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CONFLICTED REALITIES: THE SCHÜTZIAN ADDITION TO THEORISING ON THE SYMBOLIC STRUGGLES OVER COMMUNION IN SERBIA DURING COVID

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Abstract. *This paper aims to analyse and interpret the heated public debate prompted by the organization of communion during the pandemic. Performing this ritual during the lockdown, enacted due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, spawned intensive and highly polarised public reactions. The emerging debates vividly portrayed the symbolic struggles or culture wars pertinent to the Serbian society. Bourdieu's theory of classification struggles and Lamont's conceptualization of symbolic boundaries provided the framework for an earlier consideration of these disputes (Jovanović 2022). This article attempts a theoretical recasting. Taking cues from Schütz's essay "Equality and the meaning structure of the social world" regarding "the ways of life of a group as seen by in-group and out-group", a portrayal of socially approved typifications organized in domains of relevances of the aforementioned conflicted groups will be made. This will in turn provide insights into "relative natural worldview" (relativ natürliche Weltanschauung) of the conflicted groups: the means by which they define its situation within the social cosmos, with this definition(s) becoming an integral element of the situation itself. Pronounced hostility between the "defenders" and the "disputers" of communion during COVID can be understood relying on Schütz's discussion of the out-group's interpretation of the world taken for granted by the in-group.*

Key words: *symbolic struggles, definitions of reality, definitional power, systems of relevances, in-group and out-group.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 provoked a heated public controversy in Serbia over the Orthodox Christian ritual of Holy Communion. In the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), Holy Communion (in Serbian: *Причешће*) is administered with a single chalice and spoon shared by all congregants. During the nationwide lockdown and strict physical distancing measures, the continuation of this practice – worshippers lining up to receive bread and wine from a common spoon – spawned intensive and highly polarised public reactions. This debate was not merely about disease prevention; it vividly illustrated a symbolic struggle or "culture war" within Serbian society. On the one hand, religious traditionalists (including church authorities and devout believers) insisted that the sacrament was spiritually essential and divinely protected. On the other, secular-minded critics (including medical experts and many citizens) condemned the practice as a risky, unhygienic ritual endangering public health (for a detailed overview of the conflict see: Jovanović 2022).

At its core, this conflict was a clash of realities – a contest between two incompatible definitions of the situation. Was the Eucharist "a healing religious ritual at the heart of Orthodox liturgical life," as believers claimed, or "a dangerous practice detrimental to personal and public health," as critics argued? (Jovanović 2022, 60). Each camp defended its interpretation with fervour, employing strong symbolic language, ranging from ridicule and insults to moral indignation and accusations of ignorance. The stakes were high: whichever definition prevailed would guide, or at least would have a strong impact on how society treats the ritual. In effect, the struggle was over definitional power – the authority to determine what is "real" and "normal" regarding Holy Communion. Those who hold such definitional power can shape public common sense and dominate the construction of social reality. As sociologist Heinrich Popitz observes, labelling this form of power as "authoritative": "guides the attitudes, perspectives, and criteria of those affected (…) [and] the manner in which they perceive and judge something" (Popitz 2017, 14).

This article examines the communion controversy through a theoretical and interpretative sociological lens. It applies Alfred Schütz's phenomenologically based sociology – particularly his theory of multiple realities, systems of relevances, and typifications – to understand how each side inhabited a different "reality" with its own internal logic. The Schützian approach aims to understand and explain different understandings of social reality resulting from uneven knowledge distribution being the expression of power dynamics in modern society – this comprising the key empirical problem for the sociology of knowledge (Pula 2024, 13). With Schütz "we gain an approach to the analysis of political semantics and to its discursive genesis" (Srubar 1999, 44). This is complemented by Bourdieu's concept of classification struggles and Lamont's theory of symbolic boundaries to elucidate how groups drew cultural lines between "us" and "them." The notion of authoritative power by Popitz further helps explain how one narrative might gain dominance. Methodologically, the study relies on a netnographic analysis of public online discourse (social media posts, comments, news forums) mostly during March–April 2020, using thematic analysis to develop a typology of the arguments deployed by each side. By integrating phenomenological insight with theories of power and culture, the article aims to shed light on how a public health measure became a battleground for deeper questions about reality, authority, and identity in a time of crisis.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Phenomenologically Based Sociology: Schütz's Multiple Realities and In-Group Worlds

