

EVOLUTION, COMMUNION, AND VACCINES: SCIENCE AND THEOLOGY DEBATES IN THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

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During the twentieth century, the relationship between theology and science had been debated in the Serbian public within three conceptual frameworks: (1) the founding of the University of Belgrade, (2) Serbian post-Second World War theological apologetics, and (3) Neo-patristic theology. The twenty-first century, especially in the last couple of years, saw three different instances in which scientific issues were a matter of theological debates that gained the attention of the wider public. These debates were on (1) the theory of evolution and creationism, (2) the means of distributing Holy Communion in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, and (3) vaccines against the Coronavirus. This paper presents an overview of the three instances of theology and science debates in the Serbian Orthodox Church in the twenty-first century, as well as some key factors whose interplay shaped these debates to a great extent.

Introduction

Recent years have somewhat unexpectedly seen a rise in interest in science within the Serbian Orthodox Church. For a quite long period of time, theology and science debates, especially within the context of the rise of neo-patristic theology, were seen as being an interest of those theologies that were both ‘un-patristic’ and somewhat outdated, i.e. Christian apologetics. However, in a short period of time, the theology and science relationship became a focus of much heated public debate and caused certain controversies within Church structures. These debates were on (1) the theory of evolution and creationism, (2) the

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means of distributing Holy Communion in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, and (3) vaccines against oronavirus. This paper aims to analyse these three debates, as well as some key factors whose interplay shaped these debates to a great extent. But before focusing on that, I will point out three distinct frameworks within which the relationship between theology and science were thematized in the twentieth century.

Theology and Science in the Twentieth Century

Being one of the perennial issues of theological endeavour, the relationship between theology and science was discussed in Serbian public life throughout the twentieth century. In particular, one could mention three specific contextual frameworks in which this issue was particularly dealt with. Namely, these are (1) the founding of the University of Belgrade, (2) Serbian post-Second World War theological apologetics, and (3) Neo-patristic theology.²

Firstly, the scientific status of theology was a subject of much debate at the very beginning of the century, at the time when the new state university of what was then the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenians was being established in Belgrade. Journals, booklets, daily newspapers, but also the Parliament itself became the ground on which the scientific nature of theology was hotly debated. The outcome of this debate was in favour of the place of theology in the university and therefore the Faculty of Orthodox Theology was established as a part of the University of Belgrade.³

After the Second World War and the establishment of the communist regime, things changed significantly for the Serbian Orthodox Church and theology itself. Religion was excluded from the public square, the Church hierarchy was marginalized and persecuted, and the Faculty of Orthodox Theology was expelled from the University of Belgrade. It was in this context that apologetics became a prominent expression

² Cf. Andrej Jeftić, 'Pitanje naučnosti teologije u srpskoj teološkoj misli 20. vijeka' in *Srpska teologija u dvadesetom veku: istraživački problemi i rezultati*, vol. 10, ed. Bogoljub Šijaković (Beograd: Pravoslavni bogoslovski fakultet, 2011) 26–38.

³ Bogoljub Šijaković, Aleksandar Raković, *Univerzitet i srpska teologija: istorijski i prosvetni kontekst osnivanja Pravoslavnog bogoslovske fakulteta u Beogradu (istraživanja, dokumentacija, bibliografija)*, (Beograd: Pravoslavni bogoslovski fakultet, 2010); Vladan Perišić, 'Teološki fakultet: pro et contra', in *Srpska teologija u dvadesetom veku: istraživački problemi i rezultati*, vol. 2, ed. Bogoljub Šijaković (Beograd: Pravoslavni bogoslovski fakultet, 2007), 50–9.

of the orthodox faith. Theologians deemed it necessary to compensate for the pressure exhibited by the communist ideology and defend the scientific and epistemic status of theological claims. While the political battle had already been lost and the influence of the Church on the public marginalized, what was left for theologians was to seek to defend their ground in the realm of epistemological claims. Christian truth was defended on scientific grounds while ontological naturalism as a sole interpretative framework of the scientific endeavour was itself questioned.⁴

With the 'patristic turn' and the renaissance of the interest in the works of the Church Fathers there came a certain decline of theological interest in the issues of its relationship with science. Although it was proclaimed as a programmatic engagement with contemporary issues on the grounds of patristic theology, the neo-patristic paradigm brought a certain disinterest in those problems, which were perceived as foreign to the authentic orthodox mindset.⁵ The relationship between science and theology, as well as the scientific status of the theology itself, were perceived as 'too western' and became regularly neglected. Focusing on the patristic writings that reflected the pre-modern status of human thought, which did not actually contain empirical science in its present form, neo-patristic theologians viewed the relationship between theology and science as foreign to the patristic mindset and therefore irrelevant.

