STUDENTS ATTITUDES TOWARD RELIGION AND RELIGIOUS LEADERS

This work describes student attitudes toward religion, religious leaders and their influence. The research was conducted amongst the student body of the Faculty of philosophy in Novi Sad through analysis of their written responses. There are quotes that show the way that young people comprehend their families, religious influence, formation of the view of God, church and life in general. The results have shown that young individuals give deep thoughts to religious issues, and that their contemplations about the purpose of life lead them to seek answers in religion, while their encounters with mediators between man and God create a critical stance toward their own religions. Youth does recognize the importance of religion in society and their own lives, but they also realize that there is a lack of opportunity for religious leaders to help young individuals.

Key words: religion, youth, religious leaders, view of God.

STUDENTS AND THEIR VIEWS OF RELIGION

Religion and youth is the topic I have dealt with for many years, and this text is for me a complete new form of research and writing about that topic. Students at the Faculty of philosophy in Novi Sad answered the questions related to attitudes that young people have about religion as well as their understanding of theological topics and the role that religious leaders have in religious communities. The first piece of research was conducted on May 7th, 2007 and the last on October 6, 2009. 420 students in all four years of studies were the subject of that survey. The overwhelming majority of students surveyed came from Departments of journalism, sociology and philosophy. From general data, I have singled out using places of birth as the most variable information that reminds us of migrations caused by war conflicts. From the abundance of material that I obtained for this occasion I have selected the most typical responses that might help us to better understand relations between youth and religion. My focus in this research was not on quantities indicators of students’ religiosity, but the aim was to obtain qualitative information which demonstrates subtle elements of beliefs specific to the minds of contemporary youth.
The most important initial attitude toward religion includes understanding the phenomenon of God. We wonder how young people today describe God and how they rate their stance toward God on the scale of belief and what is the significance of God for their lives. The second question dealt with understanding of self, that is a personal position that young individuals have in contemporary society. We have attempted to recognize the specifics related to adolescent’s age in comparison to the adult world and youth needs and problems. The third focus of our interest was how religious leaders mediate between the youth and spiritual values, those leaders who have an educational and mediating role in approaching religious beliefs. When we think about religious leaders, we have in mind those individuals who have dedicated their lives to presenting spiritual values in their ministries. However, that ministry is obvious in their service to humankind (Kuburić 2002: 200). We were interested to find out how religious leaders could help young people, but according to the opinion of young individuals.

Young individuals that we questioned about the issues of faith are primarily students who, in the course of their studies, have encountered subjects such as sociology of religion, World religions and Religious communities. That means besides their young age and personal religiosity or the lack of it for that matter, they have a certain level of vocational education. Another characteristic of this survey is the fact that those students attended my lectures. However, since lectures and seminars were not the only influence on their attitudes and knowledge, the things we talk about in this text in fact represent a broader influence of the society in which we live, be that family, church, media or personal experience. Students originate from different parts of the Republic of Serbia, but some also come from surrounding regions since transition has forced us to various forms of migration. The religious affiliations of surveyed student are also different, yet most of them are Serbian Orthodox from their birth. Nevertheless, a significant number of students come from religiously mixed marriages. All those circumstances have contributed to the responses you will find in this survey.

FAMILY SURROUNDING AND THE FORMATION OF THE VIEW OF GOD

First of all, survey participants gave several descriptions of their families where they first acquired knowledge about religion. I do believe that a family structure is primary and irreplaceable factor in personality formation. I also believe that on those foundations hinge and survive anything that has any relation to both a person and his society (Kuburić 2008; 2009). Family structure still has a power to select and adapt information and live according to its own standards. Membranes through which families receive outer influences are permeable in certain areas and almost closed in others, which makes them more or less flexible (Kuburić 2006). Religion is often integrated into that defensive lawyer called "identity". Family connections build a personality and influence personal thinking in specific ways. That is why religious
personalities are significant because they indirectly, through families, have not an insignificant influence. We shall from the statements of young people what took place in that influence interaction.

A journalism student begins her story with the following words, “My family is only theoretically religious because we have never dealt with religious issues, we have never talked about it and haven’t kept anything. We only celebrate once a year our family saint. Even to this day, I am not certain if that was a habit, our duty, or a religious custom. In accordance with that, I always believed myself to be an atheist. However, when I give it another thought, I have never really considered that question. I have always been occupied with other things: work, sports, etc. However, when I reached the adult age, I started to think about the question who am I, what is my purpose in this world? Does God exist? Is there eternal life? As I encountered various disasters, such as the death of close relatives and a friend of mine, I began to think about life, death and God. I was scared about all that. Awareness that man is a finite being, that death is certain and that there is an end to our road scares me. On the other hand, when things get better a person forgets about bad things. Only when one touches the bottom, from that abyss there is an opportunity to jump up, wake up and try it all over again. That is what happened to me. I wondered what was going on with me: have I been so bad that so many bad things should happen to me?! Does God exist and if He does, why was He doing all those things to me? I realized that I myself was guilty for all bad things, God sent me various favorable situations, good people, but I was not able to recognize that. I don’t know how God looks like, I don’t even imagine Him, I simply feel Him. I feel that He is there and I often feel ashamed before Him when I do something wrong” says this female student.

In this confession we see another role of religion: it contributes to the purpose of life as it responds to the questions that are primarily religious in nature. In that search for the purpose, young people, whichever way they were brought up, poses questions in which God is inevitable. The key clause in that statement is the awareness of man as a finite being and that death is certain because “the road we travel will come to an end”. A similar experience of sadness over transitory nature of life was expressed by Aleksandar Birvis when he reminisced about his experiences as a young person. “The first New Testament with Psalms I purchased from an Orthodox religious teacher sometimes at the beginning of 1938. I read it very quickly. Prior to my tenth birthday (in 1938), before I fell to sleep I thought about the fact that life is so transitory. I wept before falling to sleep and I said, O, Lord, give me eternal life! Unfortunately, there was nobody back then that I could have a conversation with. I continued my life with that kind of sadness” (Kuburic 2008: 151). Fear and sadness are feelings that cause cry for God who in this context means eternal life.

