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THE SOCIOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE LANGUAGE OF RELIGION: WHAT IS THE WORD ABOUT?[2]

There are three tasks to science, including sociology, and also the sociology of religion: to *understand, explain* and *predict*.

Abstract

Respecting its subject matter and its methodological framework, the sociology of religion should solely study the influence of society on religion and that of religion on society. In this process, sociology of religion is much more interested in the results of both influences, which are separated only for analytical reasons, on the group behavior of people – for instance, starting from marital and family life, over other primary and secondary, partial and global groups, all the way to society as a whole – than it is interested in their results on individuals. Sociologists stress that the primary role of the sociology of religion is not to penetrate the "essence of the sacred". They rather insist on the study of its more mundane ministry. And this earthly substance is that which may be reduced to "socialness". The sociologically viewed socialness of religion is embodied in the religious community (whether we should technically call it a religious body, group, organization, institution… this is of lesser importance) – which, in terms of development, may be a cult, sect, denomination and church. In it, as an embodied and actual reality, people live their religiosity. If it wishes to be "successful" and behave "appropriately" to its believers, the religious community should address them in a "sociologically intelligible language". We wish to say that – although it is difficult to distinguish between the transcendental and the mundane ministry of religion – in this author's view, the sociological understanding of the language of religion is not anything but its "translation", direction at and accordance with (also) contemporary, even topical, burning issues of the universe, the concrete society, and concrete people being addressed. The responsibility lies with every individual religious organism.

Key words: Sociology of religion, Mundane ministry of religion, Socialness of religion, Sociological language, Language of religion.

What is the Word About

Respecting its subject matter and its methodological framework, the sociology of religion should solely study the influence of society on religion and that of religion on society. In this process, it is much more interested in the results of both influences, which are separated only for analytical reasons, on the group behavior of people – for instance, starting from marital and family life, over other primary and secondary, partial and global groups, all the way to society as a whole – than it is interested in their results on individuals. Whether or not it wishes to do so, the sociology of religion reduces religion to socialness – hence its discussion of the "socialness of religion".

In the text that follows I will concisely comment on a few questions dealing with the relationship between sociology of religion and religion, including the problem of the sociological understanding of the language of religion:

- What does the sociology of religion deal with?;
- What does the sociology of religion reduce the socialness of religion to?; and
- What is the sociological understanding of the language of religion?

What does the sociology of religion deal with?

It is true: the sociology of religion should study exclusively the influence of society on religion and that of religion on society. Hence the unentangled definition of the subject matter of the sociology of religion is that *it studies the relationship between society and religion, i.e. the consequences of their influence on one another (interaction).*[3] In a bit more analytical manner, this is also stated by Djuro Susnjic (1998I:28), an unquestioned authority in matters of sociology of religion: "If in an analysis the concept of *social* structure (the state, nation, class, family, etc.) is often located before the concept of *religion* (the church, sect, cult, mystical experience, etc.), then one can understand this as a *methodological* principle or direction of the researcher: as a rule, he or she studies the religious form of belief, thought and behavior of a group depending on its position and role in the social structure. The one studying religion by a sociological method puts all social categories before religious categories, because this is what sociological observation requires: methodological determinism! First of all, this person attempts to learn about society (e.g. types of integration, legitimation, control, etc.), and only then about religion: this is why the field is called the sociology of religion and not religious sociology! Through this procedure, the researcher does not deny that any religious tradition has developed independently. Rather, he or she attempts to consider this development with regard to the development of the society in which the given tradition comprises a constituent part of his or her culture."

At the same time, the sociologist of religion has another task: while assessing the substantive and methodological framework of the sociology of religion, i.e. taking care of his or her own (lack of) religiosity, the (lack of) religiosity of his or her own discipline, the interdisciplinarity of the discipline, the complexity of the society and the religious-church complex, religion as a social product, search for the criteria of "real" religiosity, and the limitations of the method of the given discipline, he or she has the task to a)

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3   More details in our book – Trouble with the Sacred – Challenges to the Sociology of Religion (2007a).

understand, b) *explain*, and c) *predict* phenomena and events in the interplay of society and religion (society ↔ religion), or, more precisely, in the interplay of society and the religious-church complex (society ↔ religious-church complex).[4]