Three recent debates

Before the turn of the century, the Serbian Orthodox Church entered a new era. Marked by the national and religious renaissance, this period also saw the flourishing of theology. The Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Foča (Republic of Srpska, Bosnia, and Herzegovina) was founded

⁴ As famous Serbian apologetic theologian Lazar Milin put it, the primary role of apologetics is to systematically lay out 'the basic principles of religion, proving their truthfulness and validity, and defend them from the objections posed ... to establish the truthfulness of the Christian religion in the face of the reason'. Lazar Milin, *Naučno opravdanje religije: apologetika*, vol. 1 (Šid: Bogoslovski fakultet Beograd, 2002), 7.

⁵ Dimitrije Bogdanović strongly dismissed the entire apologetical endeavour, claiming that it is founded on the sense of guilt and shame that Christians have internalized in face of the modern world. Dimitrije Bogdanović, 'Kuda ide hrišćanska apologetika', *Glasnik SPC* 5 (May 1960) 112–5.

as a part of a newly founded state university of Eastern Sarajevo. On the other hand, in 2004 the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Belgrade regained its place within the University, with the court decision that nullified its expulsion in 1952. The Church itself has regained a central position in public life, certain members of the hierarchy gained wider prominence, and theology itself gained a great impetus with the publication of new books, journals, translations, etc. Regained importance of the Church and religious life in society and the presence of the Church hierarchy and theologians in public life have almost inevitably led to public debates pertaining to the issues of the relationship between theology and science. I will present and discuss three recent debates. While two of them are quite recent and related to COVID-19, the first one has to a large extent set the framework for the latter, structured by the factors that will be discussed further below.

a. Evolution and Creationism Debate

In May 2017 ‘a group of interested citizens’ issued a public petition asking for the revision of the curriculum for the study of evolution on all educational levels, from primary schools to universities. The petition was signed by 170 people, more than fifty of whom were academics, one hundred having postgraduate degrees, as well as five priests. The document was circulated to governing bodies in charge of the Serbian education system, including the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technological Development, the Standing Committee for the education of the Serbian Parliament, then headed by the former Mufti of Novi Pazar, late Muamer Zukorlić, as well as the boards and heads of the universities in Serbia and Republic of Srpska. The request was made that the theory of evolution should be taught as ‘just a theory’, its weak points should be equally presented in the classrooms, and the alternative ‘biblical theory of creation’ should be taught alongside it. A similar initiative was brought up previously in 2004 by the former Minister of Education, but it never gained wider acceptance. This time, however, the initiative was met with a theological response.

On the 10 May, 2017, eleven professors and assistants of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology of the University of Belgrade reacted to the pre-

viously signed petition.⁶ The statement has seven points, which deserve to be briefly overviewed. First, it is stated that it is not up to the state institutions to make a final judgment and ‘revise’ what is going to be considered a scientific theory. Secondly, such a revision can only be made through the scientific research done properly and by the scientific community of each discipline. Thirdly, it acknowledges that the theory of evolution is ‘currently the only scientifically accepted theory that explains the development of life on Earth’ and, as such, at the moment it has no plausible alternatives. Fourthly, it is argued that the ‘biblical theory of creation’, the proposed alternative to the theory of evolution, is not a viable scientific theory nor is it a well-based theological position. Fifthly, it is claimed that the biblical narration concerning creation should be studied in the course of religious education, which is already present in the curriculum of primary and secondary schools. Sixthly, any form of scientism attempting to offer a sort of a philosophical or even religious alternative to Christian teachings about God, man, and the world is dismissed as a non-scientific metaphysical claim. Finally, the value of maintaining the autonomy of scientific disciplines was affirmed and the artificially generated conflicts between them, hence between biology and theology, are to be avoided.

