

Review

# Religionization of Public Space: Symbolic Struggles and Beyond—The Case of Ex-Yugoslav Societies

Danijela Gavrilovic <sup>1,\*</sup> and Dragoljub B. Đorđević <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Philosophy, University of Nis, Nis 18000, Serbia

<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, University of Nis, Nis 18000, Serbia; brkab@junis.ni.ac.rs

\* Correspondence: danijelagavrilovic21@gmail.com; Tel.: +38-164-831-2503

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**Abstract:** The relationship between religious communities and states in the former Yugoslavia is burdened with socialist heritage, but also with conflicts that ensued after the downfall of the socialist regimes. Although the majority of these countries are defined as secular, the struggles have not abated. Following the war conflicts, these struggles moved to the political and symbolic level. The formal and informal influence of religious institutions on the secular state and society continues. Since these countries are formally defined as secular and they strive to join the EU, which supports the separation between church(es) and religious communities and the state, with cooperation based on mutual independence and respect, legal solutions are biased towards acknowledging these principles. Nevertheless, the public sphere has become a battlefield in which public space is being occupied, and a particular way of life and values is imposed. The dynamics of symbolic and other struggles in former Yugoslav countries differ as a consequence of different powers and the relationships between specific religious communities within a state. This paper aims to examine the present religionization of public space that has been taking place, despite the fact that the states in question have been declared as secular (Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia).

**Keywords:** religionization; symbolic struggles; former Yugoslavia

## 1. Introduction

Religious differences accompany conflicts but also represent a factor affecting conflicts and divisions when the borderline between the state and religious communities is unclear, and when the functions of religion are traditional—i.e., directed at politics, rather than at the society as a whole. A different religion means a different family life, different dress code, different moral norms, and differences manifesting themselves in the public sphere that are derived from the politically imposed dominant religion, in spite of any public declaration in these societies that the ideology of civil society will become the legitimator of the public sphere.

Symbolic borders, borders established through cultural codes, are distinctions separating social groups that also enhance within-group cohesion. The dominant group imposes its “system of classification” which members of the society interiorize and to some extent accept. The more pronounced the symbolic conflicts in a society, the stricter the divisions between class (Bourdieu 1984), ethnicity (Sanders 2002) and culture (Van Eijck 2001), and the sharper the criteria for grouping and mutual differentiation. Bourdieu, a great scholar of culture, relates culture, and also religion (Turner 2011) as an integral part of it, throughout most of the history of civilization, to power (Swartz 1997). Namely, this is the power to impose its own conception of social life. The power of religious groups in the observed societies stems from the numbers of adherents to the religion and from the religious homogeneity of these communities, as well as the specific relationship between the state and religious communities in these societies, something we could label quasi-secularity.

Symbolic borders in a society are reflected in the establishment of a system of values and way of life of social groups which may live in different ways even though they are spatially very close to one another. The symbolic conquest of space by the use of religion is a source of power and inequality. (Pachucki et al. 2007, p. 342).<sup>1</sup> Symbolic capital, the process of manipulating it, and symbolic struggles for the establishment of the domination of one's own symbolic content allow symbolic power to also become a source of real social inequality and exclusion. (Lamont 1992; Lamont and Molnár 2002).

In the sociology of religion today there is an ongoing debate on the deprivatization of religion and its political relevance (Habermas 2008) as an aspect of the revitalization of religiosity. This phenomenon is caused by various global events (Casanova 1994), but also by local factors. Since the collapse of socialist atheist regimes, religion has started to play a different role in post-socialist societies. Following the period of socialism, in which religion was a socially undesirable ideology, which determined religion's position in the public scene as well as the position of churches and religious communities in society, the post-socialist period has brought about a completely new position of religion and the church in post-socialist countries.

"Some religions will be induced by tradition, principle, and historical circumstances to remain basically private religions of individual salvation. Certain cultural traditions, religious doctrinal principles, and historical circumstances, by contrast, will induce other religions to enter, at least occasionally, the public sphere." (Casanova 1994, p. 221).

One could argue that the general characteristics of this changed relationship are an increased level of religious freedom and increased cooperation of the state and religious communities (Zrinščak 2011, p. 161). In individual countries from this group, the situation in terms of practicing religions is however very different, despite the one characteristic they have in common, i.e. their joint socialist past. Some of these societies have been deeply secularized (The Czech Republic, Estonia) while in others the role of religion and exercise of religious practice has persevered (Poland, Croatia) (Nelis et al. 2017).