For example, the sociology of religion should view religion as a social product, whilst paying due respect to the fact that religion cannot be reduced to it. Further, it should explain religiosity of the population and its particular groups with social factors and societal events, and also give a projection for future trends.[5] Likewise, in another example, the sociology of religion is not primarily interested in individual instances of *conversion*, no matter how stylized and paradigmatic they were. Rather, it is by far more guided by the interest to determine whether:

– this phenomenon is becoming massive and why it is directed to and developed within a particular group defined by status, ethnicity, confession, culture, and language;

– in the developed conversion process the key role is played by social and economic, ecclesiastical, cultural, or political factors;

– conversion of many results in benefits for the group, i.e. emancipation and integration, advancement on the stratification scale, strengthening of its political power and growth of its respect; and

– whether the change of faith, should it encompass the entire group, may lead to the change of its entire identity?[6]

Likewise, in all other instances in which the sociology of religion studies the interrelationship of society and religion, this discipline, pursuing its specific approach and perspectives, and attempting to support its findings with empirical evidence, while still differing from the series of other disciplines studying the religious reality – philosophy and theology, anthropology and psychology, history and political science – points to the „*socialness of religion*".

What does the sociology of religion reduce the socialness of religion to?

We have written that for the sociology of religion it is more important to study the influence and consequences of the interrelation of society and religion on the „group manifestations of people – starting, for instance, from marital and family life, over other primary and secondary, partial and global groups, all the way to society as

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4   Please, refer to Dragoljub B. Djorđević's essay „What should a sociologist of religion pay attention to in studying religion" (2009).

5   Which Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart excellently demonstrate in their analysis of „American" Adventism: „Adventism has defined itself as a negation of the American dream of unlimited material and spiritual progress. The millennium will not take place on American soil, for the nation was in league with the devil, and its achievements were doomed to destruction. The way to salvation and the experience of a heavenly millennium was to seek a sanctuary among the band of Sabbath keepers who were moving toward perfection. From the first, Adventism presented itself as a more effective means for realizing the spiritual objectives for which the rest of the society was striving. Interestingly enough, Adventism has also proved to be an effective means of gaining the material and social benefits for which most Americans yearn. But the accelerated upward mobility that Adventists achieve depends on their deviation from the mainstream. It is precisely because Adventism has developed an alternative network of schools and institutions that it is possible to rise so rapidly within it. Adventism's deviant ideology has provided a justification for the replication of state institutions. This, in turn, has provided a way to realize more rapidly the goal of material prosperity. Through negating the American dream, Adventism has turned it into reality" (2008:189).

6   See my study „The Protestantization of the Roma in Serbia" in the book mentioned above (2007a:145-154).

a whole – than on their individual manifestations". In this process, does it avoid the "clash with the sacral", since some scholars object to the discipline that, especially when compared with theology or anthropology, stands no chance of penetrating the essence of religion, the *sacred*? A developed symbolical system, religion is of necessity followed by a specific *religious experience*, which is interpreted in various ways. As a rule, the religious experience is reduced to the sacred, *which is an encounter with a radically different order of things, by far exceeding human powers, causing fear, but also helping and attracting*. This is why, from Emile Durkheim (1982), over Rudolf Otto (1983) and Mircea Eliade (1980), to contemporary phenomenologists, the category of the sacred has been an inevitable component of religion, the thing differentiating between religion and other systems of ideas, beliefs, and practices.

The sociology of religion accepts that there is a series of difficulties, „troubles" around the sacred, and also around the study of its historical and social expression. For this reason the sociologist of religion should care about the complexity of society and the religious-church complex, as shortly presented by Stefica Bahtijarevic (1986:73):„In a word, in the study of religion – from definition, the development of theoretical and hypothetical frameworks, operationalization, selection of indicators, to interpretive hypotheses – the sociologist must bear in mind *the complexity of the religious situation* (including, we should add, the ambivalence of the religious phenomenon and the ambivalence of the secularization process), *the complexity of the church situation* and *the complexity of the social situation*."