Alfred Schütz's phenomenologically oriented sociology provides a foundational framework for understanding this clash. Schütz, following Husserl, argued that "it is the meaning of our experiences and not the ontological structure of the objects which constitutes reality" (Schütz 1962, 230). In other words, what people experience as real depends on the interpretive meaning they give to events, based on the social context. Different spheres of life – such as religion, science, or everyday life – form distinct provinces of meaning or "multiple realities," each governed by its own cognitive style[1], assumptions, and system of relevances – "socially shaped and transmitted structures of relevances (or interests)" (Barber 2024a, 156)[2]. An action or object may thus be perceived in fundamentally different ways depending on which reality is (currently) actual for the actor(s).

Theory of relevances received considerable and focused attention in Schütz's writings (Schütz 1970; 2011; Schütz and Luckmann 1973, 182-229). The concept of relevance "is a most significant regulative principle of reality construction since it coordinates between knowing and experiencing of objects and serves the subjective actor in defining the situation" (Dreher 2011, 499). Schütz declared that the "concept of relevance is the central concept of sociology and of the cultural sciences [*Geisteswissenschaften*]. However, the basic phenomenon of relevance reaches beyond them into every life; it permeates our existing, our living and cognizing experience" (1996, 3). According to him, "the basic *problem of relevance* concerns selection from the totality of the world which is pregiven to life as well as thinking", where relevance acts "as a guide for selectivity" (Schütz 1996, 4).[3]

Having in mind the objectively given structure of the world and subjectively experienced biographical situation, Schütz discerns two systems of relevance which structure our knowledge, and analytically differentiates three ideal types of relevance.

First, he distinguishes between systems of "imposed" and "intrinsic" relevances.

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[1] Schütz writes of six basic characteristics which constitute its specific cognitive style: 1) a specific tension of consciousness, 2) a specific *epoché*, 3) a prevalent form of spontaneity, 4) a specific form of experiencing one's self, 5) a specific form of sociality, and 6) a specific time-perspective (1962, 230).

[2] "It is our interest at hand that motivates all our thinking, projecting, acting, and therewith establishes the problems to be solved by our thought and the goals to be attained by our actions. In other words, it is our interest that breaks asunder the unproblematic field of the preknown into various zones of various relevance with respect to such interest, each of them requiring a different degree of precision of knowledge" (Schütz 1964b, 124).

[3] "[R]epeatedly we come up against the same problem. This is the question of why these facts and precisely these are selected by thought from the totality of lived experience and regarded as relevant" (Schütz 1967, 250). Compare with Weber's considerations from his essay on the "objectivity" of knowledge: "things in themselves possess no inherent criterion according to which some of them can be selected as the only part to be taken into account. A serious attempt to obtain 'presuppositionless' knowledge of reality would only yield a chaos of 'existential judgements' concerning innumerable single perceptions. And even that result would only be apparent, as any perception will in reality, if scrutinized more closely, exhibit an infinite number of individual elements for which it is impossible to formulate an exhaustive set of perceptual judgements. The *only* reason why order can reign in that chaos is the fact that, in each case, it is only a *part* of individual reality that is of interest and has *significance* for us, because only that part has a relation to the *cultural value ideas* with which we approach reality. Consequently, only certain *aspects* of the, always infinitely manifold, individual phenomena – namely those that in our view possess general *cultural significance* – are worth knowing" (2012, 117-118; original italics).