The most important contribution of the Statement was to offer an alternative to the standard narrative of the clash between science and religion, biology and theology, theory of evolution as a scientific, and creationism as a theological standpoint. It offered a sort of a proposal to establish a ‘middle way’ between the extremes and open up a discussion on these matters. Most importantly, it argued for the autonomy of scientific disciplines and against the unnecessary conflicts between them. Also, the statement itself was an act of theological responsibility manifested in the public sphere, meaning that theologians must not refrain from the public sphere and are supposed to challenge any dubious theological standpoint and abuse of the interests of the religious community.

However, the statement was met with a strong backlash, mostly coming from the higher Church hierarchy. This development also pro-

⁶ A brief and very useful overview of the debate with the useful links to the original statement is provided by Gayle Woloschak, ‘Evolution and Science Curriculum Debates in Serbia’, *Public Orthodoxy*, 10 October 2017, <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2017/10/10/evolution-debates-in-serbia/>

foundly influenced the circumstances and to some extent formed the framework in which the science-religion debates during the time of the pandemic took place.

b. Holy Communion and the Common Spoon

The second issue was with regards to the question of whether Holy Communion, consisting of consecrated bread and wine and distributed by a spoon from the common chalice, can be a transmitter of a coronavirus. This issue was raised in the first weeks of the pandemic.

At the outbreak of Coronavirus in mid-March 2020, an influential bishop of the SOC invited people to take Communion without fear, because for him 'God is more powerful than any evil and epidemic'.⁷ In this statement God and the Coronavirus are portrayed in a Manichean fashion as absolute good and absolute evil. As Cyril Hovorun argued, such a dualistic view is in stark contrast with at least two Christian Orthodox stances. First it overlooks the stance that the Coronavirus, like other viruses and bacteria, are part of the ecosystem created by God and second, it fails to acknowledge that evil is a product of human freedom, and it is not embedded in nature.⁸

The popular Serbian theological web magazine *Teologija.net* (Theology.net) began to publish articles debating these issues. Thus, a lecturer of patristics at the University of Tübingen Vladimir Latinović claimed that since Communion can make one drunk or sated and it can be spoiled, indented, or turned sour, it may also have the characteristic of transmitting viruses and bacteria.⁹ The reactions to Latinović's article acknowledged his arguments but dismissed the article as a sheer attack on the authority of the Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which holds that Communion cannot transmit the virus. The whole theological debate about the effects of the Coronavirus on the practice

⁷ Episkop Fotije pozvao vernike da se pričešćuju, 'Bog je jači od bolesti' [Bishop Fotije called believers to take Communion, 'God is stronger than illness'], *Semberija.info* 15 March 2020: <https://www.seberija.info/cir/news/novosti/Republika-Srpska/6222.episkop-fotije-pozvao-vjernike-da-se-pricescuju,-%E2%80%9Cbog-je-jaci-od-bolesti-.html>

⁸ Cyril Hovorun, 'COVID-19 and Christian (?) Dualism', *Public Orthodoxy* 23 March 2020: <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2020/03/23/COVID-19-and-dualism/>

⁹ Vladimir Latinović, 'Od hrane do leka: Efekti pričešća na telesno zdravlje' [From food to medicine: Effects of Communion on physical health], *Teologija.net* 24 March 2020: <https://teologija.net/od-hrane-do-leka-efekti-pricesca-na-telesno-zdravlje/>

of distributing the Communion was reduced to the debate about the infallibility of the Synod of the Serbian Church.

The practices of distributing Communion varied in the dioceses of the Serbian Orthodox Church and reflected the theological positions of the bishops. Thus, in some churches, as long as they were not closed by the decision of civil authorities, the distribution of Communion was continued in a traditional manner, with a chalice and spoon, while the measures of wearing a mask and keeping distance were even ignored. This practice reflected the theological position that the eucharist is not only the ‘medicine of immortality’ (Ignatius, *Eph.* PG 5, 753–6), but also a kind of vaccine against Coronaviruses.¹⁰ Hovorun deems this position as docetist or Eucharystian, because for him those who believe that a virus cannot be transmitted through the Communion hold that Communion is either exempted from the laws of nature, as the body of Jesus Christ was exempted from the laws of nature, or the nature of the bread and wine is changed, as for Eucharystians the human nature of Jesus Christ is changed in Communion with his divine nature.¹¹ Contrary to Hovorun, Nikolaos Loudovikos argues that in spite of the fact that the nature of Eucharist bread and wine remain the same, their ‘way of existence’ is changed.¹² Due to the different ‘way of existence’ the Eucharistic bread and wine are free of their natural limits, such as being prone to infections. Therefore, for Loudovikos, Communion cannot be the transmitter of viruses.