When considering the countries emerging after the breakup of Yugoslavia, one can claim that their position on religiosity is somewhat determined by the ethnic conflicts, in which religion played an important role (Cvitković 2004; Perica 2006). Although after the year 2000 the Yugoslav wars and conflicts ended, religion still continued to play an important role in these societies' public sphere, receiving from the newly-established states some concessions as a reward for its support in the process of dissolving Yugoslavia, but also in response to the newly-established attitude of the population to religious communities and to their newly-discovered religiosity. The ex-Yugoslav societies differ from one another in terms of the presence and numbers of various religions and religious communities after the breakup of the former common, pro-atheist country, and in terms of their internal dynamics and relationships: Croatia is predominantly Catholic (Zrinščak 2017); Bosnia and Herzegovina is split between Muslims, Catholics, and Orthodox Christians (Cvitković 2004; Abazović 2015); and Serbia is predominantly Orthodox (Đorđević 2009, 2013; Gavrilović 2013). However, despite these differences, one can still provide an assessment that these societies have experienced an enhanced role of religious communities and increased religiosity in their populations.

"Through the war and afterward, religions continued rebuilding resources and increasing influence. Traditional religion was blended with the new national ideologies carried out by ethnic nationalist parties allied with the ethnic majority churches established as state religions. Two decades after the Balkan war, the growing influence of these religions in the public sphere coincides with the post-Yugoslav new ethnic nations' failures in state building and democratic transition" (Perica 2014, p. 1).

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<sup>1</sup> After Durkheim, the idea of symbolic borders and conflicts has a long tradition in sociological thought (Pierre Bourdieu, Mary Douglas, Norbert Elias, Erving Goffman, Michel Foucault) and remains an indispensable concept in studying ethnic, racial, gender, and also religious relationships in society.

## 2. The Context

In the lines that follow we will present a religious panorama of the societies observed here. According to the 1991 census, Muslims were the most numerous group in Bosnia and Herzegovina, followed by Serbs, then Croats, and finally members of other ethnicities. The national structure of the most populous peoples was as follows: Muslims 43%, Serbs 31%, Croats 17% (Cvitković 2004, p. 9). This ethnic division was accompanied by confessional demarcation, since Serbs were mainly Orthodox, while the majority of Croats were Catholics. Today, based on the data from the 2013 census, in Bosnia and Herzegovina there are 50.70% Muslims, 30.75% Orthodox, and 15.19% Catholics (Table 1). Despite these differences, prior to the war members of different religious communities lived and mixed together in the majority of B&H cities (Abazović 2015, p. 3). Religion played an important role in the Bosnian war, which is why certain authors consider it the main factor in the conflict (Cvitković 2017, p. 17). What is without any doubt is the increase in religiosity in the previous two decades (Cvitković 2004). Today, after the war that took place on its territory, Bosnia and Herzegovina is divided into two entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska. This way the religious and ethnic divisions have been institutionalized, with the majority of the Muslim and Catholic population living in the Federation, and the Orthodox population concentrated in Republika Srpska. Religious homogenization has been linked with national homogenization, which in turn influences the rise of religious self-identification.

According to the 2011 census, in Croatia 86.28% are Catholics, 4.44% Orthodox, 1.47% Muslims, and 0.34% Protestants (Table 1) (Zrinščak 2017). Zrinščak points out that, compared with the year 2001, there are no major changes. However, analyzed against the year 1991, changes occurred due to the war. The number of Catholics increased (from 76.5% to 86.28%), and the number of Orthodox believers decreased (11.1% to 4.44%) (Ibid., p. 33).

“The case here is undoubtedly that of traditional, church-oriented, collectivistic religiosity (which research results from the 1970s and 1980s had also shown), closely tied to the family and the nation, with a high level of confessional identification; mediated through family socialization, with recognizable elements: the range of sacraments from baptism to anointment, attending religious education classes in schools, religious rearing in the family, and at least occasional visits to the church” (Marinović-Bobinac 2006, p. 21).