"*Intrinsic relevances* are related to our chosen interests, established by our spontaneous decision to solve a problem by our thinking, to attain a goal by our action, etc. *Imposed relevances*, on the other hand, are not connected with interests chosen by us and do not originate in acts of our discretion; we have to take them just as they are, without the power to modify them by our spontaneous activities (…) Imposed and intrinsic systems of relevance depend, in particular, on the individual's knowledge of the life-world which is taken for granted and which is based on webs of social relationships, on systems of signs and symbols with a specific meaning structure, on institutionalized forms of organization, on systems of status and prestige, etc. (…). This means that the life-world is impregnated with established power structures that are imposed on individual perception and experience." (Dreher and López 2015, 214-215; original italics)

If the life-world is permeated with power – since knowledge production passes through discourses of power which "represent a formal mechanism of the structure of the lifeworld" (Srubar 2005, 19) – then it definitely is not a harmless place (cf. Srubar 2007). When differing life-worlds collide, the encounter can be anything but benign, it can be deeply disorienting and conflictual, thoroughly polemogenic, even violent.

As for the types of relevance, Schütz sets apart: 1) topical (or thematic) relevance – which determines toward which topic an individual directs her conscious intentionality to (how does it come about that a certain topic attracts attention?), 2) interpretative relevance – determines which aspects of the thematic object are considered relevant for interpretation (which aspects of the topic are recognized as being significant?), and 3) motivational relevance – refers to meaningful/adequate ground for behavior (which motives exert an influence on this process?) (Göttlich 2011, 497).[4]

In the context of the conflict over communion, the religious participants operated within what Schütz would call the religious finite province of meaning, wherein the Holy Communion is imbued with sacred significance and supernatural efficacy. Within this reality, empirical evidence and doubt are suspended by the "leap of faith." The Eucharist is not seen as an ordinary matter but as the true Body and Blood of Christ – often referred to by Church fathers as the "medicine of immortality" (φάρμακον ἀθανασίας) that grants spiritual healing and the "antidote of which we should not die, but live forever in Jesus Christ" (Ignatius of Antioch). From this internal viewpoint, it seems literally impossible for the holy sacrament to transmit disease; to suggest otherwise would undermine its sacred character. By contrast, secular and medical-minded actors approached the ritual from the perspective of the everyday "paramount reality" of the modern, scientifically-understood world (or what we might call the biomedical discourse). In that reality, communion is seen plainly as a physical act – multiple people drinking and eating from the same implements – which, according to germ theory, poses an obvious risk of contagion. Each side's stance was perfectly "rational" within its own reality: one grounded in faith and tradition, the other in science and public health.

Schütz also emphasized how social groups develop typifications – shared, habitual perceptions of typical people and actions – that emerge from the life-world (in German: *Lebenswelt*). Typifications pertain to the process of structuring our immediate experiences by imposing an organizational framework onto the perceptual field – one that

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[4] For a further elaboration, critique and caveats regarding the concept of relevance see: Barber 2024b, 13-34; Göttlich 2012; 2022; Nasu 2008, 91-94; 2021; Pula 2024, 48-113; Srubar 2018; Venturini 2021.

the field itself does not inherently possess. Typifications are "the pre-discursive classifications of things in terms of being 'trees', 'human beings', 'dogs', etc." and they "are built up over a lifetime and which make it possible for us to anticipate how present experiences will unfold and to cope effectively with reality" (Barber 2018, 62). In addition to enabling classification, typifications "include the approved folkways of societies and in-groups, learned habits, physical skills, language patterns and usages, and recipes for action" (*ibid.*).

