

## Matters of Choice: Notes on Slavica Jakelić's *Collectivistic Religions*

“We live in age when language about religion is the language of choice,” Slavica Jakelić writes in her introduction, which details the ways in which currently prevailing assumptions about personal “choice” in religious matters can preclude serious consideration of the complex—and above all collective—relationships that constitute religious institutions, traditions, and communities. Indeed, Jakelić’s analysis of what she terms “collectivistic religions” is appealing precisely because it pays attention to those crucial conditions and times “when religion is not a choice,” but rather a kind of given point of departure, something that people are “born into.” This approach allows her to explore how questions about religion and belonging are bound up with each other in specific historical contexts that, in turn, shed light on issues of religious pluralism and the ascriptive character of religious identity in Europe today.

Given this framework, perhaps the most practical response lies in sketching some possibilities that Jakelić’s work opens. These preliminary notes highlight two potential areas of inquiry: one, what thinking about matters that are “not a choice” could illuminate; and two, the place of politics in sustaining the institutional authority of collectivistic religions.

By compellingly arguing that “one does not choose to belong to these religious traditions; one is born into them,” Jakelić not only moves away from choice-focused theories, but also points to an implicit link between matters that are beyond individual choice (such as one’s own birth) and certain life events and processes that appear inevitable, natural, simply given. By the 1960s, some of the first interventions of what would later be called cultural studies began to scrutinize “nature, its ‘laws’ and its ‘limits’ in order to discover History there, and at last to establish Nature itself as historical.”<sup>1</sup> Since then, the repertoire of historicizing social phenomena that seem natural or universal has expanded past demystifying operations, which remain useful and insightful, to include a wide range of nuanced analyses of previously unquestioned practices and unmarked categories, customs, beliefs, and relationships. Jakelić’s attention to religious belonging as a social and cultural matter that is not reducible to issues of individual choice could also be read as a contribution to such approaches. It could suggest, for instance, ways of considering how people continue to belong to religious communities, see themselves as religious, or view religion as profoundly important to their identities when they do not, and

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Great Family of Man,” [1957] in *Mythologies* (New York, 1972), 100-102.

sometimes indeed cannot, explain their faith primarily in terms of their (theological, ideological, etc.) beliefs or customs. Moreover, these concerns raise related issues surrounding social authority and institutional practices that sustain and reproduce established religious traditions, making them not only available, but also acutely relevant to questions of communal identity in places like Ireland, Croatia, Poland, Greece, and so on.

Put another way, collectivistic religions are, as Jakelić writes, “public, even political, in character.” The political dimension in particular, it seems to me, opens yet another productive line of inquiry. A seemingly trivial recent event in Bosnia and Herzegovina allows us to glimpse some of the grounds why religious-political encounters are well worth exploring (especially in the European contexts that Jakelić studies in her book).

In May 2010, a small-town TV program hosted Milorad Dodik, then the prime minister (and the current president) of the Republika Srpska entity within Bosnia and Herzegovina. During the show’s call-in segment, an unidentified viewer politely greeted the participants and then tersely addressed the Bosnian Serb politician: “I just want to say that Mr. Dodik does not know what Jesus is, what God is, he only knows what a billion convertible marks is. Thank you.” Dodik immediately dismissed the comment with an expletive and the show’s host called for the next question, but the agitated prime minister would not let the matter go. Answering the last part of the comment first, as it were, Dodik explained that he knows well how much a billion is since he claimed responsibility for billions invested into the regional economy. “And as to whether I believe or don’t believe—I’ve received the highest church honor, the Order of Saint Sava,” the prime minister said, going on to cite in a similar vein his recent meetings with the Serb Orthodox Patriarch, who had blessed and thanked the Bosnian Serb politicians for their work. While outlining these credentials, Dodik also challenged the “democratic quality” of such public questioning of a prime minister’s faith.<sup>2</sup>

It would be misleading to read this encounter simply as yet another instance of church-state (in)separation, that is, to recycle the usual truisms that say little about how religious and political affairs actually work together in specific contemporary contexts. As Jakelić’s work suggests, more productive approaches would ask how people come to engage with particular moral communities, posing questions that “are never just a matter of belief” and investigating social issues tied to particular historical legacies, cultural formations, and political experiences. In the former

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<sup>2</sup> The television interview was reported in the Sarajevo weekly *Dani* (No. 676, 28 May 2010) and on the Croatian news portal *Danas*: <http://danas.net.hr/svijet/page/2010/05/24/0698006.html>

Yugoslav cases that she cites, these include experiences of organized violence, war, post-socialist transition, international intervention, and new state-formation since the 1990s. Delving into these developments and their relationship to religious and political life would require a different kind of study, but Jakelić's work enables us to reexamine such problems with both critical scrutiny and careful attention to the social complexity of what she aptly calls collectivistic religions.

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