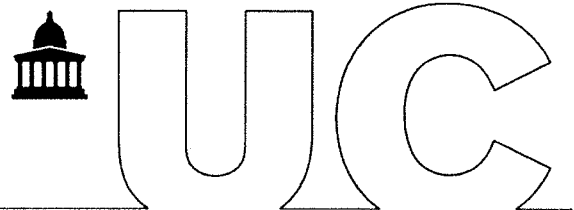


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The Serbian Orthodox Church's Engagement in Memory Politics of Post-2000 Serbia:
Memory of Suffering and Resistance

This is an excellent dissertation dealing with the mnemonic agency and engagement of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) in the production and transformation of World War II public memory. Its greatest contribution lays in the exploration of the encounter of the national dimension of social (memory) production and the transnational level of memory work, as exemplified by the Holocaust memorialisation. Or in author's words, how the SPC was able to 'appropriate the highly developed and globally appealing symbolism and vocabulary of the transnational memory of the Holocaust' (p. 83). For the sake of brevity, I will refrain from much deserved praise and only point out some minor shortcomings.

The introduction explains and summarises the topic justifying its relevance and contextualising it within the current debates and scholarly trends as well as the existing body of literature. What follows is an excellent historical overview that sketches chronologically the contours of the SPC engagement since 1990s, situating it for the examination, according to the dissertation's research aims. Great observations of subtle changes and forces at work, though it was important to stress that it was actually the liberal Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić that introduced the Religious Education, barely eight months into his mandate, and thus opened the gates for the later Law on the Churches, and all other changes accounting for the current position and engagement of the SPC. What is missing in the account of the pre-history to the period analysed, is how secular and clerical elites came together towards the end of 19th century, as demonstrated in the work of Kitromilides for Greece, and my own work for the Serbian case. A minor criticism is the lack of differentiation between the ecclesiastic situation in Northern Macedonia and Montenegro, with the former being a dispute over canonicity of its autocephaly declaration (but not its bishops, etc), and the latter just a nationalist charade.

In addition, the author presents her meticulously constructed and elaborated methodology that lays the most solid ground for the research and demonstration of her aims. Similarly, well presented is the analysis of source base. What clearly lacks among sources, as highlighted by the author herself, are the voices of the SPC hierarchy or clergy. While clearly understanding and sympathising with the wall the author encountered when contacting them, these could have been avoided if the article that caused a stir was published after the dissertation research was completed. Traditionally, the SPC nourishes Slavophilia and especially friendly attitudes to Czechs, as opposed to Occidentalism, which the author missed to exploit.

Furthermore, we are confronted with theories of Hervieu-Leger (very useful notions of the chain of memory, as invoked by the authority of tradition), Habermas, Giddens, Casanova, Bauman, Pavlović and others, which the author successfully integrates in her own theoretical framework developed to situate and explain her research agenda and material. The only objection I have is the reliance on the problematic notion of 'collectivistic religion' [as opposed to individualistic (sic), which would be absurd as any religion is collectivistic by default], proposed by Slavica Jakelic. It is a theory not widely accepted or used in the sociology of religion, as it confuses historical developments and political factors with definitions and understandings of innate features of religion. It does not specify what are the specific forms of Catholicism present in Ireland and Poland for example. On the other hand, Casanova deals with these two cases (one might add Croatian as well), when discussing delayed secularisation. So, the reliance on this concept is rather superfluous, especially as the author claims that she understands it as an assigned attribute of collective identity (p. 38), rather than doctrinal or spiritual feature. It is also responsible for an apparent contradiction, when the author claims that collectivistic religions do not exist in pre-modern settings, though nominates Judaism and Hinduism as examples (both exemplary pre-modern religions), or writes about the collectivistic religious tradition of Serbian Orthodoxy.

Similarly, the author adopts Jakelic's interpretation of collectivistic religions as fixed rather than fluid, due to the key inclusion/exclusion criteria of the notion. However, as Duijzings has amply demonstrated in his work, religions and religious belonging and identity in the Balkans were all but fixed, while the inclusionary/exclusionary strategies, singled out by Jakelic, have actually emerged only recently in order to deal with this fluidity. Most crucially, the notion of traditional collectivistic Churches (pp. 44 and 45) obstructs the author's understanding of the key period that preceded the period under her scrutiny namely the 45 years of Communist rule, repression of religion, and ideological monism (which only comes later (pp. 80-81) and not sufficiently (for example, where and how were the current SPC clergy recruited during the period 1945-1990?). While the discussion of Habermas's work and its shortcomings is superb, the author, in my opinion, wrongly attributes the current SPC public engagement and lack of transparency to their exclusion from the evolution of the modern public sphere and the recent degeneration of the public sphere (comfort zone of pseudo-public spheres, hybrid conditions of the late-modern public sphere). During the 19th century, or in the interwar period, there was much more debate and open (self) criticism both within the Church and between clerical and secular authors. In fact, because of its institutional features, the SPC turned into the last bastion of the public sphere characterised by the ideological monism of the post-WW2 period. Despite being oppressed during this period, the Church mimicked the same lack of transparency, lack of debate, and conspiratorial modes of thinking and acting.