Some bishops ordered their priests to celebrate the liturgy with the participation of a few members of the laity. The theological explanation offered for this practice is that in spite of the small number of people, liturgy is celebrated for all people and for the whole of creation, and those who are absent are absent for justified reasons.¹³

Finally, a few bishops introduced an adapted version of the distribution of the Holy Gifts, such as one practiced in the liturgy of St James. Namely, a priest approached each communicant, one and a half

¹⁰ Latinović, ‘Od hrane do leka’.

¹¹ Hovorun, ‘COVID-19 and Christian (?) Dualism’.

¹² Νικόλαος Λουδοβίκος, Μεταλαμβάνοντας σε καιρούς πανδημίας, *Antifono* 26 March 2020: <https://antifono.gr/μεταλαμβάνοντας-σε-καιρούς-πανδημία/>.

¹³ Episkop požarevačko-braničevski g. Ignatije, ‘Reč utehe, u susret Vaskrsu!’ [‘A word of comfort in approaching Easter!’], *RTV Biser* 15 April 2020: <https://rtvbiser.rs/6404-2/> Cf. also John Zizioulas, ‘The Church without the Eucharist is no longer the Church’, *Public Orthodoxy* 23 March 2020: <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2020/03/27/church-without-eucharist/>

meters distant from the others, with a plate with consecrated pieces of bread and a cup of consecrated wine, and he or she took the bread and immersed it in wine.

At the theoretical level, the participants in the debate took positions that could be divided into three groups: a) Communion, consisting of the bread and wine can transmit viruses, b) Communion cannot be a transmitter of the disease, but the spoon or chalice for distributing Communion may be the transmitter, and c) neither Communion nor the means of distributing it can be infectious. However, at the practical level there prevailed, mostly among the episcopate, an attitude that neither Communion nor the means of distributing it can be infectious. The only reason why some bishops decided to introduce alternative ways of distributing the Communion is out of the Church *oikonomia* and for those people who are weak in faith, as Metropolitan John Zizoulas described it.¹⁴ Ten of the fifteen bishops that have their diocese in the of Republic of Serbia, being older than sixty-five, were obliged by the decision of the Serbian Government from 21 May 2020 to stay at home and could not attend services. A priest and assistant professor at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, Vukašin Milićević, who publicly stressed the importance of social distancing, avoiding direct contact, and following all the other preventive measures during the performance of the service, was punished for disobedience by the ban to perform his priestly duties.¹⁵

In order to stop further debates and various liturgical practices, the member of the Holy Synod, Bishop Irinej of Bačka, in early May of 2020 wrote the booklet, entitled *Holy Communion – a source of health or a source of disease?* He attacked ‘quasi-modern, ultraliberal, scientific theologians’ from the web-magazine *Teologija.net* for their stance about Communion as a transmitter of infections, but also those who introduced the distributions of gifts like the one in the liturgy of St James, opting for the most traditional method of distributing the gifts, from a single chalice using a common spoon. The booklet was printed in one hundred thousand copies and distributed in diocese of the Serbian

¹⁴ Zizioulas, ‘The Church without the Eucharist is no longer the Church’.

¹⁵ Milica Resanovic, ‘Beliefs and knowledges – Between a Purifying and Polluting Spoon’, *The European Sociologist* 46/2, 1 May 2020: <https://www.europeansociologist.org/issue-46-pandemic-impossibilities-vol-2/beliefs-and-knowledges-between-purifying-and-polluting>

Church. The Synod avoided making any decision about the implementation of restrictive measures during the pandemic and urged the hierarchy to continue distributing Holy Communion in the old fashion. However, COVID-19 took its toll on the Church. Many bishops and priests of the Serbian Church died from COVID-19, including most notably Patriarch Irinej, Metropolitan Amfilohije of Montenegro, and Littoral, retired Bishop Atanasije of Zahumlje, Herzegovina and Littoral, Bishop Milutin of Valjevo, and deposed Bishop Artemije.

c. Vaccines

At the convocation of the Assembly of Bishops of the Serbian Church held in May 2019, the mandatory vaccination of children was discussed. The assembly decided that both the reasons for vaccination of scientific medicine and the parents' fear of vaccinating their children should be respected.¹⁶ With the release of COVID-19 vaccines, the debate re-emerged in the Serbian Church. In addition to the ongoing debate between those who insist on the benefits of vaccination and those who oppose it, usually called 'vaxxers' and 'anti-vaxxers', some Church members were insisting on Holy Communion as the only successful protection from the contentious disease. However, the episcopate of the Serbian Church was divided on the issue of the benefits of vaccination.

