

## Changing Faces, Swapping Places: Oh Sister Where Art Thou?

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### INTRODUCTION

Michael Foucault once wrote ‘There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses.’<sup>1</sup>

For anyone even fairly familiar with the history of religion in the Southeast is aware of the fact that two out of three Abrahamic religions, which are in the majority in the area, are hostile toward women. Once democratic changes began during the 1990s, there was a real hope amongst women in the Balkans that there were now a democratic means, such as respect for Human Rights for all citizens, which would take care of respect for their rights. The need for protection was more than obvious once the two Abrahamic religions were on their way back into the public sphere, as the moral rulers of the newborn society.<sup>2</sup> However, did this protection of women’s rights ever see daylight?

As we shall see in this contribution, democratic means of various kinds have been used for a number of years in order to change the situation of

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women after the fall of the Former Yugoslavia and the disappearance of its pro-women legislation. Unfortunately, democratic means are most of the time used for the purpose of enforcing religious nationalism and its politically traditional values in its views of women, the family, and women's role within the primary group, which can hardly be seen as reflecting the view on women in today's modern Europe.

My basic argument is that religious education in public schools, as it is organized in the Southeast today, is socially dysfunctional considering to what degree it provokes the segregation and the conflict at least between the religious and secular populations that choose to base their world view on civil rights and secular values. While having a certain understanding of the emotional needs of religious institutions, to compensate for their marginalization during the time of Tito's Yugoslavia does not mean that one's rights to freedom of religion are violated, when I argue that religious education does not belong in public schools. Respecting one's freedom of religion does not specify where exactly religious education has to be carried out. Let us remind ourselves that Catholic religious education during Tito's rule was without any state interference carried out within churches (around the Former Yugoslavia). Interference from the state was only a threat if and when religion was to be used to cause religious or ethnic conflict between groups.

In my search for some recent concrete examples, I looked at the seventh-grade school textbook for religious education in public schools in Croatia. What I looked for in this textbook is how convincing is the argument that religious values are imposed upon the youth of that age, since there has still not been any other possibility to introduce a substitute<sup>3</sup> for the education of values to those pupils who choose to follow civil rather than religious value systems. What makes this particularly interesting for us is that this is the first time during the use of religious education in public schools that pupils meet with an introduction to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in the attempt to adjust the educational form to the needs of children growing up in a secular modern world. However, I will not be making an evaluation of the arguments presented in this textbook, as to whether they are logically consequent or not, as we are aware of the fact that ethical arguments are often far from being logically consequent.

## WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN TITO'S YUGOSLAVIA

Despite many flaws in Tito's system, its public policy was in many ways and levels pro-women oriented. This pro-women legislation was simply a continuance of the equality of women demonstrated during the Second World War, where women took part in Tito's anti-fascist movement on equal grounds with men. A proof of this equality is a list of the national hero medals awarded to women for their bravery in the Yugoslav nation's battle against the occupying powers and the local quislings.

What Tito's legislative and institutional politics gave women, independent of their national or religious background was, equal pay for equal work, welfare benefits, the possibility of free education, finding work outside the home, having a career, or just earning their daily bread independently of their husbands, while taking care of the family's needs, as they saw fit.

Most importantly, concerning women, Tito's legislation interfered with religious dogma on two important levels. First, the state legislation made women from some religious groups more visible in public spaces by forbidding the use of the burka in public places. Second, the state legislation gave women the possibility to decide over their own bodies by granting adult women the right to abortion.

This, however, does not mean that Abrahamism<sup>4</sup> did not continue within the private sphere. What this means is that the volume of Abrahamism was challenged by the institutional emancipation and empowerment of women in the public sphere and, consequently, pushed Abrahamism out of public places, forcing it into confinement within the four walls of the family where women's dignity used to be defined, prior to Tito's rule.

