

Being Nonreligious in Croatia

Subjects: Sociology

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Catholicism in the Croatian context has been one of the most powerful sources of collective belonging for centuries. Since the fall of socialism, desecularization tendencies have manifested as homogenization, collectivization, and deprivatization of religion. (Non)religiosity became a contested issue, which not only implied belonging (ethnic, national, historical) but was also highly politicized.

Keywords: nonreligiosity ; collective religion ; Catholicism ; Croatia

1. Introduction

Scholars' interest in the phenomena of nonreligious and secular worldviews is increasing in parallel with the increase in the number of nones, nonreligious, and secular individuals in Europe and North America ([Baker and Smith 2015](#); [Furseth 2018](#); [Zuckerman 2009](#)). Most of the scientific production on these phenomena revolves around organized nonreligious, secular, or atheistic communities; collective or individual identity formations, and identity management in the light of various social prejudices against nonreligious people and atheists.

Since the very attempt to classify religion and its other counterintuitive, it became clear that, in most cases, imposed classifications obscure the richness of substantive and affirmative forms of nonreligiosity, as a living reality that is performed in everyday life, in communities of practice, in forming individual identities and shaping interactions, in structuring social and political relations, and so forth. In 1972, [Colin Campbell \(1972\)](#) described the religious–nonreligious continuum with a series of degrees of (non)religiosity, and since then, various scholars have sought to explore this “murky middle”, pointing out that it is not a dichotomy with quantitative differences, but rather a field which comprises many layered and plural ways in which religiosity and nonreligiosity are combined, experienced, and manifested in everyday life ([Lee 2015](#); [Quack 2014](#)). On the other hand, nonreligiosity is not only dynamic but also reactional and relational with respect to religion ([Cimino and Smith 2014](#); [Hout and Fischer 2002](#); [Taylor 2007](#)). Hence, although there are some basic similarities across societies, nonreligiosity is in many ways context specific.

Croatian society is highly religious. The different research works conducted since the 1990s, despite different methodologies, samples, and instruments, show a high level of religiosity in Croatia, according to all indicators ([Baloban and Črpić 2000](#); [Baloban et al. 2014](#); [Črpić and Zrinščak 2005](#); [Nikodem and Zrinščak 2012](#)). The Pew Research Center positions Croatia as the seventh most religious out of 34 European countries.¹ Despite high levels of declared religiosity and religious belonging in Croatia, other processes such as individualization and (contextual or differentiated) secularization can also take place simultaneously.² Due to specific socio-historical circumstances, religious and national identities in Croatia are intertwined, while the dominant Catholic Church is very publicly present, with a strong influence on the media, education system, and public discourse. [Slavica Jakelić \(2010\)](#) identified this type of religion as collective and described it as culturally specific, historically embedded, and defined in opposition towards the religious Other. In the Croatian case, it is also defined partly in relation to the “internal Other” ([Zubrzycki 2006, p. 54](#)) or “inside-outsider” ([Trzebiatowska 2021](#)): someone who lives within a society but is never fully accepted because she does not fit into the collectivity on a national or religious basis. This position of “internal Other” was reinforced after the collapse of socialism and disintegration of Yugoslavia, when the dominant social pattern took a turn toward retraditionalization, recollectivization, and homogenization, in the national and religious sense.

2. Croatian (Non)Religious Landscape

Since the initial process of embracing Christianity in the period from the 7th to 11th century, the Catholic Church has played an important role in creating and maintaining the collective identity of the Croatian people. During the war with the Ottoman Empire in the 14th and 15th centuries, Roman popes referred to the Croatian territory as *Antemurale Christianitatis*; towers and walls that protect Christianity. The existence on three religious borders (Catholic, Orthodox, and Islamic), shaped specific Croatian experiences, in which religious identity often served as a guardian and protector of

national values. During this turbulent history, Croatia was part of other empires and state formations, except in the period from 1941 to 1945, during which a short-lived quisling Independent State of Croatia (NDH) was established, under the Ustaša regime and supported by Axis forces: Hitler's Germany and fascist Italy. The Catholic Church at this time had a great role in the public life of the new state ([Perica 2002, pp. 24–25](#)) and welcomed it as the long-awaited realization of the Croatian national independence ([Jakelić 2010, p. 116](#)). The Church position in NDH is still to this day problematic for part of the Croatian public, especially since the official Church reluctantly mentions Ustaša's crimes and some members of the clergy relativize them.