Another girl, also a journalism student wrote the following, “Even though I come from a religious family where religious practices go back to my grandfather, the oldest member of our family, who since his childhood has been regularly attending
the church and family saint was celebrated in his house, my family has never forced me to keep those customs. That was left up to my personal choice. I am not one of those believers who regularly attend church services, but I go to church during religious feasts such as Easter and Christmas. I think that religiosity is not reflected in the number of times that one attends church services or observes the fast, but that internal faith is important, that which is felt and the way one acts. I have never thought about God as a being or about His appearance.

Since the greatest number of definitions of religion imply belief in god, just as Djuro Susnjic has outlined in his work (1998), the first question in the survey was directed toward understanding the phenomenon of god and attempt to describe personal attitude. Questions were open because closed questions which aim for quantitative analysis can never reach the beauty of linguistic description of individual introspective view of personal stance.

“Regarding the question on how I envisage God, his appearance, I don’t think I can give a concrete response. I have never made any effort to make a clear mental picture of His appearance and I think that it is irrelevant. The important thing to me is that He is there, that I can feel and know that He is there among us. I believe in God, the God who is an infinite source of love and everything that is good. God is life. In fact, belief in God is something that life would be unimaginable without.”

“I envisage God as the only person that knows everything about me. He is always there to hear me out. He is my conscience. If I do something that I later realize was a mistake, I can turn to him. I don’t go to church, but I read the Lord’s prayer every night and I pray to God”.

“I see God as an almighty, supreme power that is all around us taking care of us and giving us instructions as to how to live and act. Existence of the entire world is his merit. He is just and merciful to everyone because that is in his nature. We are all his children and each one of us receives equal amounts of love and attention from him. He is always available to everyone, he is guiding us and he is shedding light on our ways. Through him we come to the knowledge about the purpose of our lives.”

“I consider God the highest being. I have believed in that being since my childhood, from the moment I was baptised (at the age of seven). They taught me that God is one, that I should believe in him, that I must not insult him and that he is, no matter where I am, always with me. I rarely try to imagine his appearance. I pray at night before I go to sleep and he looks to me as the brightest star so far away from me, yet it shines on me and listens to me when I pray. God is good. He is guiding me and he has never let me down. If things don’t turn out as I expect them to be, I remember that it may not be God’s will, so I keep on believing on Him.”

“I believe in God, but not in a God who is the creator of everything, but in the notion of a superhuman, pure and solemn. I believe that everyone has the same God who treats all people equally regardless of how people call him or the language they speak or the color of their skin... Personally, I don’t envisage God as someone
with a human image, but rather as a power, might, light that reaches to everyone who carries internal goodness. That very goodness in people represents to me a particle of God, something from god that makes us closer to Him. That is why I would say that God is everywhere, in each one of us; in a bit of us.. I believe that He is considerate, able to award and punish us through many life circumstances which we call destiny. He can award or punish us for either good and noble actions, or sinful, shameful and cruel actions. Say that I see God as a perfect pedagogue to whom human soul is like an innocent child.” Those are the words of a sociology student. Even though at the beginning he considers God as a higher power without bodily shape, he gives him sheer personal traits that he connects with parent-children relations. He also recognizes his ambivalent attitude because God is essentially unforeseeable.

"The Spirit is always with us no matter if we attend or not attend the church, or observe religious customs. I would agree with Kant’s position that we believe in god because we are moral, not the other way around. That is, we are moral because we believe in god. That position implies our personal spirituality and ability to feel elevated through a sense of love. For the feeling of love toward others, toward self and nature means also belief in god and love toward god. In that way, if that faith is in us, in our hearts, it can help young people when it is truly needed”. “God is someone who can do anything. He is supposed to be absolutely righteous, helper of the less fortunate, healer for all ailments, the One that maintains peace in the world, doesn’t allow wars, theft, murder and other numerous disasters. If he is God, he has to be PERFECT!”

"My God is not a man, He is something and nothing, He dwells with me, lives in mind, heart and soul. He is the thought, feeling, something that is constantly heard, being with me and working through me. I experience him through my Orthodox faith, I see him in our churches and feasts, but that is my God. God is essentially good, He lives through good deeds and rewards us for good deeds. Through destiny and natural balance He warns and punishes, not to manifest His wrath and magnitude, but to force people to repent and think before they do something bad”.

“It is well known what is God like, that is not to be asked. Man should think about his personality because it is changeable. God’s personality is immutable.” It seems that believing individuals have no need to wonder about the being of God. Rather, they are to wonder about their own beings. Those who don’t believe and have no personal experience of religiosity they foster negative attitudes such as, “I don’t believe in god and I think that young people experience him in a very primitive way – in forms of pictorial images.”

“God is Creator”. “The One that is”. “Fairly abstract”. Messages from these responses show that the thought of God is abstract and cannot be searched for in perceptive psychological processes. ”It cannot be said that there is an image of God. Rather, it is a phenomenon. To believers God is salvation, He is just and faithful and He propagates love.”
“I don’t think there is one definite established picture of god that is supposed to be special, predestined in relations to many others. Many different notions of god should be understood. That is why the type of religion is not important.” In this response we recognize the attitude of tolerance and need for variety of religious beliefs. In fact, religions are diverse in pluralistic societies.

“God is inconceivable. He represents different things to different people. Ambivalent feelings are related to the notion of God. They range from fear to respect, love and hope. For those who believe in God, He is good and merciful, but also an eternal judge and persecutor.”