## THE REBORN ABRAHAMISM

The perception in Islam and Christianity of women's bodies as possessions is a well-established historical fact, which characterizes the local Abrahamic culture of the Southeast. Society was en-culturized for centuries through religion to reinforce the repressive patriarchal idea of women. Patriarchy denotes the legal, economic, and social system that validates rule by men over women.<sup>5</sup>

The power of conviction that lies in this en-cultured model of patriarchal social control comes nevertheless from the religious images at hand. The Abrahamic religions'<sup>6</sup> cultural construction depicts women and womanhood as inferior to men, because women are not the full image of God. The images of God in the Scripture are mainly male: Lord, King, Father.<sup>7</sup> The examples that Nena Močnik gives in her essay on genocidal rape in Bosnia during the 1990s for how women in Abrahamic religions define the value of women in the scriptures are of value here: in the Qur'an the inheritance of a female child is clearly stated as half of her male siblings (4.11., 4.176). In the New Testament, for St. Paul, women should remain silent (Timothy, 1:2). For Močnik, this form of the symbolic celebration of a man as a ruler of his property is something that, even in war mythology, is nothing but the extreme expression of accepted practices in everyday lives.<sup>8</sup>

However what feminists often fail to recognize is that women and men are equally en-cultured in this model of Abrahamic culture. It is systematic in every aspect of society to the point that it is experienced as normal, and therefore accommodating for en-culturing women and men to believe something that even reflects a clear disadvantage in their own self-realization as individuals. It is important to notice how the primary nurturers of the family, in the domestic set of Abrahamism, are always women/mothers. This means that mothers are the first carriers of values that are taught directly to children in the privacy of their home, which gives them great power in defining the context and values that later on can be only adjusted in the society at large.

According to the newly established religious nationalism, and its extreme core value traditionalism in Abrahamism, women are to be subjugated to men for the primary purpose of reproduction. This is how religious extremism reduced women's wombs to the womb of the new independent nations. Women's wombs have become national territory as an expression of a new form of domestic slavery. This is why in today's society in the Southeast, women's individual ambitions for self-realization are kept strictly focused on the level of realization of women's potential, but only as an instrument of the nation's reproduction. Since sex in Abrahamic culture is only to be practiced for the purpose of reproduction, women are kept away from any possibility of either reaching their full potential as individuals or being treated as equals to men in relationships (or otherwise). Women are socially marginalized through the systematic limitation of their experiences, in order to limit their

possibilities of development by traditionally dividing tasks into ‘women’s’ or ‘men’s’ roles. Religious nationalism managed to ensure the enormous increase in the traditional domestication of women’s obedience through dependency, by for example, preferably employing men. The climax of the identity building process being that of the Abrahamic core: women’s religious affiliation has no say concerning the religious affiliation of the offspring, theirs is automatically determined by the ethnic and religious origin of men. The newly attained homogeneity of the groups helped to accommodate this process so that the occasional offspring of a mixed marriage of any kind preferred to choose only one identity in order not to complicate its relations to the domineering ethnic or religious group, recognizing both parents’ origins equally.

In the eyes of religious nationalist institutional psychology, women are breeders of new generations of believers, who represent the survival of the institution itself. This is why they are en-cultured into the status quo of the Abrahamic patriarchal system, and thus trapped as individuals they are essentially instrumental to systems survival which cynically enslaves them.

### SEVENTH GRADE TEXTBOOK FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

One of the essential survival strategies of the Catholic Church in modern Europe today has been, nevertheless, its ability to adapt to any new social and political circumstances. Therefore, in this section I shall denote some argumentational mechanisms and techniques to show how well, or maybe not so well, Catholic value rhetoric, within the context of a public, meaning, secular state-run school, functions in the role of an educator.

In our sample textbook for seventh grade religious education in public schools in Croatia, in the section on the ‘Ten commandments for living in love and freedom’, it is stated that ‘consciousness’ in a man is God’s voice in a human being, an inner expression of God’s commandments,<sup>9</sup> only to contradict the same sentence a few pages later by stating how ‘conscience is actually something that needs to be taught and learned’.<sup>10</sup> What this example shows is that it appears to contradict essential parts of the doctrine and thus does not seem to pose much of a problem.