Religiologists, in particular the sociologists of religion, stress that the principal task of the sociology of religion is not to delve into the „essence of the sacred", but rather insist on the study of its mundane ministry. Yet, the sociology of religion, like all religiology, is not a mere „counting the horse teeth", but rather a painstaking and systematic scientific advancement toward the truth of religion.[7] For:

– there is no truth of the truth of religion (religious truth) without the truth of the social role of religion,

– there is no truth of the social role of religion without the truth of the truth of religion (religious truth),

– the truth of the truth of religion (religious truth) does not incommensurably boil down to the truth of the social role of religion, and

– the truth of the social role of religion does not incommensurably boil down to the truth of religion (religious truth). [8]

And this earthly ministry is no other than what boils down to „socialness". The sociologically conceived socialness of religion is embodied in the religious community (it is of lesser importance if we technically label it a religious body, group, organization, institution…) – which, by rate of development, may be a cult, sect, denomination, and church.

The religious community – whether a "historical" church, a huger „traditional" denomination, the „new" nineteenth century sect or globally spread cult – as one

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7   „About 30 years ago, one of the first professional sociologists in our part of the world told me that at that time, at the meeting of SISR, theologians commented that any quantitative research of religiosity was akin to counting teeth in horses (probably in determining the age of the horse, i.e. in looking for indicators of the horse's value), which they contrasted to the allegedly ineffable and incomprehensible, rationally and empirically unattainable essence of religion (Flere, 2008b: 114)."

8   Similar thinking is found in Bojan Jovanovic (2008).

of the participants in the interactive relationship (the other is *societas* itself: society ↔ religious-church complex) and translating the transcendent into the mundane, produces the socialness of religion through numerous advocacies and institutions, engagements and ardent work, aids and techniques. Via its:

– *believers* (followers, borderline believers and supporters);

– *sacral facilities* (temples, churches, mosques, synagogues, pagodas, prayer houses…);

– *bishops* (priests, preachers, hojas…);

- *lay clerks* (civilians employed in the administration and other assistants);

– *educational institutions* (secondary schools and colleges of theology; elementary, secondary schools and universities under the auspices of, i.e. owned by religious organizations);

– *teachers and professors* (and other school faculty);

– *territorial units* (eparchies, parishes, unions, jammats…), better – *the diffusion of the religious group;*

– *publishing activity* (brochures, papers, weeklies, monthlies, journals, proceedings, books…);

– *propaganda activity* (word and picture – poster, calendar…; sound – radio broadcasts, sound recording devices; motion picture – television, video, film; electronic means in general, and the Internet in particular);

– *missionary work* (in the domicile area and, more importantly, outside it);

– *economic structure* (the total material basis, not solely based on money); and

– *quality and quantity of echo* (reverberation or reputation in the most immediate environment or the public at large)…

the community will create the socialness of religion of one kind or another – rich, complex, powerful and full of perspective or poor, simple, important and lacking any perspective – which depends on the reach and properties, size and features of the factors given above.[9] However, there is also a *paradox* underlying the dialectic of the relationship of society and religion: by growing and becoming more complex, viewed against the society, the religious community influences the development of a rich, complex, powerful, and perspectival socialness of religion. And when religion completes this process, then global society comes to the scene, impressing its own seal onto both the religious community and the socialness of religion. It turns out that small religious communities have an advantage: true, they do not produce a rich, complex, powerful, and perspectival socialness of religion, but they are spared the excessive interference from the society at large. Yet this situation does not last, since every religious body follows the logic: each cult strives to become a sect, and a sect – over denomination – wishes to become a church.

What is the sociological understanding of the language of religion?

As stated already, for the sociology of religion, religion as a social fact – a social product having relative independence – is implemented through a particular religious

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9   These are also the parameters of the growing complexity of religious organizations, from cult to church. I give a detailed interpretation of types of religious organization in the book Sects and Cults (1993).

community, and this community, in cooperation with the particular society, creates the socialness of religion (Figure 1).