“How do I imagine God? Just the same as I imagine Jesus Christ. When I think of God, I see the image of Jesus.” “I imagine God more like a notion of justice, goodness and balance between good and evil. I don’t think he is supposed to look like any ordinary person. When I was little, I imagined him the way that Jesus was portrayed in films and church frescos, as blue-eyed, bearded, long heir and long garment.” For young generations that were brought up on movies it is very apt that the image of Jesus Christ totally makes all abstract views of God concrete. In the process of making God concrete some students quote the problem of gender.

“The only thing that I know and believe is that God is male, even though I wish I could know why people believe that. Why isn’t he not female? I don’t understand that. As far as his appearance is concerned, I have no definite notion of that.”

All our wonders over the phenomenon that is higher than ourselves and responses that aim to make the thought closer to our minds through words, we can summarize in several key words: eternal life, purpose, justice, mercy, love, goodness, power, might, light, creator. Certainly, in the minds of young people we can recognize the idea of parental care and protection, as well as rewards and punishments as the methods of upbringing. In the research of general Balkan population (Kuburic 2008; 2009) God is experienced equally in the role of both mother and father, which shows that traits of parental unity are interwoven in the image of God who has incorporated the integrity of beings into Himself.

YOUTH PROBLEMS

According to research in Serbia (Mihailovic 2004; Markovic, Kijevcanin 2004) youth problems are primarily related to drug and alcohol addictions and the crime (59% of participants. 25% participants said the worst problems were unemployment and poor material status, while 15% see bleak future and generation gap as major problems for young individuals. When we analyze those responses in relation to the overall number of participants, the hierarchy of problems is as follows: alcohol addiction, unemployment, drug addiction, crime, poor material status, violent behavior, and the generation gap.
In 2002, the American non-government organization “Catholic Rescue Service” with local partners conducted a research in Uzice, Smederevska Palanka, Backa Palanka and Subotica. The results of that research offer the way to resolve problems. A large number of participants recognized that problems should be primarily solved by the Government of the Republic of Serbia and political parties (46%). Also, 12% of the participants invited parents to become involved in solving youth problems. The list of those called upon to solve youth problems is as follows: political parties, government, youth in general, parents, media, local authorities, local organizations, schools, seminaries, NGOs that care for youth. The Church as an institution was the last on the list since barely 2% of young individuals have cited that the institution as the one that should take part in solving problems (Markovic, Kijevcanin 2004: 125).

On the other hand, Gallup research in the Balkans involved 7000 participants above 15. That research has shown that the Church was the first institution to be cited as the one enjoying the greatest trust from citizens (Balkan Monitor 2008: 26-28). In each country a big trust has been shown toward religious institutions. The exceptions are Kosovo and Albania where NATO comes first as the most trusting institution. Perhaps this means that religious institutions are not considered responsible for problems that are present in the entire system of other entities since they are not exactly from this world.

Youth problems as recognized by our survey participants in this research are also numbered and subtly displayed in opinions that are mutually complemented. I personally believe that it is more profitable to conduct a qualitative research prior to quantitative one and then make a questionnaire based on offered responses with the purpose to research the frequency of researched subjects. Young people know best what their problems are. In the responses that are listed below we see all the difficulties of our societal circumstances and the context of growing up in Serbia. We can also seek the ways to resolve those problems in the very same answers given by young people.

“The 21st century world is diverse and so are the problems in young population. In my opinion, there are no common problems. Each class is affected one way or the other with diverse problems.” “We cannot really categorize problems as being of youth or adults. We are witnessing the fact that problems have intermixed and the fact is that young people are burdened with heavy burdens, such as worries about the employment of their parents and their own employment, to name just the two.” “A common youth problem is the feeling of insecurity in our country, as well as ever decreasing faith in a brighter future.”

From the list of general and common problems young individuals have particularly singled out addictions. Addictions are a trap for young people and for some reason an ever increasing number of youths have been falling into it. “Drug addiction is the main youth problem.”
“Youth problems are numerous vices, lack of understanding of the true purpose of life, mutual intolerance and lack of mutual understanding.”

“Unemployment is our primary problem. The consequences of unemployment are the fact that youth is turning to various immoral things. Due to lack of money, crises in families and bad surroundings, there is drug-taking and prostitution all over the place. The last protest in Belgrade for legalizing “light drugs” is the very proof of that. Even worse, Belgrade is only one of many world cities that demand that legalization.”

“The problem of youth is generally speaking this contemporary society and the pace of modern life which is drifting away more and more from the true purpose of life.”

“I consider the main problem to be ignorance about the true values in our society. I think the basic problem is that young people think there is no way out and then some of them commit suicide. We should discuss that subject.”

“The problems are more related to finances than to anything else.” ”Young people should spend more time thinking about themselves as persons since nobody else is able to help them unless they have strong will. Youth morality is in question here.”

“Attitudes of young people toward religions vary to a great extent. Some regularly attend the church thinking that can bring them closer to God. More often than not that is just a fake, outer dedication to God. Some do not attend the church on a regular basis, but they are nobler and better individuals compared to those who do. Nowadays the whole issue of faith has been drastically turned around. The Church has become an institution for collecting money to build different temples, make religious feasts etc. Most people go to those holy sites to find comfort. Is it really possible to find comfort there?”

“How is it possible to find religion if one’s understanding about the personal world is totally different without any connection to religion? How is god possible in today’s world and for humans at large, let alone for young humans…”

“Considering our society, there are two extreme ends of behavior in Serbia when it comes to youth, particularly those of Orthodox faith. Some have superficial, lax attitude inherited from their parents. Their religion is more in service to societal conformity. The other extreme end is orthodoxy marked with fear of God, strict adherence to the rules. In both cases nobody or a small percentage has read the Bible. That is the most needed change. Those interested in religion should have more independence in searching, and should be directed to various sources that can enrich their understanding and experience.”