During the socialist period, in a multi-religious and multi-national Yugoslavia (1945–1991), the official government of the time saw religion as a negative and backward social factor. Religion and Church were suppressed from public life, but, although an “ideological struggle” was fought against them (with various intensities over time), especially through the media and education system, they remained present in the traditional family patterns of behavior and socialization, celebrations of patron saints, holiday gatherings, implementation of local religious traditions, etc. ([Jukić 1994, p. 366](#)). In this way, religion was not publicly visible, but still served as a collective identification mark. Data show that over 40% of Croatian citizens declared as religious during socialism, while an even higher percentage of citizens declared a confessional affiliation ([Marinović Jerolimov and Hazdovac Bajić 2017, p. 116](#)). This means that part of the nonreligious people also declared belonging to some (mostly Catholic) confession at the time.

After the collapse of socialism and the introduction of democratic changes, Croatia experienced military aggression. The modern Croatian state was, thus, created during the war, while its democratization and social consolidation were based on homogenization in the national and religious sense. During this time a strong connection between different national and religious identities in the region was present: Croat–Catholic, Serb–Orthodox, and Bosnian–Muslim. The newly established political elites based their legitimacy, as well as the legitimacy of the new social system, partly on Catholicism as a historical guardian of traditional and national values and as the only social factor that represented opposition during socialism. The relationship between the Catholic Church and the state was regulated by the constitution and four agreements with the Holy See. Part of the public claimed from the very beginning that these, so-called Vatican Contracts, put the Church in a privileged social position.³

(Non)religiosity in these circumstances became a contested issue, which not only implied belonging (ethnic, national, historical) but that was also highly politicized. The Church entered the public arena, became a powerful social factor through its connection with the ruling right-wing party, it entered the education system on all levels (public schools with the introduction of confessional education, universities, and preschools), the media, family life, and sought to influence legislation by associating with a range of civil associations.⁴ The dominant national narrative almost always includes religion. Public state holidays are celebrated with Holy Masses, and religious holidays include state leaders at the forefront of the churches. Some of the leading politicians since the nineties declared as atheists or agnostics, but not without some doubts in the public about whether someone who is a nonbeliever can lead a Catholic country.⁵ Narratives connected with widely spread folk religiosity also include national elements, such as in the popular saying “God and Croats” or the well-known religious song “Heavenly Maiden, Queen of Croats”. The Catholic Church in Croatia and its clergy often invoke the dangers of atheism, Godlessness, and the ever-present hovering communism. As religiosity became a dominant and conformist position in the society, there was a considerable increase in declared religiosity among Croatian citizens and a decrease in the number of those who declared as nonreligious or atheists ([Aračić et al. 2003](#); [Marinović Jerolimov 1993](#)). The great majority of Croatian citizens (about 90%) report confessional adherence, while almost 80% of them declare themselves as religious ([Nikodem and Zrinščak 2019](#)).

While the religion of the traditional, public, deprivatized, and collectivistic type with strong national character remains an important symbolic identification framework for the majority of the Croatian population, there are, at the same time, more or less subtle indications of individualization and secularization. This can be traced through the high confessional identification and strong presence of elements of traditional religiosity (mainly in family socialization, public expressions of religiosity such as the celebration of religious holidays, attending religious education, and attaining sacraments), with other indicators of religiosity that are not as present. In other words, there is a graduation, from almost complete confessional identification in the society, toward a lower level of religious self-identification, followed by a lower level of acceptance of fundamental religious beliefs, and even lower level of religious participation, with the acceptance of moral Church doctrine at the end ([Črpić and Zrinščak 2014](#)). Furthermore, there is a visible trend of losing trust in the Church, with an increasing number of citizens who think that the Catholic Church in Croatia is a rich institution, primarily interested in power, and with little capacity to help in solving moral or spiritual problems ([Nikodem 2011](#); [Nikodem and Zrinščak 2019](#)). Data show that about half of the religious population in Croatia follows the Church's teaching, and the other half expresses more individualized forms of religiosity ([Marinović Jerolimov 2005](#); [Nikodem 2011](#)). All of this causes reactions from the clergy. In one public holiday sermon before the Prime Minister and the President, one of the Croatian bishops