In public messages to his flock and other people, Bishop Grigorije of Germany insisted on vaccination as the best way to fight COVID-19. The conference of the canonical Orthodox bishops of Germany, of which Bishop Grigorije is a part, issued an appeal to people to immunize themselves.¹⁷ Several bishops, including Archbishop Jovan of Ohrid and Assistant Bishop Stefan of Remesiana took an active role in the public campaign for vaccination.

On the other hand, other bishops, such as Bishop Irinej of Bačka, argued that the Church as the space of freedom cannot issue any official statement either in support of or against vaccination. He also emphasized that if the state insists on mandatory vaccination, the Church will

¹⁶ The Communique of the Holy Assembly of Bishops, SPC 22 May 2019: http://arhiva.spc.rs/eng/communique_holy_assembly_bishops_2

¹⁷ Grigorije: Vakcina nije napravljena da nas ubije nego da nas spase [Grigorije: The vaccine was not made to kill us, but to save us], *Politika* 13.11.2021: <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/492055/Grigorije-Vakcina-nije-napravljena-da-nas-ubije-nego-da-nas-spase>

be against it, because of possible abuse and unreliability of vaccines, as well as unwanted side effects.¹⁸ The main argument for the lack of support of the Serbian Church to the mandatory vaccination is not a suspicion of its efficiency, but rather lack of knowledge about the vaccine. Thus, the Serbian Church did not recommend vaccination to its members, but it left to each individual member to decide for herself of himself, being against the decision of the authorities to take the right from people to decide about their personal health.

How a debate takes shape

In all of the three mentioned instances, public discourse on the relationship between theology and science was shaped through the interplay of different factors. Some of them reflect the particularities of the Serbian public sphere, while others pertain to the dynamics of the inner life of the Serbian Orthodox Church. It is important to point out some of these factors if not provide a detailed analysis. Although they are related to the Serbian context, they can be related to other contexts, especially those of predominantly Orthodox countries.

These factors have shaped the way that the theology and science debates are internally understood within the context of the Church. This internal debate, on the other hand, impacted the public discourse on these matters.

a. 'It's always personal'

In all of these debates, more often than not Church doctrine was used as a 'weapon' in settling personal disputes. Certain church hierarchs aimed at establishing their dominance in the Church over other parties and used the theology and science debates as a tool for doing so. At the convocation of the Assembly of Bishops of the SOC in May 2017, Bishop Irinej of Bačka demanded that the blessing of the Synod for further teaching at the Faculty of Theology should be denied to the

¹⁸ Episkop bački Irinej: Na braniku vere, morala i tradicije ostaje pravoslavlje [Bishop Irinej of Bačka: Orthodoxy remains on the bulwark of faith, morality and tradition], *Novi standard* 3.1.2022: <https://standard.rs/2022/01/03/episkop-backi-irinej-pravoslavlje-ostaje-na-braniku-vera-morala-i-tradicije/>

signatories of the statement on evolution. This may be interpreted not so much as the debate between the evolutionists and creationists, but rather as a personal dispute between Bishop Irinej and some of the signatories, especially Bishop Maxim of Western America.

In order to gain the upper hand and acquire support from other parties, some hierarchs would use the populist representation of the confrontation between science and religion on specific matters, such as the theory of evolution. Arguing that a Christian should consider their oldest common ancestor to be Adam and not an *Australopithecus*, proved to be a successful strategy to gain political alliances. Solidification of the believers for the continuation of the endangered teaching of the Church easily took shape. This strategy proved to be especially fruitful with those Church members who had lived through the communist regime in which ‘scientific facts’ were constantly used as conclusive proof that there is no God and that there should be no religion either.