According to the 2011 census data, Serbia is predominantly an Orthodox country (84.49% of the population), with a renewed, yet very intense religious tradition that appeared after the breakup of Yugoslavia. Apart from the dominant Orthodox population, other significant groups in Serbia are Catholics (4.97%), mainly in Vojvodina, and Muslims (3.1%) (Table 1). It seems that two types of religiosity predominate in the religious scene in Serbia: traditional and eclectic. Rites of passage assume an important position in the ritual circle present in Serbia. As many as 81.7% respondents believe it important to carry out religious rituals upon the birth of a child, 86.6% believe so in terms of marriage, and 89.6% on the occasion of death (EVS 2010). Rites of passage and major feasts are the cornerstone of religious practice in Serbia, while the introduction of more distinctive religious indicators such as fasting, prayer, or reading religious literature results in a drastic decline in the level of religious practice (Gavrilović 2013, p. 37).

**Table 1.** Overview of largest confessions/religions in the region.

%	B&H	Croatia	Serbia
Muslims	50.7	1.47	3.10
Orthodox	30.75	4.44	84.49
Catholics	15.19	86.28	4.97

### 3. New Roles of Religion—Identification and Symbolic Boundaries

These religious communities, traditionally present in the area, had a negligible social role in the socialist period, and yet after the collapse of Yugoslavia they became an important element of the identity of the warring nations, whose other characteristics were similar: language and the common Slavic ancestry. Having renounced the ideology of “brotherhood and unity” (Gavrilović et al. 2016), and some even their Slavic roots, the peoples of this area felt nationally jeopardized and defended their identity by stressing religious differences:

“The role of religion in cultural defense can be described as follows: When two (or more) communities are confronted and have a different religion (e.g., Protestants and Catholics in Ireland, or Serbs, Catholics and Muslims in what was once Yugoslavia), then religious identity assumes new relevance, new importance and loyalty, religious identity becomes a means to confirm what Max Weber calls ‘ethnic honor’” (Bruce 1996, p. 96).

The socialist ideology functioned as a secular religion and supplied the Yugoslav population with a worldview by providing meaning to social life, combined with Tito’s strong cult of personality. Its fall opened up room for strengthening the religious worldview, which, as pointed out, had previously been suppressed. In this period, religious identification became an important factor for separating the nations, since affiliation with a particular religion is one of the main agents of ethnicity through a number of ethnic identifiers. Religion exerts influence on the idea of the mythical homeland, and common ancestry, and it plays a role in providing content to the collective memory of an ethnic group (Perica 2006; Gavrilović 2008). This phenomenon finds its roots in the past and in the relationship between ethnic identity and Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Islam as an important element of it. Traveling through this area in the period of Turkish occupation, travel writer Hilferding noticed:

“The oneness of language, origins, and customs means nothing compared with the difference in the confession” (Hilferding 1972, p. 119).

He claimed that this was not just a hypothesis, but that he corroborated such a fact by talking with the people he was meeting; during the process, depending on whether the particular person belonged to the Orthodox, Catholic, or Islamic faith, the writer realized this person would accordingly consider themselves a member of the “Orthodox, Catholic, or Turkish people”. Confession is taken here as the basic element of ethnic identification. “The Orthodox consider the Latins, and the Latins the Orthodox, as two separate social wholes, not only in the religious sense, but also in the secular, national sense” (Hilferding 1972, p. 119). Asked what nation they belong to, people provide their confession.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina one can recognize the cultural borders between the Latin and Byzantine worlds, the Muslim entity, and the Sephardic Jews who arrived there after escaping from Spain (Zanini 2002). This entire rich cultural milieu had been covered up by the socialist classificatory ideology. However, it awoke during the war and once again played a huge role in making divisions between people. “In some of the more recent armed conflicts (the Balkans, Northern Ireland, Israel, Rwanda, India), the enemy was very close” (Vukomanović 2004, p. 85). During the war the national communities “incorporated religious values into their value systems”.

“In this way, the path was paved to the sacralization of the nation, while religion and confession were assuming an integrative role within the community, but also a disintegrative role against members of other national communities” (Cvitković 2004, p. 207).

Divisions into laborers and owners, poor and rich, no longer mattered.