complained that the practical and theoretical atheism, religious indifference, and avoidance of Church belonging were an elite phenomenon in the previous system, while, in this system, religious illiteracy of young people and secularism entered Croatian homes.⁶ At the same time, nonreligious organizations and civil initiatives started to emerge in the Croatian public sphere. Although they gather a small number of people, they have the potential to attract a larger number of sympathizers, and even religious people, regarding specific debated themes, which are in the focus of cultural wars (abortion, immigrants, health, and religious education in public schools, etc.).

Hence, the religious changes in Croatia could be described using religious complexity as a theoretical concept, which refers to the coexistence of several religious trends that take place at different levels of society, with different intensities and different (even opposing) directions ([Furseth 2018](#)).

3. Conceptual Background

Although nonreligiosity has gained considerable scholarly interest, there is still a lack of research, especially qualitative, in the societies outside Western Europe and North America. Studies in these countries have shown that the form of culturally relevant religion(s) is closely connected to the forms of nonreligiosity and the identities of the people who reject it ([Smith 2011](#)). In other words, nonreligiosity is dependent on perception or experience related to religion. Furthermore, they showed how nonreligiosity is a highly complex and polysemic phenomenon at the individual, group, and institutional levels ([Beaman and Tomlins 2015](#); [LeDrew 2015](#); [Cotter 2011](#); [Lee 2015](#); [Silver et al. 2014](#)). A great deal of the existing studies focused on the organized forms of nonreligiosity or atheism, while the “quiet majority” of nonreligious people, with less coordinated and more diversified expressions of nonreligiosity, are still understudied. Differently put, there is still a lot to be learned about nonreligiosity and how it is “actually lived, expressed, or experienced” in everyday life ([Zuckerman 2010](#), p. viii).

Religion in Croatia can be described as collective, and religious identity as ascribed and not chosen ([Jakelić 2010](#)). On the other hand, separation from religion or the Church is a conscious act for the majority of those who define themselves as nonreligious in Croatia. This separation is rarely sharp and clear. Existing studies from Western European and American societies suggest that the main reason cited for rejection of religion is its inconsistency: logical, value related, or moral ([Zuckerman 2015](#)). This is confirmed in the study conducted by [Trzebiatowska \(2021\)](#) in the Polish context, which shows striking similarities to that in Croatia.

Research among members of nonreligious and atheistic organizations conducted in Croatia ([Hazdovac Bajić 2019](#)) concluded, similarly, that interviewees’ separation from religion was explained based on intellectual and value disagreements, as they accept a different set of “secularly sacred” values ([Knott 2010](#)). Members of these organizations expressed their feeling of stigmatization due to the normative position of religiosity in the society, the ubiquity of religion in the public space, and the politicization of issues of (non)religiosity. Since these individuals actively express their nonreligiosity and reconfirm it through involvement in these organizations, their break with religion is clearer and their attitude towards the Church and its public activities is almost entirely negative. Data gathered in the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) in 2018 indicate that there is a much bigger diversity among nonreligious people. Only 54% of the surveyed nonreligious people do not belong to any church or religious organization. Less than half of them declare as atheists, with about 20% as agnostics, about 15% believing in some higher power, and about 10% expressing uncertainty about God’s existence, while about 5% believe in God. As such, nonreligious people in Croatia retain a certain connection with religious traditions and beliefs, but also with the Catholic Church itself, much like studies in other countries have shown ([Cotter 2015](#); [Day et al. 2013](#)). [Cotter \(2011\)](#) argued that nonreligious people express various combinations of seemingly incompatible (non)religious self-representations, identities, practices, and beliefs, which are brought together and consistently interpreted on an individual, practical level. These interpretations are also fluid and contextually variable.

References

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