> "[A]ll typification consists in the equalization of traits relevant to the particular purpose at hand for the sake of which the type has been formed, and in disregarding those individual differences of the typified objects that are irrelevant to such purpose. There is no such thing as a type pure and simple. All types are relational terms carrying, to borrow from mathematics, a subscript referring to the purpose for the sake of which the type has been formed. And this purpose is nothing but the theoretical or practical problem which, as a consequence of our situationally determined interest, has emerged as questionable from the unquestioned background of the world just taken for granted." (Schütz 1964a, 234)

Typification should be regarded not solely as an abstract concept within the philosophy of social science, "but also as a quite foundational practice underlying socially competent perception, understanding, and social interaction generally" (Kim and Berard 2009, 266-267).

Typifications differ for in-groups versus out-groups. In his essay "Equality and the Meaning Structure of the Social World"[5], Schütz (1964a) noted that the "way of life of a group as seen by the in-group" will differ starkly from how that way of life is viewed by outsiders. The in-group's behaviors and beliefs appear normal and self-evident to themselves, but can seem strange, foolish or even dangerous to an out-group with a different frame of reference. This often breeds mutual misunderstanding or hostility. In our case, Orthodox believers (the in-group defending communion) saw the ritual as essential and inherently safe – part of the natural order of their religious life – whereas secular outsiders (the out-group disputing the practice) saw it as irresponsible and irrational by the standards of everyday health norms. The pronounced hostility between the "defenders" and "disputers" of communion can thus be understood via Schütz's insight about out-group interpretations of an in-group's taken-for-granted world. Each side perceived the other through its own typifications: devotees saw critics as impious or lacking understanding of the sacred, while skeptics saw devotees as ignorant or willfully blind to "facts". These perceptions were not merely opinions but were rooted in two different realities.

Furthermore, Schütz's concept of systems of relevances is useful to analyze how the pandemic imposed new relevances. During a pandemic, the thematic relevance of risk and contagion became dominant in society at large. Public discourse in Serbia, as elsewhere, was saturated with talk of infection rates, safety measures, and personal responsibility to avoid spreading the virus. This biomedical discourse attempted to impose its relevances universally – everyone was expected to prioritize health and safety above all. In the context of the pandemic, the biomedical discourse imposed a set of thematic relevances (risk, contagion, prevention) on all actors. However, for devout Orthodox Christians, Holy Communion retained an intrinsic relevance (imposed for the out-group members[6]) tied to

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[5] For a thorough overview and analysis of this essay see: Embree 2015.

[6] "[F]rom one individual's perspective, the intrinsic relevances of the other appear to be imposed relevances. The readiness with which individuals accept or resist the imposition of the other's relevance system differs from situation to situation. Schutz notes that the range of acceptance and resistance 'could be used advantageously for a classification of the various social relationships'" (Pietrykowski 1996, 239).

spiritual salvation, communal worship, spiritual healing and obedience to divine command. Thus a conflict emerged between "imposed relevances" (the public health priorities pressed upon all citizens) and "intrinsic relevances" (the religious imperatives internally felt by the faithful). This tension led to a disruption between distinct meaning structures – essentially a collision of finite provinces of meaning. As we will see, the result was a breakdown of a shared reality, with actors "residing" in competing life-worlds vying to define the situation.

2.2. Symbolic Power and Boundaries: Bourdieu, Lamont, and Popitz

While phenomenologically informed sociology explains why each side viewed the issue so differently, it is also important to consider the struggle for power and legitimacy between these camps. Pierre Bourdieu's notion of classification struggles and Michèle Lamont's theory of symbolic boundaries offer a lens to interpret the communion debate as a competition over cultural classification and group identity. Bourdieu noted that "the way that social subjects represent the social world is part of the objective truth of the social world" (Bourdieu 2018, 67). In other words, representations (interpretations, classifications) are themselves stakes in social contests: groups fight to impose their vision of reality because doing so reinforces their status and interests. Here, the question of whether communion is "safe" or "dangerous" was a prime example of a classification struggle – a contest over how to categorize the ritual (sacred and untouchable, or profane and subject to regulation). Each group sought to have its definition become the dominant, taken-for-granted one.