“In the modern world it is difficult for young people to believe in anything, be that God or anything else.”

“The most difficult problem with young people is that nobody understands them.”
“A very small number of young people in Serbia has any basic knowledge about religion. The majority say they are religious, but they do that because of the current fashion in the society that is related to growing nationalism.”

“Young people usually have a negative stance toward religion as well as toward all other forms of authority, institutions that impose rules, etc. Young people today have no respect for anything.”

“I think that young people have ever decreasing faith, which is the consequence of modern society that has been steadily progressing to secularization. I see that as something positive because people are becoming more tolerant toward different religions.”

“Unfortunately, youth problems are as follows: lack of consciousness, quick moves, dejection, lack of interest, laziness, limited opinion about anything. This is very sad.”

“Young people are lost. They think that money is solution to any problems.”

“Distance from faith and losing the purpose of life are the main problems.”

“The common problem for all young people is usually the fact that they are not satisfied with their lives, economic status or anything else. They manifest that dissatisfaction by losing faith in everything, even that which is the most sacred and they disdain God and negate love for him which is deeply rooted in all of us.”

It is interesting that a journalism student cites the example of children from religiously mixed marriages. There are many such children in this area. They are usually faced with a dilemma as to which faith to accept. Conflict of loyalty makes them ambivalent. Thus, often in the search for an integrative model they accept that form of religious practice that does not exclude either inherited religion, but rather integrates them both.

However, religiously mixed marriage is not by itself a problem for all young people because some of them see in it their personal opportunity to have freedom to choose. A sociology student wrote that her divorced parents are of different faiths. “My mother is Catholic, while father is Orthodox. I was baptized in the Orthodox church when I was 5 or 6. The priest who baptized me has been relocated to another parish, so I don’t have any contact with him unlike Catholic priests who maintain relation with their parish members. I am a believer. I don’t like religious parades in a sense that only those who attend church on Sunday, make confessions and take communion are counted as believers. Considering the freedom that I have as far as my confession is concerned, I like going to the Catholic church. In consultation with an Orthodox priest, I have realized that even though I am an Orthodox believer, I can choose something from Catholic rites as I wish. Being extraordinarily curious and communicative, I have got to know people from various confessions. In the last two years (2007 and 2008), I have had an opportunity to be in the TAIZE camp in France. It is a large camp… I am a believer, but primarily in my heart. I sang in a church
choir, thus I don’t experience superficially those words that permeate church hymns. I consider it a privilege because I myself can choose where and when to pray.”

Therefore, youth problems are numerous. Statistically, we can make a conclusion about their importance and urgency to be solved based on frequency. However, for each individual it is a challenge and each is sufficiently important and meritorious of attention. Outlined problems can be grouped in several sections. It seems that the most urgent are addiction problems. Drug and alcohol addictions are the ones most frequently cited. Crime rate is on rise, morality is in crises, vices are ruling! On the top of that come poor material status, bleak future and lack of goals, purpose and faith in future. Values have been undermined, there is a lack of trust and mutual understanding. Young individuals feel insecure and their existential needs are threatened.

HOW CAN RELIGIOUS LEADERS HELP YOUNG PEOPLE?

When it comes to modern society, Balkans and Serbia and my knowledge based on empirical research (Gallup Balkan Monitor), we could say that the citizens have returned to faith in God and religious practice. Research has shown that from all institutions in society the religious communities are those that citizens trust most. Albeit imperfect, their power has been resurrected due to powerlessness of other institutions to respond to needs, including those institutions whose job description is to respond to need. Since religious communities representatives are also people of significant trust, we wonder how they can help young people in contemporary society.

“How can religious leaders help youngsters? It is quite a difficult question because society is turning only to materialistic values as opposed to spirituality. Young people should be educated and offered some alternatives. Since we live in a media age dominated by media the society should use it to offer some traditional religious formulas. The Church can be much more successful in spreading its mission far and wide”.

“I think the greatest problem for young people is the ever worsening value system. I also believe that family influences are far more important for the formation of a personality. I believe that upbringing is the primary thing, then we can talk about possible influence which comes from religious leaders. Nobody can help us unless there is a personal desire to help oneself. Religious leaders are there to guide us on our paths and search for something better.”

“I think the role of religious leaders should be primarily to give religious education to young people, to give them moral upbringing and prepare them for future family life. They should set the example and real authority to both children and adults. A priest can be an important counselor when it comes to important life decisions. They are to be support in difficult times and comfort when justice is not executed.”

“They should introduce faith to young people and give them shelter if they are asked for it, help them solve their problems, point out to the bright side of life when young people think that there is no way out.”
"They should listen, read and react. Lately, the religious leaders become vocal only when a new constitution is to be voted on, when the government or president are to be elected, or when political subjects are raised. That is probably why youth topics are not being popularized. Politics has taken deep roots in the churches. If religious leaders want to help young people, they should skip reading the first columns in the daily newspaper that talk about politics and then get information on the pages that follow about what is going on. Instead of condemning the gender and cheer leaders, they should rather comment on the murder of a young person, or unemployment because religious communities are mighty tools that can work miracles."

"Religious leaders would help young people only if they would speak about tolerance in their sermons. That might get closer to youth from different religious communities."

"Religious leaders can help young people by preaching about religious tolerance, no matter which confession they belong to. Such a tolerance would help overcome all the differences and conflicts from the past. Religious leaders should never present their faith as being better than any other faith. They should only say that their faith is special because of the way it is and that differences are nice, not a vice. The essential and true beauty lies in similarities and the spirit that all faiths equally preach. Because all people regardless of religion are equal before God. Youth should accept all those that are different and they must never allow the repetition of past mistakes when religious differences served as a reason for conflict. God is love toward the world around us, toward the people in general and toward us. Only love can lead us on the right way through our lives."