The connection between ethnic specificity and religious affiliation became additionally relevant during the breakup of Yugoslavia and the conflict. After the war, the position of religious communities in these countries changed, whereby they became an important social factor. Religiosity can always become mobilized when there is a general feeling of being endangered, which is precisely why political

forces instrumentalize religion. On the other hand, religious communities equally take advantage of this situation so as to increase their influence in these societies.

#### 4. Religionization of Public Space

Today Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>2</sup> are constitutionally defined as secular countries, but the domination of the Catholic Church in Croatia (embodied in its contracts with the Holy See) and the Serbian Orthodox Church in Serbia (embodied in its status as the traditional church, in addition to six other also traditional religious communities)—is conspicuous. The situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is complicated because of the country's organization into entities, each with different predominant religions. The constitutions of these countries declaratively avoid providing a direct link with religion as the cultural core of the nation state and of the cultural identity of the ruling nation (Flere et al. 2016, p. 46). However, Republika Srpska, as an integral part of B&H, steps away from this model (Ibid.).<sup>3</sup> Both Croatia and Serbia provide an indirect means for establishing the dominance of the biggest religious communities in public life. Croatia does so through its contract with the Holy See in the domain of culture and education, the need for which is justified by the historical role of religion and the number of the faithful: "having in mind the irreplaceable historical and current role of the Catholic Church in Croatia, in the cultural and moral upbringing of the people, and its role in the domain of culture and education; taking into consideration the fact that the majority of citizens in the Republic of Croatia belong to the Catholic Church" (Law on establishing the agreement between the Holy See and the Republic of Croatia).

Sociological research shows that the amount of trust in religious communities is high in all these societies (Zrinščak 2017, p. 34; Jovanović and Gavrilović 2012, p. 139). Levels of religiosity in these countries differ. In Croatia and B&H the level of religiosity, as measured by sociological indicators, is higher compared with Serbia. Theorists assess religiosity in Croatia as institutionalized and high (Marinović-Bobinac 2006), while the predominant form of religiosity in Serbia is not directly related to the institutional church (Dorđević 2009). However, what both countries have in common is the fact that religious communities are attempting to impose their worldviews and demarcate their public space as much as possible, to ultimately either establish borders with others or assimilate others. Although the situation in terms of levels and types of religiosity in these countries is completely different, the establishment of symbolic borders by means of religion is what still unites the religions in the region.

Interestingly, after the pronounced role of religious communities during and immediately after the conflict, in these societies awareness of the need to separate the church and state has grown. A relatively high number of those who are aware of this need is found in Serbia, though of the three countries it is the lowest (Religious leaders should not influence the decision making authority—Completely agree 22.5%, Agree 26.8%, Neither 22.2%, Disagree 11.7%, Completely disagree 4.3%). Bosnia and Herzegovina follows (Religious leaders should not influence the decision making authority—Completely agree 26.3%, Agree 35.7%, Neither 20.3%, Disagree 8.0%, Completely disagree 3.3%).<sup>4</sup> Data for Croatia, as given by Zrinščak et al., suggest that in this society even more citizens agree with the statement that religious leaders should not influence the decisions of secular authorities (Religious leaders should not influence government—Agree 78.1%, Neither 9.7%, Disagree 9.2%) (Zrinščak et al. 2014, p. 20).

<sup>2</sup> B&H's Constitution does not include explicit rules mandating the separation of church and religious communities and the state, but the Law on the Freedom of Religion and Legal Position of Churches and Religious Communities, adopted in 2004, introduced a secular notion of the state (Abazović 2015, p. 17).

<sup>3</sup> The Constitution of Republika Srpska guarantees freedom of religion. Religious communities are equal by law, free in conducting religious affairs and religious rites, they may establish religious schools and conduct religious education in all schools of all levels of education, carry out economic and other activities, receive gifts, create endowments and manage them, in accordance with the law. The Serbian Orthodox Church is the church of the Serbian people and other peoples of Orthodox confession. (Constitution of Republika Srpska, Article 28).

<sup>4</sup> The analyses rely on the results of the study "Resistance to Socio-Economic Changes in Western Balkan Societies" realized within the Regional Research Promotion Programme Western Balkans by the Centre for Empirical Studies of South-East Europe.