Michèle Lamont, in collaboration with Virág Molnár, defined symbolic boundaries as:

"conceptual distinctions made by social agents to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space. They are tools by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality. Examining them allows us to capture the dynamic dimensions of social relations, as groups compete in the production, diffusion, and institutionalization of alternative systems and principles of classifications. Symbolic boundaries also separate people into groups and generate feelings of similarity and group membership (…). They are an essential medium through which people acquire status and monopolize resources." (Lamont and Molnár 2002, 168)

In the struggle over communion, both sides constructed strong symbolic boundaries. Religious traditionalists drew a line between the faithful who "properly" trust in God's providence versus those who lack faith. For example, Church officials and supporters accused opponents of being "anti-church and anti-Serbian" elements trying to disparage Orthodoxy. In this framing, to insist on changing the communion practice was not just a health concern – it branded one as an outsider to the national-religious community, someone motivated by malice or lack of belief (Jovanović 2022, 78-84). On the other hand, secular critics (including many educated urbanites and medical professionals) drew boundaries between the "civilized, rational" public and the "primitive, superstitious" believers. They often portrayed the insistence on using a common spoon in a pandemic as backward or pre-modern. Indeed, epidemiologist Dr. Zoran Radovanović, voicing the secularist view, stated: "As a citizen, I find it civilizationally unacceptable that people in the 21st century kiss the same object and eat from the same spoon. As an epidemiologist, I must warn that this is dangerous" (Jovanović 2022, 60). His remark encapsulates the boundary drawn by critics: modern science and civilization vs. (medieval) ignorance. In sum, the dispute was also a boundary-work process, in which each side reinforced its in-group identity (as pious patriots or as rational public guardians) by denigrating the out-group.

"A secondary consequence might be that those members of the in-group who plead for a policy of mutual understanding are designated by the spokesmen of radical ethnocentrism as disloyal or traitors, etc., a fact which again leads to a change in the self-interpretation of the social group." (Schütz 1964a, 247)[7]

This interplay of meaning and power leads to the question: who has the authority to define reality in this situation? Popitz's concept of authoritative power is pertinent. Authoritative power, per Popitz, is the ability to shape others' perceptions and judgments of the world:

"power is not only performed by imposing one's own relevances on another person against her will, that is, when two conflicting systems of relevance exist. Power can also be performed by defining one's own relevances as common ones, that is, when only one system of relevance exists and the according projects of action are experienced by every person involved as if they would emanate from his own free will." (Göttlich 2011, 501)

In the context of the communion dispute, both the Church hierarchy and state-backed medical experts claimed the right to decree what "really" matters – spiritual salvation or virus containment – and what the ritual "really" represents – a holy mystery or an infection hazard. The struggle over Holy Communion thus exemplified a competition for authoritative power. If the Church's definition prevailed, it would effectively exempt a core religious practice from the profane scrutiny of health officials, reasserting the autonomy of the sacred sphere. If the biomedical definition prevailed, it would subject even the most sacred rites to secular regulation in the name of collective safety.[8]

Bourdieu would recognize in this a form of symbolic power at play – the power to make one vision of the world accepted as legitimate (Bourdieu 1991). The SOC wields significant symbolic power in society, and it leveraged its institutional authority to insist that "the state does not deal with, nor can it deal with, the content and manner of performing the Holy Liturgy" (Jovanović 2022, 25). This assertion from an SOC press release underscored the Church's claim of jurisdiction over reality in the religious domain. The government largely acquiesced: during the spring 2020 lockdown, it imposed strict curfews on the general population but placed no explicit ban on communion performed within the SOC.[9] President Aleksandar Vučić went so far as to assure that authorities "had no intention of arresting bishops or priests" for holding services (Jovanović 2022, 59). In effect, the Church's symbolic power carved out a sphere of exception for itself. At the same time, the medical experts and many in the media exercised their own authority – the epistemic authority of science – to label the Church's stance as dangerously delusional. This was not a trivial matter of opinion; it had

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[7] The priest and assistant professor of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology Vukašin Milićević fits this description of being a "disloyal traitor" perfectly. He suggested that alternative forms of Holy Communion should be considered (he merely pointed to historical facts: before the 11th century, the church practiced different forms of communion and sometimes still does so today during the Liturgy of Saint James). Serbian Patriarch Irinej officially sanctioned him. He was banned from appearing in the media and on social networks, suspended him from his priestly duties and summoned him to the Church Court (see: Jovanović 2022, 26-28; 82).