In the section on the Declaration of Human Rights,<sup>11</sup> the text begins in a safe manner with a universal statement about how ‘All human laws

need to be founded on God's commandments, especially on conscience in 10 commandments'. This is then modified by stating that 'If the governmental laws are against the 10 commandments we need to act according to our conscience since "one has to obey the God and not people" (Dj 5, 29). As Christians, we need to co-operate with civil rulers and do everything in our power through different laws and regulations to respect basic Human Rights for the purpose of the promotion of a just society.'

This example shows us how the author of textbooks consciously exhibits a traditional religious truth reference to a modern universal norm, only in so far as the modern norm overlaps the traditionalism in the original universal generalization. This demonstrates a case of a selective reading of the same Universal Declaration, where Article 5 of the Declaration says that 'everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and belief'. It is only under Article 5 that women's rights can be respected in their totality. We can as an example name the two basic women's rights legislations, which Tito in his time imposed: the right to decide over one's own body and the ban on the use of the burka in public places. Women had the right to choose an abortion without the consent of anyone else as long as they were of age. They were no longer forced culturally to cover their faces in public places as a token of belonging to a certain religious culture or ethnic group.

By referring to God's fourth commandment<sup>12</sup> the author of the textbook repeats that if the government acts against Christian beliefs and values, followers of Catholicism are not obliged to respect the state nor obey the state's orders, since 'one must obey God and not Man.' By giving such instructions, the author is challenging the constitution of the state, implying that in such a case, there is a need for 'an institution within the institution' in order to regulate the individual's morally undesirable behavior. Further, by such instruction, the author implies that whenever the two models of rules and regulations do not overlap completely, the state is blamed for being morally weak, rather than the church for misusing its influence on the Catholic faithful.

The author returns to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights later when he refers to the 'right to life'. The right to life is not only a human right, it is also an absolute right (see Declaration on euthanasia).<sup>13</sup> This strong argument, with its reference to the Declaration is in this case strengthened by other statements/examples in the margins on the same page in the textbook.

*Example one* Abortion and the murder of a child are two horrific crimes (Gaudium et al., 51).<sup>14</sup> This example is supposed to scare young people from committing a crime according to religious truth.

*Example two* All human beings have the right to life. There is no death sentence in the Republic of Croatia.<sup>15</sup> This example is a warning against doing something that is prohibited by state legislation.

*Example three* Hitler signed an order in 1939, which resulted in euthanasia for seriously ill patients. A total of 275,000 people were killed because of this decision (Conclusion in the Court in Nurnberg 1945–1946).<sup>16</sup> This example is a warning against taking part in committing a massive crime prohibited by law, associated with one of the worst evils of the twentieth century.

*Example four* I swear (...) that I shall never even if someone begs me, either give the means which will result in death or give advice to the same effort (Hippocrates Oath).<sup>17</sup> This example is a warning to stop youngsters from seeking help from health professionals by presenting them as breaching their oath in cases where they hasten death, which does not result from natural causes, such as by carrying out an abortion at a woman's request. Abortion falls under the breach of God's fifth commandment, together with suicide, euthanasia, and war. Women are according to Abrahamic culture supposed to fulfill a pregnancy, independent of circumstances, even where in extreme cases this would mean also undergoing pregnancies and giving birth to children who were the result of genocidal rape, as was the case in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo during the 1990s wars.