"They should not lead young people into religious intolerance toward other religions."

"It will be enough if they would teach young people about the Ten Commandments."

"Religious leaders should talk with young people, but also let them speak about their problems. Talk, talk, only talk is enough.” “Certain workshops should be organized and there should be adequate people in them to find some solutions together with young people. They should together make decisions and discuss certain topics. Young people should be guided to voice their opinions, but should also be given opportunities to accept something new.”

"Religious leaders would help young people if they would understand them. They can only understand them if they approach them, which in turn means that religious leaders are favorable to modern age and that will make them more attractive to youth."

"I don’t see any way that the church could help young people.” “Perhaps when it comes to morality."

"Religious personnel in this society still have traditionally authoritative. The past wars might have contributed to even greater separation and lack of communication with other religions."
“If belief in people would return, the belief in God would also come back, as well as belief in religious leaders who represent God. However, nowadays there is no faith in morality, friendship and neighbours. As far as typical youth problems are concerned, such as alcohol and drug addiction, I think that religious leaders could help if they organize and employ youth and enthuse them to believe in themselves and God primarily.”

“Religious leaders cannot help young people if young people are not willing to help themselves. Religious leaders can only instruct young people about the possible consequences of their actions by citing them historical examples, instructive stories and stories from the Bible.”

“ They can help young people by their personal examples, through bright life worthy of a religious leader. And when they teach them about love and tolerance, they should live that love and tolerance, which is not the case with a large number of religious leaders. Many years will have to pass in Serbia before things get crystal clear and well balanced, so that religious leaders would have a role in the society which belongs to them. Young people in Serbia are practically in need of hope that they have been losing. Their enthusiasm is also on decline. Religious leaders should find ways to help them in those areas.”

“Lent and confessions are extremely important in the life of every person. Only in that way can we be redeemed and justified before God. God is everywhere around us and He hears our words and prayers, no matter where we find ourselves. But it is important to go to church and attend liturgy. By going to church services over a period of time a person acquires peace of mind and body. Orthodox priests are extremely kind, always ready to help a troubled soul. Yet, young people often do not want, or do not think that they need help or a council from the priest. It seems that priests can help me in the best way by acting as all other normal humans do and thinking in earthly terms.”

From the statements above we can conclude that the young population thinks the role of religious leaders is primarily to give spiritual education, formulate traditional frameworks of behavior, set a good example, be support and provide a refuge. Young minds cry out for values that have been proven throughout the centuries. They also yearn for the purpose that can make their minds busy when perspectives transcending the limits of everyday life are open.

CRITICISM OF RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP

Nevertheless, greater the expectations deepen the disappointments if trust is lost. Not only religious leaders and church representatives are criticized, but the believers themselves. The first response I quote criticizes inconsistency, “It bothers me that some people go to churches on Saturdays and Sundays as believers, but when they leave their churches they swear, lie and cheat. I think such people should be
barred from entering a church. We should not believe in something holy only when we have difficulties or feel bad.”

“It is not up to me to criticize them, but what bothers me is the fact that if they have decided to dedicate themselves to such a life, they should realize that they cannot behave like people who can still fall into temptations into which we as ordinary people do fall.” This sociology student thinks that religious employees are extraordinary people that are less prone to sin.

“The Church has ever increasing influence on the young population as well as over the entire society. Unfortunately, greater church influence did not result in greater religiosity, particularly not in greater morality.”

“The main mistake of all religious leaders is that they do not point out to the believers the necessity to tolerate other faiths, or at least they do not do it sufficiently. Some religious communities are commonly called Sabbatarians or sectarian and in other similar terms. Someone should warn that they too are Christians and that their Bible is the same as ours, that their God is the same as our God”.

“The Church should deal with evangelization, not spread clericalism.”

“Criticisms to all religious communities is that they take material goods, money. Some minor religious communities with their members impose themselves in the society and they recruit people to serve their interest. Religious communities also neglect equality of people regardless of national origin and religion. We also see plunder, lack of kindness, pride. There are only few exceptions to such behavior.”

“Corruption is widespread to all spheres. Unfortunately, certain religious leaders are not exception to that.” “Corruption, false priests, priest of who and what?”

A sociology student poses only this question, “where is the money and do you declare your taxes?” “Today we often see church fathers in expensive limous, with expensive mobile phones and in cafes and bars. I think that picture speaks louder than thousand words.”

“Religious leaders will never be toppled from their positions because they do not have the electorate to vote for them. Thus, any criticism is in vain. Business people in Serbia are actually religious leaders. That is shame! It is the same situation in the West, but it is not that obvious.”

“If we speak about Orthodoxy, I rarely meet people who talk about God and I am not sure that they act in accordance with the rules of faith. Many would like to go to church services, but it seems that they fear mockery from their colleagues. Rare are those who truly understand. They turn to themselves, or seek and wait for convenient moment to speak up their minds and understandings and the way they live and understand themselves, their purpose and consequently God. Young people don’t really have a relation to religion because they don’t know…”

A Journalism student believes that true representatives of faith are found in monasteries. “There are several exceptions, but for me the priests are rather merchants.”
“Priests are largely responsible that people have such attitudes and are getting further away from religion. They have become corrupted and morally corrupt. In the middle of burial ceremony a priest gets a call to his mobile and he responds and talks for about 15 minutes. He asks my sister who is Catholic to pay him 200 euros only to baptize godchild in the Orthodox church. He asks for 3,000 dinars to marry a Catholic woman to an Orthodox man in the Orthodox church.”

“My main objection is the price list that priests do operate in churches. They ask for a great sum of money for baptism. Baptism in a monastery is free of charge. It is so strange and I wonder why so much money is needed when God ordained that all people should be baptized (In Hopovo monastery it is enough to bring a bottle of wine and litre of oil).”