[8] "Schutz's typification allows us to precisely analyze the performance of definitional power, because it makes it possible to identify the exact 'locus' of this performance: is it the limiting of the thematic horizon, the exclusion of certain interpretational patterns, or the preference for a particular motive?" (Göttlich 2011, 500).

[9] Only the members of the church faction "in exile" labelled by SOC as "sectarian" and "schismatic", were sanctioned (arrested) for practicing communion, thus violating the prescribed measures for the protection of public health (see: Jovanović 2022, 59).

life-and-death implications in a pandemic. Each side's exertion of authoritative power aimed to "guide the perspectives" of the public: either towards trust in divine protection or towards adherence to epidemiological guidelines.

3. THE METHOD

3.1. Data Collection: Netnography of Online Discourse

Traditional face-to-face fieldwork was impossible during Serbia's COVID-19 lockdown in March–April 2020. Instead, this study employed netnography, a qualitative research method that adapts ethnographic techniques to the study of online communities and content. Following Kozinets' approach to netnography (Kozinets, Dolbec and Earley 2014), the research gathered the "digital traces" of the public debate on Holy Communion from various Internet sources. The data corpus included: news articles and opinion columns (and their comment sections) from the Serbian media, official statements from the SOC, posts and comment threads on social networks (Facebook, Twitter), blogs and discussion forums, and popular memes or caricatures circulating on these platforms. Material was collected in real time throughout March and April 2020, capturing the intense wave of discourse triggered by the approaching Orthodox Easter (19 April, 2020), with some items collected during later months. Since the debate was highly public and often featured in national news, only publicly accessible content was included – for instance, comments on public Facebook posts by news outlets or tweets with relevant hashtags. Ethical considerations were taken into account by anonymising ordinary users' quotes when used, although many statements came from public figures (bishops, doctors, etc.) whose identities are part of the story.

Netnography allowed us to observe how different actors framed their arguments, interacted, and constructed meaning *in situ* in the online space, which became the primary arena for debate due to physical gathering restrictions. This approach is well-suited for studying social interactions and cultural meanings within digital communication contexts. By immersing in the online discourse, the researcher noted recurring themes, evocative images, and key flashpoints (such as news of clergy infections, or viral videos of clandestine liturgies).

3.2. Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis and Typology Development

To interpret the voluminous qualitative data, thematic analysis was employed, following the reflexive thematic analysis approach of Braun and Clarke (2022). This method involved systematically coding the content and identifying patterns or themes in how people argued about and experienced the communion issue. Initial coding was partly inductive – allowing themes to emerge from the data (for example, repeated references to "faith" or "health" or specific insults) – and partly guided by the theoretical framework (e.g. looking for language that signalled in-group/out-group distinctions or reality conflicts).

Through iterative coding and theme refinement, a typology of arguments used by the opposed groups was constructed. Essentially, the analysis distilled the discourse into a set of narrative types or justificatory strategies on each side. For instance, among the communion defenders, one common narrative theme was the "Spiritual Immunity Argument" (claiming that the holy nature of the sacrament prevents any harm), while among the critics, a theme was the "Public Safety Argument" (insisting that no tradition can trump epidemiological risk). In total, as will be detailed, several such themes were identified for each side, forming a structured typology.