In spite of such findings, the public space of these societies is strongly marked by the presence of dominant religions. Religious communities conquer public space and impose their cultural code on their own community, thus establishing borders with all those who do not recognize themselves as members of the dominant religious community in these societies.

“Although Serbia is a secular state, in which the principle of separation of church and state is validly defined in the Constitution, and also a multiethnic and multi-confessional community in which minorities comprise almost a third of the population, representatives of the state invest great efforts in paying their respect to the Church, by being present at religious ceremonies and meetings between state and church officials, where opinions on a wide range of questions are exchanged, including those which (at least in the secular state) do not belong to the domain of the Church.” (Radić 2010, p. 111).

Conquering the space of educational institutions is an important step in the imposition of their own cultural codes onto the collective consciousness of the population, at least in terms of the numbers of those present. In this domain in all of the countries considered here a substantial desecularization on all levels of education has been implemented<sup>5</sup>, reaching its peak in the inclusion of faculties of theology in the universities of Zagreb, Sarajevo, and Belgrade (Đorđević 2005; Radić and Vukomanović 2014). Cases have been noted of an insufficiently differentiated approach to the treatment of particular topics—in both teaching and research—torn between science and doctrine.<sup>6</sup>

One of the forms in which religion is present in the public space of these countries is the tendency of the dominant religious communities to impose the patriarchal code. In Croatia, this phenomenon is reflected in obstructions to the ratification of the Istanbul Convention (The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence) in the Croatian Parliament, with the justification from circles around the Catholic Church that this convention imposes a particular “gender ideology”. Rising against this practice, members of women’s groups have organized a series of protests, bearing slogans such as “Stop fundamentalism”, “The state is no church”, etc.

“The hobgoblin of gender ideology roams Croatia. One cannot know if the Croatian Parliament will ratify the Istanbul Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence—in the near future or indeed at all, because everything depends on Croatia’s ruling Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), where the Catholic Church, HDZ-internal and HDZ-external right alike—do not want this ratification.” (Novilist.hr, 24 October 2017).

In these societies, there is strong debate on abortion. It is included in almost all epistles from the Serbian Orthodox Church Patriarch, and there have also been initiatives to forbid the Eucharist to doctors and nurses conducting abortions. However, apart from appeals to conscience, there have been no more concrete actions that would attempt to amend the laws with regard to abortion. On this matter, the activity of the Catholic Church in Croatia is much more prominent.

“Just a day before, the associations Vigilare and Prolife.hr submitted to the Croatian Parliament 168,000 signatures for the petition to ban abortion, and they were hosted by the Deputy Speaker Željko Reiner. “Raped women should give birth, too, why would that child be punished”, notorious Vice Batarelo stressed on this occasion, and then appealed to the Prime Minister Plenković not to ratify the Istanbul Convention. When journalists

<sup>5</sup> In Croatia, religious education is organized even in preschool.

<sup>6</sup> The religious worldview, institutions of service, and beliefs never start from analytical thinking and do not require any “evidence” of their truthfulness, except when they are attacked from a rational viewpoint. In religion, logos is a weapon of defense. The certainty of a believer is not the certainty of a mathematician (Kolakovski 1992, p. 56).

asked him about this, health minister Milan Kujudžić responded the Istanbul Convention “partly promoted” gender ideology, but he did not know the details, i.e., what exactly in the Convention promoted such an ideology.” (Novolist.hr, 24 October 2017).

Public space is conquered through formal and informal channels. Informal channels include pressure, anathematizing, using personal power to stop the passing of laws, and establishing informal practices that oppose the principles of civil society. In Serbia, a well-known case is that of the formal and informal influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church on the passing of The Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination. Formally, the Church participated in the public debate, and expressed concerns about articles 18 and 21 of this Act, which were duly submitted to the Serbian parliament. Article 18 guarantees the freedom to change one’s confession, while Article 21 pertains to the ban on discrimination based on sexual orientation. (Radić and Vukomanović 2014, p. 193). We read in the Serbian media about the informal influence in the now famous news article that the passing of this Act was halted by a telephone call from a Serbian Orthodox Church bishop.

Another way of coloring the way of life in ex-Yugoslav societies is to allocate public space and areas for religious activities. Religious communities are attempting to delineate their space. An example of this is pressure from the Islamic community in B&H to allow the wearing of hijabs in the institutions of B&H, as well as seeking a one-hour break during the working day for worship. The game is twofold: played against the quasi-secular state and against the confronting religious communities.