A Journalism student cites a concrete example, “Last year an Orthodox priest in a village in Vojvodina where I live sent a letter to his parishoners. He complained in the letter that parishoners are wrong because they perform marriage ceremonies and baptize children in the surrounding villages. The reason why people of this village do that is the fact that this priest constantly raises the cost of services (as if he owns a hair dressing shop). A baptism ceremony, for example, costs 10,000 dinars, while it is 2000 in the next village. But the priest pretends to be smart and sends his proclamation saying that he is not receiving his wage and has no means for living. Well, that is the utmost rudeness. I will not speak about incidents that he makes when he calls those who are of Catholic faith ustashis. I think the church should receive aid from parishoners in a way that everyone should give according to his ability instead of charging for services as a hair dresser.”

“There is one objection which is not related to religious leaders, but rather to people. It is human to make mistake. Namely, a mother had her children baptized twice, once in the Catholic and then in the Orthodox church. The priest did not ask her if her children were baptized.” Speaking of baptism, a student asked a question why children are baptized when they are little, having no idea what the baptism ceremony is all about? “I don’t say that because I think that baptism is something bad, on the contrary. I was baptized a year ago and I did that because I felt a need to do it. I ask this question because of one example that I know in which a child was baptized in the Catholic church against its will. The child wanted to be baptized in the Orthodox church.”

A sociology student says, “I cannot be objective because I would be criticizing religious leaders in other churches, but would have no criticism for Serbian Orthodox church leaders.”

A number of students believe priesthood is not to be criticized. “When I say religious leaders, I think about priests. What are their mistakes? It is very difficult to speak about that because who are we to judge and criticize priesthood?”

Young people are quite sincere in their statements. Their statements are different. According to earlier research (Kuburic, Stojkovic 2004; Kuburic 2005) 15%
of the general population accept the teachings of their religion. However, 22% of those who have critical opinions and a selective approach to their own religions make this category of people the most numerous. There are those willing to see shortcomings only in their religion and those who want to see them only in the religion of others. If we are to express youth opinions through key words, those would be: inconsistency, intolerance, unkindness, immorality, pride, corruption, dedication to material values, abuse of position.

MESSAGE TO RELIGIOUS LEADERS

“I belong to Orthodox faith and I attend the church. However, I have noticed that Orthodox priests take their jobs as ordinary employment, seeking convenient opportunity to make a profit. I don’t like it. Seeking profit is not bad, but in their work they don’t give their hearts and they seem as not being genuine. My message is that religious leaders should be more dedicated to their work and have a sincere attitude. That is the only way to attract young people.”

“My message: life is great, enjoy it with a persistent will to live, to enjoy life and have pleasure in it, but also with conscience and belief that good will be repaid with good and bad with bad.”

“I think that religious leaders should make effort without being forced to represent their religious communities in the best possible way and to leave young people to have the freedom of choice. Faith, as a tree of life, should be nourished.”

“Think positively, love yourself and besides self love others in your immediate surrounding.”

“Price lists for religious rites should be abolished and religious convictions of others should be respected.”

“My message to religious leaders (be they Orthodox, Muslim and all others) is that they are to be genuine and must not mingle with politics as they do every single day. They should not be a cause for division, but love among people. No church from any confession should be involved in anything that is not related to religion. More sincerity is needed!”

“Church should be involved with evangelism, the state should allow promote a bright future for young people.” A philosophy student who in other responses expresses atheist attitudes has taken a position of criticism toward church and its clericalism.

Another philosophy student has an imperative message, “Spirituality should be bound to churches and not spread to schools. Do not mix religious instruction with secular institutions. Faith is an individual thing. It is paradoxical to educate pupils about one faith as being the one and only religion. Orthodox faith should be immediately protestantitized.”
A great number of students call on religious leaders to be people of integrity who respect their own words and say, “live lives that you proclaim.”

“My message to religious leaders is that they should not use spiritual mottos in order to improve their personal and even more their material positions.”

“My message is also a criticism: let your deeds be according to your words.”

Religious leaders should be close to God and men: “They should be closer to people as men and closer to God as individuals who have decided to serve him. In that way they will also help us.”

“Be tolerant to other people and don’t allow hatred. Stop hatred as soon as you sense it coming. Being tolerant doesn’t mean that evil is allowed. Make people’s lives easier and show them that they should not fear life and future. But you yourself should deeply and sincerely believe in that.”

A journalism student in her message emphasizes the meaning of lent and confession.

“The message is that freedom of thought is the most important.”

“There are many religious communities. It is my impression that they don’t like one another. If they want to have a world peace, they should work together for more tolerance for one another. What others believe should be respected instead of promoting only one’s faith. Priests are more and more involved with self, they only think about their own goods and forget what is their real task. They should not be so conservative because the world is changing.”

“They would do better if they counsel people rather than criticizing and condemning.”

“Do good and it will be done to you.”

A journalism student as his message cites the stance that there are two most important rules: 1. Love God and 2. Love people (neighbours). Those rules are identical for those who love God they also love men and vice verse. At the end he posed a question which expresses his criticism by asking why all the Muslims would not declare jihad and all the Christians a crusade in order to stop the torment of mutual annihilation?

Another journalism student in Novi Sad thinks about a need for reciprocal relations. He says that young people in a multicultural area such as Vojvodina are deprived of all information about the characteristics of their kinsmen. They are oriented only to customs and traits of faiths to which they belong, while about other religions they only guess, have suppositions and often form wrong positions about those who belong to other religious communities in their immediate surrounding. Don’t religious leaders have a duty not only to care for their own religious communities, but also to allow equal, objective and ultimately tolerant information about similarities and differences between territorially close communities in the neighbourhood? Shouldn’t this information be given primarily to young people? Lectures, books, booklets and handbooks about that topic should be transparent and in turn more ac-
STUDENTS ATTITUDES TOWARD RELIGION AND RELIGIOUS LEADERS

cessible to young people who can then make proper conclusions and learn how to act in situations when they come in close contact with those who belong to different ethnic minorities or believers of another confession.