Thematic analysis also considered the rhetorical tone and tactics present, noting how humor, sarcasm, or moral condemnation were employed. Visual data (memes, cartoons) were analyzed in tandem with textual data to understand their messaging. For example, a meme might encapsulate an argument in imagery (one widely shared cartoon depicted the coronavirus itself being "fed" by a priest's spoon to a boy congregant – a darkly comic critique of the practice).

Fig. 1 A darkly humorous depiction of communion

Throughout the analysis, the researcher kept in mind Scheller's concept of the "relative natural worldview" (in German: *relativ natürliche Weltanschauung*) of each group, trying to reconstruct how each side perceived its own stance as "natural" and "logical", and how it perceived the other side's stance. Carlos Belvedere distinguishes this process, positing the study of it as a distinctive "alternate to [sociological] mainstream": "the specific object of phenomenological sociology is the natural attitude of groups, which is constituted through a structuration of the field of consciousness through imposed relevances of the in-group upon its members and upon out-groups" (2022, 107). By typologizing the arguments and narratives, we effectively mapped conflicted world-views and their points of friction.

Triangulation was achieved by comparing discourse from different platforms and by cross-referencing the emergent themes with external reports and scholarly insights on similar debates (for instance, academic analyses of how Orthodox authorities in Greece and Russia reacted, which provided a wider context – e.g. Hovorun 2021; Kessareas 2023). The combination of netnographic immersion and rigorous thematic coding aimed to ensure a rich, credible interpretation of this affectively charged debate.

4. FINDINGS: CONFLICTING WORLDVIEWS AND ARGUMENTS

Below, we present the typology of the main arguments put forth by each side, illustrated with examples from the data. We then analyze how these arguments reflect deeper symbolic boundaries and the in-group versus out-group dynamics observed.

4.1. The "Defenders": Faith, Tradition, and Sacred Immunity

For Orthodox believers and clergy defending the continuation of communion, the overarching frame was that spiritual reality overrides material concerns. Their discourse was characterized by reverence for tradition, trust in divine protection, and resentment of secular interference. Several key argument themes emerged:

Sacred Tradition is Paramount: Defenders stressed that the Eucharist has been performed in this manner for centuries and is the "heart of Orthodox liturgical life." As Bishop Irinej (of Bačka) explained in an essay, "for two thousand years Christians have communed in the same way, from one bread and one cup", and this unity is fundamental: "Without Holy Communion, there is no Church." This argument from antiquity posited that it is unthinkable to alter a practice so central to Church identity. In their view, eternal divine commandments cannot be trumped by temporary human regulations. Any suggestion to use separate spoons or halt communion was seen as a direct assault on the continuity of sacred tradition.

Divine Protection and the "Medicine of Immortality": A strong belief was voiced that the sacrament itself cannot cause harm – on the contrary, it is spiritually healing. The logic here is that God's grace is transmitted through communion, not diseases. Bishop Irinej emphatically stated: "Nobody got sick from participating in communion for the past two thousand years, including priests who gave communion to people who suffered from plague and tuberculosis." In contemporary terms, a Serbian priest declared, "if there's faith, the Body and Blood of Christ can vanquish any disease." This faith in miraculous immunity was not merely a theological abstraction – it was cited as empirical truth (no priest had fallen ill from communion, they claimed) and as a test of true belief. Some went so far as to say that fearing infection from the Eucharist was tantamount to heresy: to doubt the sacrament's safety is to doubt God's power.

Fig. 2 Drawing of Christ kicking the virus off the spoon

Religion Above Secular Law: Many defenders implicitly or explicitly argued that spiritual obligations transcend earthly law or medical advice. They noted that Serbian authorities had not explicitly banned communion, and they took that as rightful deference. When some public health voices demanded a stop to shared communion, Church representatives accused them of overreach: the state has no authority to rewrite liturgical practice. There was a sense of righteous defiance: priests in several locales quietly continued

liturgies despite lockdown. Vivid examples occurred in Požarevac, Niš, and Belgrade, where believers attended the liturgy in churches and communed with the single spoon, defying the curfew. Images on social media showed a crowd waiting to enter a church crypt to receive communion from one chalice. These incidents were celebrated in some church circles as acts of faith. A common refrain in the pro-Church discourse was the biblical injunction "We must obey God rather than men" – implying that any state mandate that contradicts religious duty could be justifiably ignored. In-group solidarity was reinforced by framing this as a scenario of faithful resistance against secular oppression.