When on 8 July, 2019, the Synod decided to withdraw the blessing for teaching at the Faculty of Theology to two signatories of the Statement: Bishop Maxim, a full professor, and Marko Vilotić, an assistant professor, the explanation included some odd accusations. Thus, Bishop Maxim was not only criticized for signing his support for the theory of evolution, but he was also accused of professing Taoism, because he quoted in one of his articles an author who drew some parallels between Christian and Taoist teachings.

Theological scholars were not themselves excluded from this either. Some of those who felt the opportunity to criticize their counterparts on the basis of their alleged ‘progressivism’ and the betrayal of core beliefs used these debates to do so. Here is where I come to the second factor, closely related to the first one.

b. Epistemic dominance

In the course of these debates, theological knowledge was represented as being exclusively produced and verified by the ecclesial authorities. Theologians and scholars who act publicly without being previously approved by these authorities and/or are offering contrasting opinions are to be deemed as invalid sources of knowledge and therefore silenced. This factor became more important since the public

appeal regarding the theory of evolution was made by a group of theologians in 2017. Through the ‘silencing’ of the important contributors to the debate, the debate itself has taken another form. It became, once again, the case of ‘warfare between science and religion’.

The reactions to the articles about Communion by Vladimir Latinović, who holds an academic post at the University of Tübingen, are a good example of a clash between ‘scientific theology’ and ‘theology in the service of the Church’. Since it was difficult to refute Latinović’s arguments, he was accused among other things of lacking both personal faith and scientific rigorism, for taking a sectarian approach and for allegedly labelling the Synod of the Serbian Church as the fortress of backwardness.

On the other hand, the self-proclaimed promoters of the scientific worldview perpetuated this very notion and strived to establish epistemic dominance, albeit in the opposite direction. Aligning with ‘science’, they opted for epistemic dominance in the public space. Diverging opinions, and especially those related to the Church and its core teaching, were dismissed as backward and in opposition with the truth itself, conveniently and self-evidently revealed in the latest scientific findings. In addition to that, those theologians offering support to the theory of evolution or hesitant to accept as a scientific fact that the ecclesial space is by definition free of the Coronavirus were perceived as actually supporting the fight *against* the Orthodox Church that is the supposed source of all backwardness in the Serbian society. They were perceived as ‘Christian atheists’, siding with the truth and against their own beliefs and communities (whether they are aware of it or not). Therefore, the confrontation and the means of establishing epistemic dominance were further developed and welcomed by both parties.

c. Performative identities

In the course of the mentioned debates, public representations of the theological standpoints were driven by the need for the preservation of the Orthodox identity. Orthodox doctrine is understood as a public virtue that should be communicated *via public speech acts*

but not necessarily put into practice.¹⁹ Therefore, public speech acts through which one represents one's own doctrinal standpoints serve as a means by which one's identity is constructed. However, practical behaviour does not necessarily align with these speech acts. Sometimes it is even contrary to the publicly proclaimed theological standpoints. The Orthodox identity is produced through the public communication of the conservative standpoints, but not necessarily through practical enactment of their implications as well.

In the case of the dispute regarding the use of a common spoon, this meant that any change in the traditional way of receiving Holy Communion was condemned as an unholy innovation calling into question the belief in the healing power of Christ's own body. 'In the history of the Orthodox Church, no one has ever been infected through Holy Communion', was often repeated by many. But, on the other hand, this did not prevent the actual alteration of the way that Holy Communion was distributed in many diocese, even those headed by bishops who stood against such changes or at least kept silent about it. Also, some bishops would publicly call the believers to attend the Church services and 'not be afraid' of getting infected, while simultaneously refraining from participating in the Church services, thereby obeying the recommendations directed to elderly citizens to avoid public gatherings.²⁰

The same attitude could be recognized by the other party in the debate. Those who protested strongly against any sort of Church gathering, calling Christians 'the spoon lickers', were eager to participate and applaud other sorts of public gatherings if they were performed for 'the right purposes'. Therefore, political protests opposing the current regime were praised by the same media and public figures who were eager not to allow the usual celebration of Easter. Also, the large gathering of people at the funeral of famous Serbian singer Đorđe

¹⁹ As Judith Butler puts it 'Within speech act theory, a performative is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names'. Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'sex'* (New York & London: Routledge, 1993) 13.