CONCLUSION

Having read the above statements of young people about themselves, religion and religious leaders, I understand very well Solomon’s claim that wisdom is found in many counsellors. Who could express better what young people think than they themselves? They have given us sufficient information. With each new research among the youth, I marvel at their sincerity, creativity and readiness to recognize, at times only intuitively, the true challenges in anticipated future. The power of their messages is hidden precisely in their intellectual potentials, emotional sensitivity and motivational actions in their willingness to respond to the challenges of their own time.

Young individuals’ messages to religious leaders are also pertinent for the society as a whole because they reflect sincere notions. Youngsters represent the measure of past because they feel the effects of the past on their own skin. They also represent the measure of future because they are the ones to make it happen. Andjelka Milic (1987) notes that youth are the first to react to societal changes and reorientations and the first societal group to bear the consequences of those changes. Transition as a process is most hurtful for young individuals (Kovatacheva 2000). The reasons for that are found not only in the nature of adolescence itself, but also in the fact that young people go through their own transition, maturity process and changes that are called in literature “period of upheaval and stress” (Kuburic 2009).

Personal and societal transitions are two instable areas, excessively burdensome to young people. Thus, it is no wonder that young people cry for help. God is again being called upon in this area. Population at large – not just young people - calls for him publically and without hesitation. For this reason the messages to religious leaders are significant because they reveal the depth of crises on one hand and spiritual potential in the perspective of future on the other. That perspective is still present in religion. Tradition and personal experience are primary things through which young people form their own identity, behavioral forms and purpose of life. Because of those basic values no games are allowed. Consequently, the expectations of the mediators are more significant.

As a part of conclusion I quote integrally a fourth grade sociology student who belongs to Orthodox faith and fourth grade sociology student who belongs to Catholic faith. They talk about themselves, their religiosity, families, churches and religious leaders. Their opinions integrate the attitude of young people in this area.

“I graduated from the High School of Mechanics in Novi Sad. Religion has had a gradual influence on my personality. It started early in my elementary school education when I first got into contact with religion by reading the Bible for children.
I learned from it how the world and humans came to be. I also read biblical stories. I can freely say that from that point on, after reading the Bible, my understanding of God and religion had begun. In later period of socialization and growing up I started attending church, even though I come from a family that does not believe in the importance of religious awareness. As far as religion is concerned, I consider myself a believer, but not a mechanical one in a sense that I perform rituals. In fact, I believe that belief in God means not doing evil to others and holding on to moral principles, which is probably the influence of the Ten Commandments. I go to church when I feel a need to do that, not because others do it in order to present themselves as true believers while at the same time they do injustice and evil. In religious sense, I am not fanatical. I consider fanaticism the negative aspect of religious behavior. I belong to Orthodox faith, but I don’t think that it is greatly different from other Christian faiths. Of course, there are differences in understanding. My relation to priesthood is neutral, but I don’t justify when people say they don’t go to church because of priest’s person. I think that is wrong because people should go to church out of religious needs, not because someone’s personality. Priests don’t own churches. A church was not built for a priest, but for believers. Church is there for believers.”

“I have graduated from High School in Karlovci. While studying there, I came to love sociology because I was interested in societal issues. That is why I was also interested about the significance of political conscience. That is probably because we as generation were old enough when the war in former Yugoslavia broke out and national tensions dominated in those years. I was brought up in a very Catholic family. Subsequently, I believe in God, but differently from the members of my family. I differ in a sense that I believe in God, but I don’t recognize the church and those that have an upper hand in it (pope). I think it is enough to know that God is in you, so that you can pray wherever you find yourself. When I see some individuals who regularly attend the church, kiss icons, confess sins to priests, live as if in peace with God, but outside the church they do the worst possible things, I think that is hypocrisy, not faith. Also, I don’t consider priests to be holy people. I believe they cannot be called holy because they have not been approved by their deeds. I formed this opinion while being in High School and haven’t changed my opinion to this day. Right next to our school there was an Orthodox theological seminary. I don’t have nice memories about it because I had seen behavior of both the priests and future priests. Besides sociology, I also adore politics. I know that those who truly want to become good sociologists should not belong to any party or ideology, but that is not the case with me.”

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STUDENTS ATTITUDES TOWARD RELIGION AND RELIGIOUS LEADERS


Zorica Kuburić

STAVOVI STUDENATA PREMA RELIGIJI I VERSKIM VODAMA

Rezime

U radu su prikazani stavovi studenata prema religiji i verskim vodama i njihov uticaj. Istraživanje analize sadržaja odgovora studenata rađeno je na Filozofskom fakultetu u Novom Sadu. Odgovori studenata na postavljena pitanja pokazuju način na koji mladi ljudi doživljavaju svoju porodicu, religijsko vaspitanje, formiranje slike o Bogu i životu uopšte. Na osnovu rezultata analize sadržaja odgovora studenata zaključujemo da su mladi veoma uključeni u oblast religije. U isto vreme brojni posrednici između Boga i čoveka formiraju kod
ГОДИШЊАК
ФИЛОЗОФСКОГ ФАКУЛТЕТА
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Садржај

Социологија

Dr Dušan Marinković
Sociologija znanja između ideologije i ideja: Mannheimova i Šelerova konceptacija sociologije znanja

Sociology of knowledge between ideology and ideas: Mannheim’s and Scheler’s conception of the sociology of knowledge