“In our country it has become a matter of fashion to express our religious affiliation at any place. For instance, institutions of the Republika Srpska have their Slavas—patron saint days, in the institutions of B&H you have allocated space for prayer, where religious rituals are conducted, although we know real places for this are religious buildings. Religion has entered schools, we have religious education. In our country there is no difference between religion and culture. Culture is permeated by religious symbols, so that here religious symbols are also part of the cultural identity. Moreover, there is no clear difference between the public and the private exercise of religion. In such cases, the state should take a clear stand, it should question the relationship between itself and religious communities, rather than try to solve things by means of arbitrary decisions”, B&H sociologist Popov-Momčinović says for the online portal BUKA (“Noise”).

Unlike the Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church does not have a well-developed social doctrine, which could mean that Orthodox churches are less interested in social events.

“Sociological and social questions are not primary for the Orthodox Church. It is not and should not be a political force...In its nature and tasks it is above the political, class, national, and other structures in society” (Bigović 2010, p. 57).

Although Serbia is declaratively secular, and the Orthodox Church declaratively uninterested in political events, Serbia is a country in which “Slava” is celebrated by almost all public institutions, and St. Sava is celebrated in all schools not only as an educator, but also as a saint, with clear elements of the Orthodox cult. The influence of the Church ranges from the educational domain (religious education) through influence on legislation, to international relations and European integrations (Vukomanović 2004, pp. 104–42).

As we have mentioned several times, a widely present phenomenon in all institutions in Serbia and Republika Srpska is the celebration of “Slava”. Municipalities, theaters and health centers have their own Slava celebration. This is a ritual related to the practice of the Serbian Orthodox Church, one indeed specific even with regard to other Orthodox churches. Only those who have been baptized can participate in the ritual proper, while all people present can be served the meal afterward. Since the cutting of the ritual bread, seen performed in Figures 1 and 2, takes place in public institutions, it is obvious that citizens who are not members of the Serbian Orthodox Church are excluded from this particular part of the event.



**Figure 1.** The patron saint celebrated in the Department of Radiology of the Urgent Care Center Niš, Serbia (Portal Jugmedia, 31 October 2013).



**Figure 2.** Patients wait for an examination at the infirmary in Niš (Serbia) with the table set for the patron saint celebration, (Portal Juznevesti, 11 January 2017).

## 5. Concluding Remarks

In this text we have tried to show that, in spite of the declarative legal secularity, and even in spite of the awareness of citizens in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia, there is a need to differentiate between religion and politics, church and state, and symbolic struggles are still waged by religious means. Public space is demarcated by religious affiliation, i.e., a religionization of public space is in progress. Religion still has the function of collective integration and recognition, as well as of the imposition of its own cultural codes and its way of life. Given the specific relationship among the mutually conflicting ethnic groups on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, the role of religion is not simply related to the relationship between man and God or just concerned with solving individual problems. Rather, it is still used for the purpose of collective identification, conquest of space, and the differentiation of otherwise related ethnic groups, similar in terms of language and origins.

“We propose a theory according to which religious cultures differ in the individualist and collectivist aspects of religiosity” (Cohen and Hill 2007, p. 709).

In these societies, the main role is played not by the general nature of Christianity and Islam, but rather by the internal, Balkan dynamics of ethnic and religious entities, which still today retains its strong social importance. Social channels based on which this religionization is occurring are both formal and informal, and they relate to the system of education, the passing of laws, and the influence of preferred gender and family models in society. This public role of religion is also objectively manifested in public space, in the form of rituals and sacred places in public institutions.

The “big symbolic machine” (Bourdieu) is in use, which functions in the interdependence and interinstrumentalization of the state and religion, i.e., religious communities. The dominant religious communities dig symbolic trenches, from recognizing the borders i.e., identifying US as the correct

religion and THEM, through evaluating OUR life concepts as more valuable, to attempts to implement these models in all areas of social reality. Actual numerical domination brings the real basis of symbolic power that converts into real social dominance in these societies and undermines their secularity. An essential condition is the interest from time to time of the other side, i.e., the state, for this kind of symbolic power to be instrumentalized.

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