Figure 1

The Socialness of Religion

THE SOCIALNESS OF RELIGION
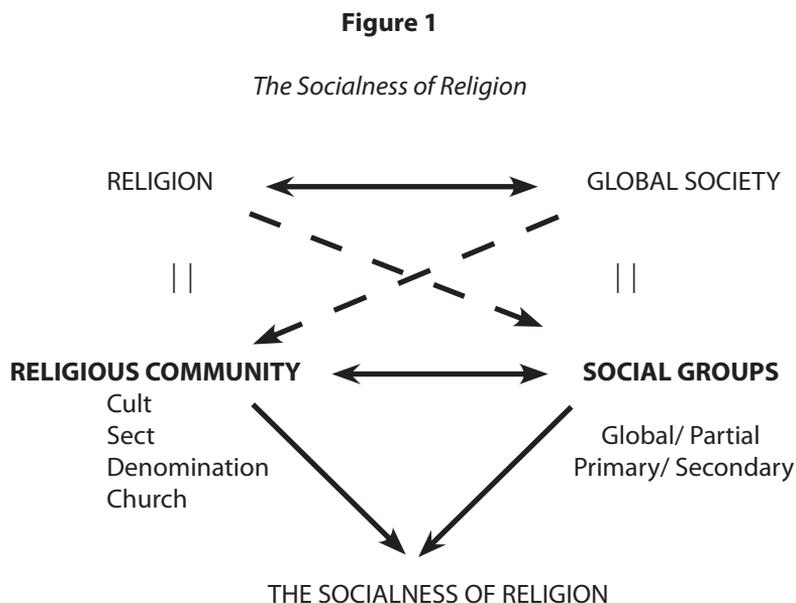
The socialness of religion:

– „represents a particular reality with its own properties" (which Durkheim claims of any social group or phenomenon),

– is something special with regard to the desires, interests and individual traits of those making it,

– in its existence there is something which is objectively given, which raises itself above them,

– is a reality which cannot be egoistically modeled…

Therefore, if in the course of a long period – from its birth, over early development, entrenchment, all the way to becoming generally accepted in the global society – a religious community truly leads the process in which the socialness of religion is established and if in it, an embodied reality, people live their religiosity as classical believers, then this community, if it wishes to be „successful" and „honest" to its flock, should address the believers in a „*sociologically intelligible language*". We wish to say here that although the transcendent and mundane ministry of religion are difficult to separate, the sociological understanding of the language of religion, at least in this author's view, is not anything but its „translation", direction at and accordance with (also) contemporary, even topical, burning issues of the universe, the concrete society, and concrete people being addressed.

A tentative and supplementary list of such open questions, not detailed at all – since the world, nature, society and *homo sapiens* are so rich and unfathomable – could result in the following systematic range. In other words, in order to use a sociologically

intelligible language and be successful, any religious community should:

- reduce the traditional-patriarchal vertical;
- construct a contemporary relationship against the political domain;
- cherish a civilized relationship with all minorities;
- advocate environmental protection; and
- formulate and vouch for planned social policy.

The responsibility lies with every individual religious organism (cult, sect, denomination, church), and its leadership and dignitaries should be aware of this. The task of the sociology of religion and sociologists of religion is just to point at this fact.

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СОЦИОЛОШКО РАЗУМЕВАЊЕ ЈЕЗИКА РЕЛИГИЈЕ: О ЧЕМУ ЈЕ РЕЧ?

Резиме

Социологија религије, поштујући свој предметни и методолошки оквир, искључиво би требало да проучава утицај друштва на религију и религије на друштво. При томе је она далеко више заинтересована за резултате оба утицаја, који се раздвајају једино из аналитичких разлога, на групно испољавање људи – нпр. почев од брачног и породичног живота, преко иних примарних и секундарних, парцијалних и глобалних група, све до друштва у целини – неголи на њихово испољавање понаособ. Социолози истичу да и није основни задатак социологије религије да захвата „срж светог“, већ инсистирају на проучавању његовог овостраног послања. А то земаљско послање није шта друго до оно што се своди на „друштвеност“. Социолошки појмљена друштвеност религије отеловљена је у верској заједници (називали је ми технички религијским телом, групом, организацијом, институцијом..., мање је важно) – која по степену развоја може бити култ, секта, деноминација и црква. У њој, као оваплоћеној и реалној збиљи, људи живе своју религиозност и њима се верска заједница, уколико рачуна на „успех“ и „коректна“ ли је према верништву, треба да обраћа „социолошки разумљивим језиком“. Хоће се рећи да – иако јесте тешко двојити онострано и овострано послање религије – социолошко разумевање језика религије, барем по ауторовом схватању, није ништа друго до његово „превођење“, усмеравање и самеравање (и) савременим, чак тренутно актуелним, горућим питањима васељене, конкретног друштва и људи са којима саобраћа. Одговорност пада на плећа сваког појединачног религијског организма.

Кључне речи: социологија религије, овострано послање религије, друштвеност религије, социолошки језик, језик религије.