This kind of selective and politicized reading of Article 5 of the Universal Declaration is only one example of an attempt to bend modern legislation in ways that would legitimize Abrahamic traditionalism, soaked as it is with examples of sacrificing their women for whatever the institution defines as the 'greater purpose'. In this sense, the greater purpose adds up to nothing less than the survival of the cultural institution, which in certain cases such as this, acts as a political agent. The political agent has a history of transforming the wombs of their women followers into the womb of a nation, where no other aspect of their person or their lives as a whole is superseded by their sole biological ability of reproduction. This reminds us to what degree the matter of reproduction within religious nationalism in the Southeast since the 1990s has

been a question of women's wombs as a nation's womb and, therefore, a means to an end concerning the nationalist territorialism. Women raped during the conflict of the 1990s did not receive the official status of victims of the Home defense war against Serbian aggression before this last year. This tells us just how hard to change the state institutions are and how well en-cultured they already are in the Abrahamic ways of reasoning when it comes to equalizing women's suffering/victimhood with the sacrifices of men during the 1990s war.

### *BILDUNG AS A BACKBONE OF DEMOCRACY*

In order to evaluate how well an institution is able to accommodate a 'self-realization of its followers in the image of God' since all already are in the 'image of God,'<sup>18</sup> we analyzed the textbooks' description and contextualization of critical thought.

The context within which the institution depicts critical thought was at the beginning of the book.<sup>19</sup> However, the contextualization of this depiction somewhat surprised the reader. The context of the definition of the institutional relation toward critical thought is nonetheless the context of the process entailed in reaching sexual maturity, which marks the end of the bodily changes in puberty, the end of the rapid growth and development of the internal organs, and the beginning of the sexually active age for men and women.<sup>20</sup> Critical thought is thus here connected only to the period of puberty, when the young are either overly critical toward themselves as a result of the physical changes, but also of others due to the growing feeling of self-importance.<sup>21</sup>

According to the author, at times in puberty children are rebellious also toward religion, and that is a normal phase of development toward the full maturity of spirituality, while true pure maturity is reached through the difficulties met as one grows up and synchronizes one's own wishes with the duties and obligations in one's family and community.<sup>22</sup> In this way, a well-known fact of how the physical volume of the human brain grows for many years after puberty has been efficiently excluded from the equation. Instead, puberty is categorically marked by developing the ability to accept limitations caused by one's body and mind, as well as by society, a kind of compromise with reality.

If the ideas listed above were a matter of religious education alone, one would always have an option of not exposing one's children to such



a breach in a doctrine of human rights. The fact that young people are being taught such a doctrine in (public) state-run schools makes the matter essential for our analysis of the degree to which women's rights in the newly established democratic independence of a successor state are actually ignored as a legislative fact. Any secular/worldly explanation of life is all about what is taught in public schools should be subject to a broader moral scrutiny if it allows itself to contextualize the concept of critical thought as a subject of adolescent rebellion during puberty, as the religious explanation appears to do so in school textbooks.

By teaching and encouraging critical thought amongst young people, society is simultaneously promoting its own self-realization: developing the individual's ability to achieve self-realization is an indicator of how well society is organized to accommodate the self-realization of the community.<sup>23</sup> An Individual's self-realization overlaps with self-realization of the society. It includes the development of the citizen's courage and ability to think differently and reflect over the whole, which eventually results in a civilized progress for the community. Here, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*,<sup>24</sup> read as a *Bildung* novel<sup>25</sup> comes to mind, where there is an exchange between the main character's experiences and his development. Hegel's civil society reflects just one of few phases through which the individual goes on its way to becoming a citizen of the state. Civil society is a form of *second family*,<sup>26</sup> and in this way the family and civil society are two sides of the same process, the process of the individual's self-realization. Without a doubt, in today's modern Europe it is nevertheless the constitutional obligation of the state to defend the individual's right to choose to live by religious dogmas. Today, religious institutions misuse the right to freedom of religion in order to overcome whatever secular grounds there may be for defending the democratic society, for which the people fought and for which their children bled to death only a few years ago. Individual development, where freedom is the final good, creates a society well prepared to meet the challenges that arise when inherent totalitarianistic tendencies become more than obvious.<sup>27</sup> Such tendencies when analyzed in relation to the situation of women in the midst of this newly established religious nationalism in the Southeast are reflected in constant attempts at the disempowerment of women, the neutralization of women as social agents in the public sphere at any given opportunity.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Judging by the above described and documented sexism, misogyny, and religious nationalistic politics that rule the Balkans today, including the systematic ignorance of women's rights as prescribed by the constitutions of each successor state, one is forced to conclude that a regression in civilization on this account is a historical fact. It would have been difficult to get women to give their democratic vote to nationalist political parties during the 1990s if they had known what the price for traditional values that came as a reborn Abrahamism or religious nationalism would be paid by the ruined lives of women and the loss of their children's lives as its main currency. This perspective on the result of a democratic vote is a part of the evaluation of political alternatives, whose expiry date never comes, since in reality we are talking about the votes of 50% of the Balkan population.