Again on pp. 60-64 the notion of collectivistic religions is unnecessarily invoked to explain their mediation of stocks of meanings, etc. All religions do this, more or less, but the wider context is important and thus a very good explanation of time context (late modernity) though not the space. To illustrate the irrelevance of the concept one only needs to look next door, to the sister Bulgarian Orthodox Church, which possesses exactly the same features as the Serbian (so collectivistic) and has been known as exemplary nationalist. However, the recent geopolitical, inner socio-political, and other factors (competition, inner weakness) do not render it particularly mnemonically active, as the Serbian Orthodox Church. It would be much better to frame the research only within the well-described post-Socialist mnemonic transformation in East Europe (as done on pp. 71-72 and 76-79) and only pay attention to particular features of a church as a mnemonic agent (as explained persuasively on pp. 80-88). To term a religion collectivistic (or its traditions) carries the danger of generalising, stereotyping, and smacks of the long-abandoned binaries of *Gesellschaft* versus *Gemeinschaft* or Western civic versus Eastern ethnic nationalism. Not to mention a complete lack of any theological arguments (literature) to back this characterisation. Finally and most importantly, the author specifies that her focus is on the operative side of the SPC's link to memory and looks at the human element within its structures, as autonomous and engaged mnemonic agents (p. 65) clearly demonstrating that there is absolutely no need for Jakelic's disputed notion of collectivistic tradition/religion.

The sections 2.3.2- 2.4 on the mnemonic agents and their agencies in post-2000 Serbia are exemplary of author's profound understanding and ability to interpret her research objects based on empirical overview and its theoretical underpinnings. Equally commendable are the two following chapters, two case studies based on the author's empirical research, demonstrating and analysing the mnemonic agency of the SPC. They are meticulously executed.

Two minor comments: (p. 151) In 1944, SS Skanderbeg division of Kosovo Albanian collaborators arrested and deported Jews along Serbs, and Albanians accused of Partisan connections. The Jews were targeted only for their ethnicity. Similarly, the high proportion of Serbs among the rest of deportees indicate that Serbs were also particularly targeted. (p. 160) 'among the Serbian émigrés in the West, the SPC played an essential role in preserving the memory of the Ravna Gora movement as the only legitimate Yugoslav armed force...' In fact, there was a bitter division among the émigrés, and especially among the SPC clergy, with followers of Ljotić being the more influential (Slijepčević, etc). This contributed to the schism in diaspora with the Belgrade Patriarchate, with Četniks backing the separation, and Ljotićevci on the side of Patriarch German, whose son died as a Ljotićevac.

At the end, the evidence provided, backed by the theoretical framework, lead the author to rightly argue that the SPC's primary motivation to enter the mnemonic fields of World War II memory production was its long-term goal of (re)establishing its position of power and (re)asserting its legitimacy in the public sphere of post-2000 Serbia and that it became the so-called mnemonic magnate. (p. 204)

As it is clear from above, my only serious reservation about this dissertation, or rather its theoretical framework, is the use of the notion of collectivistic religion, which could easily be discarded, as it is absolutely not necessary, or bringing any light to the research results. I wholeheartedly recommend this dissertation for defense. I doubt I can personally attend it but would like the candidate to discuss the most recent events (re Staro Sajmište memorial), and the dynamic between the state and the church in Serbia in light of her research findings.

The dissertation is written in perfect English and very well-presented with only a few typos, and a problematic overuse of the term ecclesiastic. Other minor terminological issues:

p. 13 the Holy Assembly of Synods should be the Holy Synod

p. 26 the Chetniks' memory (should be memorialisation of Chetniks)

Overuse of ecclesiastics (better use clergy) or in the expressions such as 'the ecclesiastic outside'. It can also be confused with the Book in the Bible.

Also to speak of individual ecclesiastics (p. 113) is wrong because the Church encompasses all, and many of its most active agents are not part of the clergy, as well explained in the case of Beckovic.

p. 27 abstract social realm (why abstract?!)

p. 61 again wrong use of ecclesiastic as in agencies, calendars, dogmas (should be church or religious)

p. 75 worldly 'Serbophobia' should be global or Western

p. 84 instead of (re)clericalization of death should be (re)sacralization of death

p. 111 dogmatic limits of a ritual (dogmatic here wrong) and later on p. 114 where dogma was extended to what are essentially pastoral customs and practices.

Hajdarpašić 2020, Sitarski 2013, and others potentially missing from the bibliography.