Dr Radivoj Stepanov
 „Washingtonski model” prezidencijalizma

Washington presidential model

Dr Zorica Kuburić
Students attitudes toward religion and religious leaders

Stavovi studenata prema religiji i verskim vodama

Mr Snežana Stojšin
Однос студената према последицама

Реформе високог образовања

Students of sociology on reform of higher education

Dr Srdjan Šljukić
Истраживања класне слојне структуре друштва као део „матичног тока” социологије

The research of class/strata structure as a part of mainstream of sociology

Mr Marica Šljukić
Различити приступи у sociološkim proučavanjima uloge obrazovanja u oblikovanju „ljudskih resursa” u svremenim društvima

Different approaches in sociological research of the role of education in forming of “human resources” in contemporary societies
THE IMAGE OF CORRUPTION IN TWO LEADING SERBIAN POLITICAL MAGAZINES .................................................. 85

ELECTRONIC MEDIA COVERAGE OF PUBLIC MEETINGS WITH CITIZENS ............... 98

SPEECH AND LANGUAGE FEATURES OF TV DNEVNIK DURING THE ELECTION PERIOD .................................................................................................................. 113

PRESENTATION OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIAN LAW ON THE PROHIBITION OF DISCRIMINATION IN DAILY NEWSPAPERS DANAS AND KURIR ......................................................... 125

CODE IN THE RECEPTION THEORIES OF MASS COMMUNICATION ............. 135

INTERCULTURALITY AND COMMUNITY RADIO IN MULTILINGUAL COMMUNITIES .................................................................................................................. 143

SOUL NEVER THINKS WITHOUT AN IMAGE .............................................................. 155
Dr Jelena Šakotić-Kurbalija
ZAVISNOST U PARTNERSKIM ODNOSIMA I PSIHOTERAPIJSKE IMPLIKACIJE

DEPENDENCE IN THE ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS
AND THE PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC IMPLICATIONS ........................................ 169

Mr Ana Genc
KROS KULTURALNA ISTRAŽIVANJA I STRES-PROCES

CROSS-CULTURAL RESEARCH AND STRESS-PROCESS ............................. 181

Mr Jasmina Pekić
ULOGA DOMENA U NASTANKU SPECIFIČNOG KVALITETA DAROVITOSTI

IMPORTANCE OF A DOMAIN ROLE IN CREATION
OF A SPECIFIC QUALITY OF THE GIFTED ..................................................... 193

ИСТОРИЈА
Mr Boris Stojkovski
ONE LITTLE KNOWN DOCUMENT CONCERNING THE ANGLO - HUNGARIAN RELATIONS IN THE LATE XV TH CENTURY

ЈЕДАН МАЛО ПОЗНАТИ ДОКУМЕНТ О ВЕЗАМА ЕНГЛЕСКЕ И УГАРСЕ У КАСНОМ XV ВЕКУ ......................................................... 207

Др Снежана Божанић
О ПОРЕКЛУ ЗЕМЉИШНЕ СВОЈИНЕ И МЕЂАША – ИСТОРИЈСКИ, АРХЕОЛОШКИ И АНТРОПОЛОШКИ АСПЕКТ

ABOUT THE ORIGIN OF LAND OWNING AND BOUNDARY-MARKERS – HISTORICAL, ARCHEOLOGICAL AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASPECTS ...... 217

Мр Светозар Бошков
ПОЛОЖАЈ ЖЕНА У АНТИЦИ
У СРПСКИМ УЈБЕНИЦИМА ИСТОРИЈЕ У XIX ВЕКУ

STATUS OF WOMEN IN ANTIQUITY
IN SERBIAN HISTORY TEXTBOOK IN 19TH CENTURY ...................................... 227

Др Ђура Харди
ТЕСТАМЕНТ МАГИСТРА ВИЉЕМА ДРУГЕТА ИЗ 1330. ГОДИНЕ
TESTAMENT OF MAGISTER WILLIAM DRUGETH, YEAR 1330. ..................... 237

Mr Goran Vasic
СРПСКИ ЦРКВЕНО-НАРОДНИ САБОР ГОДИНЕ 1837. ............................... 249

Dr Janko Ramac
ПОЧЕЦИ НАЦИОНАЛНОГ ПРЕПОРОДА РУСИНА
У ЈУЖНОЈ УГАРСКОЈ У ПРВОЈ ПОЛОВИНИ 19. ВЕКА

THE BEGINNING OF THE RUTHENIAN NATIONAL REVIVAL
IN SOUTHERN HUNGARY IN THE FIRST HALF OF 19TH CENTURY ............... 255

ПЕДАГОГИЈА
Dr Milica Andevski
REFLEKSIVNA I FUNKCIONALNA DIMENZIJA OBRAZOVAanja
ZA MENADŽMENT

REFLEXIVE AND FUNCTIONAL DIMENSION
OF EDUCATION FOR MANAGEMENT ....................................................... 267

Dr Oļja M., dr Kostović S., dr Đermanov J.
THE INTEGRATION ROMA CHILDREN
INTO PRIMARY SCHOOL - DESEGREGATED CLASSROOMS

INTEGRACIJA ROMSKE DECE U OSNOVNU ŠKOLU
– INTEGRISANA ODELJENJA ................................................................. 281

Dr Olivera Knežević-Florić
MEDIA IMAGE OF A CHILD IN THE AUTHENTIC CULTURE

MEDIJSKA SLIKA O DETETU U AUTENTičNOJ KULTURI ......................... 299

ФИЛОЗОФИЈА
Dr Željko Kaluđerović
BIOETIČKO RAZMATRANJE DOSTIGNUĆA
SAVREMENIH NAUKA, POSEBNO GENETIKE

BIOETHICAL CONSIDERATION OF THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF MODERN
SCIENCES, PARTICULARLY GENETICS .................................................. 307