²⁰ On the other hand, this ambivalence was also reflected in some decisions of the Synod. E.g., while all the bishops were required to continue distributing Holy Communion with a common spoon, they were also asked to 'throw in' the Communion in the mouth of believers in order to prevent them from touching the spoon with their lips. Therefore, it proved that often Orthodox identity is to be maintained publicly through speech acts, even if the nonverbal practices tell a different story.

Balašević were viewed positively by the same people who would call the liturgical commemoration of the late Metropolitan Amfilohije 'a corona party'. Therefore, what was on 'both sides' deemed as crucial are not actually practices but 'speech acts' that one might also deem to be nothing more than instances of virtue signalling. These practices lead us to the next factor.

d. Culture wars

The three debates were also profoundly shaped by the ongoing culture wars in Serbia. Since the last decade of the twentieth century, a political division between what was called 'First' and 'Second Serbia' has developed. It was initiated by a group of intellectuals who represented themselves as an alternative to the 'First Serbia' and protested not only the regime of Slobodan Milošević, president of Yugoslavia, at the time, but also what they perceived as the traditional understanding of the Serbian identity and statehood. Over the last three decades, this division has heavily influenced and (mis)guided political but also cultural debates in Serbia. To simplify, everything promoted by the 'Second Serbia' was seen as opposing the traditional understanding of Serbian identity and therefore of the Church and its importance as well.

This war was internalized by some Church hierarchs in order to portray their counterparts as those essentially belonging to the 'enemy side' and being infiltrated as a 'fifth column' in the midst of the Church. Also, it was used by the 'other party', the one in constant battle with all things traditional, in order to discredit and stigmatize the Church communities as 'a source of disease and thereby responsible for the deaths of thousands'.

e. Conceptual frameworks

The concept of science deployed in these debates on the side of the Church hierarchy often bears resemblance to the controversies of early modernity. Science is understood in a similar way that it was in nineteenth-century natural theology, and therefore the theological standpoints are adapted in order to confront it wherever needed. Its aim is to seek truth so that whenever it becomes seemingly confronted with

what is understood to be the truth in terms of Orthodox doctrine, it is to be corrected or disposed of. It is no wonder that, therefore, pseudo-scientific standpoints are adopted from other confessional and even religious traditions (such as Protestant and Islamic creationism) in order to protect what is understood to be the Orthodox doctrine.

On the other hand, a secularized understanding of science aims to expel any kind of religious narrative from the public sphere, *unless* it offers direct support to the claims made by those with the 'right' worldview.²¹

Conclusion

For the almost five decades of the Serbian Church under communist rule, the issue of the interplay between science and religion was of a great importance due to the need of the Church to present its teaching as scientific knowledge to communist authorities. After the fall of communism, the topic of the relationship between religion and science was abandoned, but it returned unexpectedly by the end of the 2010s, first with the theological interpretation of Darwin's theory of evolution and then with the practice of receiving Communion during the Coronavirus pandemic and the Church attitude towards the Coronavirus vaccines. The clash between religion and science emerged on several levels. The members of staff of the Faculty of the Orthodox Theology issued a statement against the attempts of certain groups in Serbian society to replace the scientifically accepted theory of evolution with the non-scientific 'biblical theory of creation'. This bold move in deeming 'creationism' neither as a viable scientific theory nor as a well-based theological position was severely criticized by the ecclesial authorities, who introduced a distinction between 'scientific' theology and 'theology in the service of the Church'. The staff members of the Faculty of Theology gained public support from the secular audience, while the Church authorities took the side of the proponents of creationism. The existing rift was deepened with the outbreak of the Coronavirus. As a preventive measure against the spread of Coronavirus, some theolo-

²¹ As Peter Harrison puts it 'One of the reasons that our science makes universal claims, then, is that it borrows from "the Christian religion" its notions'. Peter Harrison, *The Territories of Science and Religion*, vol. 4 (The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 195–6.

gians proposed an alternative method of distributing Communion, but they faced very bold opposition from the highest ecclesial authorities, who tended to maintain the status quo. Finally, in spite of the fact that many church dignitaries took an active part in promoting vaccination against the Coronavirus, the Serbian Orthodox Church did not take any official stance toward vaccination. The official explanation was that the SOC does not possess relevant scientific knowledge in order to publicly recommend massive vaccination and that it leaves to each particular believer to decide about this issue for him or herself.