If the rapid march of the two Abrahamic religions taking over public education is not challenged soon by concrete measures of defense of the state constitution, the defense of all of its citizens who choose not to be religious, the damages caused could bring even more tragic results. The free flow of religious truth that has ruled these societies for thousands of years is going to become the only truth that young people will learn as a part of their educational path: that it was a male God who was the historical and eternal creator of patriarchal structures and 'the way life is.' The religious truth that overlaps with the primary goal of the religious institutions is to improve further democratization by gaining a total control of the general education of the young. If achieved, this goal will ultimately make any reargumentation completely impossible. The questioning of human rights or ultimately, the eligibility of such non-questionable subjection of women was supposedly unable to be decided, recreated, or re-established by humans—who were, after all, only God's creation.

## NOTES

1. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*.
2. Gorana Ognjenović & Jasna Jozelić, The Human Rights State and Freedom of Religion in Southeastern Europe: The Case of Bosnia–Herzegovina, *The International Journal of Human Rights*, Special Issue, Routledge, March 2017.
3. See in this volume Ankica Marinković, *Analysis of Catholic religious instruction textbooks in Croatian primary schools: how do they teach atheism?*

4. By Abrahamism here is meant, the culture of oppression based on the common view of women across Abrahamic religions. Individuals who are not necessarily religious still follow the same cultural code of behavior based on religious values.
5. Suzan Rakoczy, "Religion and Violence: The Suffering of Women", *Religion & Spirituality* 61 (2004). p. 33.
6. In my analysis, I focus on two out of three Abrahamic religions.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
8. Nena Močnik, *Religious Symbolism and Mythology in Sexual Violence and Rape during the Balkan Conflict, 1992–1995*, in *Politicization of Religion, The Power of Symbolism, The Case of Former Yugoslavia and its Successor States*, (eds.) Gorana Ognjenović & Jasna Jozelić, Palgrave studies in Religion, Politics and Policy, 2014.
9. Ankica Cicvarić, Vesna Galić, Josip Periš, Vilma Rađa, *Zajedno u ljubavi, U džbenik za katočki vjeronauk sedmog razreda osnovne škole, KRŠĆANSKA SADAŠNJOST*, ZAGREB, 2009, p. 32.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 50.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 14–16.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
23. Jay Martin, *The education of John Dewey; A biography* 2003, Columbia University Press, p. 69.
24. Georg W. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, 1977, trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford University Press, paragraph 78.
25. Josiah Royce, *Lectures on Modern Idealism*, 1919, Yale University Press.
26. Robert R. Williams, *Hegel's Ethics of Recognition*, University of California Press 1997, p. 229.
27. Srečo Dragoš, *The Separation between Church and State in Slovenia: A Political Fiasco*, *Politicization of Religion, the Power of State, Nation, and Faith, The Case of Former Yugoslavia and its Successor States*, Gorana Ognjenović & Jasna Jozelić, Palgrave studies in Religion, Politics and Policy, 2014.

Education in Post-Conflict Transition

The Politicization of Religion in School Textbooks

Ognjenovic, G.; Jozelić, J. (Eds.)

2018, XV, 316 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-56604-7