stop sexual games of children would not be efficient if they are not supported by claim that there is some God who can see everything, so children should behave “dissent” even in the absence of parents<sup>20</sup>. Namely, children are connecting the power of order with the real presence of person who gave order – if the person is absent, there is no action i.e. execution of order, and result of absence of execution is only sense of unpleasantness in one moment<sup>21</sup>. So, we can conclude that religious feelings in children are developed mostly through development of fear from masturbation i.e. fear from sexuality in general. From the other side, because believing in some higher intelligence and fear from it can be described as energetic sexual help (assistance), which only changed its goal and content, it seems that religious feeling is equal to sexual feeling, only with different psychological content<sup>22</sup>.

Image of higher intelligence contains objective picture of personal conscience or interior affective image of father/parent, which become source of duty-feeling, forcing-model, remorse feeling, sometime even self-punishing<sup>23</sup>. So we can say that development of faith in high intelligence play the key-role in so called moral education, mostly through development of obedience moral. So, conclusion can be that foundation and development of this kind of faith are not presenting self-purpose – they really presents tools, which are used in the purpose of foundation of faith in abstract authority in general. That is proved later in Life, in everyday practice, through demand for obedience in front of the authority of Party, State, Nation, Führer...

There’s also one aspect in which we can recognize presence of religious education in public schools as very problematic, mostly for the children in the beginning of process of education. Namely, religious education is inducing all series of phobias in children – and not only already mentioned fear from sexuality – so parents and school psychologists are facing for the first time with new types of phobias and nightmares, mostly connected with religious contents and provoked by regular attending on religious education classes. The essence of the phenomena is connected with children incapability to understand content of religious education, which is logical, concerning the intellectual capabilities of children in the age of 7 or 8 years old. Children of this age are going through phase of so-called concrete (descriptive) way of thinking, which is connected with directly present thing and because of that they can’t be capable to understand abstract notions, or for formulating and testing of hypothesis and conclusions<sup>24</sup>. When they are 11 or 12 years old, and only whit developed distinction between content and form, children can be capable to judge about propositions in which they don’t believe or still don’t believe<sup>25</sup>. Until then, all stories about temptations, Christian martyrs, apocalypse, Hell and sinners from the Bible can be understand not in the way how they should be understand (in symbolic way), but adopted literary, whit all following overemphasized details, which is typical for children. Consequences can be nightmares and different phobias, which can seriously damage psychological health, and at the end even instigate neurosis. Concerning this, we can conclude that religious education in public schools in Serbia can have/is having destructive influence on children.

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<sup>20</sup> Wilhelm Reich, *Massenpsychologie des faschismus*, Zagreb, 1999, page 129.

<sup>21</sup> Jean Piaget, *Psychology of children*, Sr. Karlovci – Novi Sad, 1990, page 134.

<sup>22</sup> Wilhelm Reich, *Massenpsychologie des faschismus*, page 130.

<sup>23</sup> Jean Piaget, *Psychology of children*, page 132.

<sup>24</sup> Ana Pešikan Avramović, *Do children need history*, Belgrade, page 44.

<sup>25</sup> Jean Piaget, *Psychology of children*, page 142.

Development of religious feelings in children, and religious education through which those feelings are developed, are clearly ideologically marked, because their intention is to transform human psychological structure. Purpose of this is fixing of dominant ideological model inside their structure, which exactly presents the way of system's ideological reproduction. Concerning this, we can clearly understand role of religious education inside school system, which can shortly be described as generator for increasing of ideological repression over children. This is very important in circumstances when other parts of ideological machine of class society are having some problems to maintain regular functioning (and that is exactly case in Serbia).

Development of religious feelings play important role in mentioned process because of their close connection with ideology of nationalism i.e. because the religious and national feelings and attitudes presents basic mass-psychological elements of nationalism. Concerning this we can conclude that Christian education present one of the most important predecessors of fascist ideology in specific conditions i.e. when there's some economical stress, which lead to mass-movement<sup>26</sup>. Because of the role of religious propaganda in preparation of terrain for fascist movement in the time of crisis, research of fascist ideology can't be separated from research of psychological influence of religion<sup>27</sup>.

We can conclude that introduction of religious education in public school system in societies like Serbian society – concerning essential lagging of society, war experiences from the 1990's and low level of tolerance as result of everything mentioned – can have totally negative, maybe even catastrophic influence on the future development of society. Of course, concerning the basic fact that future of Serbia is in family of modern European democratic societies, and not in the feudalism or theocracy. With orthodox theology in public school system we are on the "right historical way" only if the last two are real political ideals of elite of Serbian society.

However, construction of some feudal, Christian, orthodox state – and that is ideal of political elite as it seems – is simply mission impossible. So-called Christian state is simply *non-state*: it represents Christian denial of state – never state realization of Christianity<sup>28</sup>. But, even if we know that final result of everything will be defeat of feudal Reaction, society will feel consequences of this, let's say retarded, choice of state and political elite, and it will suffer from them for years, maybe even decades.

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<sup>26</sup> Wilhelm Reich, *Massenpsychologie des faschismus*, page 121.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, page 109.

<sup>28</sup> Karl Marx, *Zur Judenfrage* in: K. Marx, F. Engels, *Early works*, page 67.



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