Moral Outrage at Criticism: The defenders did not merely present positive arguments; they actively counter-attacked critics. They often portrayed opponents as outsiders to the faith, driven by malice or atheism. The SOC's Holy Synod, after media reports on communion during lockdown, issued a statement decrying "anti-church and anti-Serbian circles" for a smear campaign. This statement reveals how the Church fused religious and national identity – implying that attacking the Church's ritual was unpatriotic as well. On social media, some faithful vilified prominent critics (like Dr. Radovanović) as "militant atheists", "Communist holdovers", or accused them of hatred toward the Church. The tone was often emotionally charged: critics were said to be "persecuting Christ" (language evocative of martyrdom) and creating needless fear. A strand of conspiracy thinking also appeared: a few extreme commenters claimed that the pandemic was being used as a pretext by global powers or domestic "liberals" to undermine the Orthodox faith. While not mainstream, such views amplified the in-group siege mentality – i.e., "they are using this to attack us". The net effect was a tightening of the symbolic boundary: true believers vs. blasphemous others.

Екуменista, евроунijata, лезбejка и jеврej забрањуjу народу да иде у цркву

Fig. 3 "An ecumenist, euro-uniat, lesbian, and a jew are forbidding people from going to church"

Qualified Acknowledgments: It should be noted that not all religious voices were uncompromising. A minority stance within the Church acknowledged the physical risk but couched it carefully. For example, Bishop Grigorije (of Düsseldorf) commented that Holy Communion itself cannot be a source of infection, but the manner of its administration (the shared spoon) might be – however, he immediately added, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." This biblical phrase "*Не искушавај Господа, Бога свога*" (Matthew 4:7) suggested that one should not intentionally court danger expecting a miracle. Such nuance, coming from an influential bishop, hinted at a possible "third

way" – acknowledging medical reality while upholding the sacrament's sanctity. However, voices like his were drowned out in the polarised din. The dominant defender position remained that communion must continue unchanged, and any concessions would show lack of faith.

In summary, the defenders' worldview saw the communion spoon controversy through a sacralized lens. They affirmed an alternate reality where spiritual laws trump natural laws, where centuries of sanctity outweigh months of pandemic, and where defending the Eucharist was akin to defending the faith and nation itself. Their arguments were bolstered by strong identity work – they were the faithful remnant holding fast to truth, and they rhetorically excommunicated opponents from the community of virtue.

4.2. The "Disputers": Reason, Public Health, and Accountability

Opposing the above were the voices of medical experts, secular commentators, and laypeople alarmed by the Church's stance. For the disputers, the communion issue was framed as a matter of public responsibility, rationality, and adapting tradition to modern realities. Key themes in their arguments included:

Health and Safety First: The most straightforward argument was that during a pandemic, public health measures apply to everyone, without exception. What was being asked of the Church was no different than what was asked of all institutions – temporary adaptation for the greater good. Critics pointed out that all other mass gatherings were halted: schools closed, events cancelled, even funerals limited. The virus was understood to spread through respiratory droplets and saliva, so sharing a spoon was an obvious vector. Doctors repeatedly warned that any close contact or fomite-sharing, including communion, could transmit COVID-19. Many referenced examples of outbreaks in religious settings point out that no communal activity is magically safe. A frequently cited piece of evidence was that more than 20 staff members of the large St. Sava Temple in Belgrade caught the coronavirus in April 2020, "including the bishop who serves as Vicar to the Patriarch," after likely being exposed during services. And tragically, Bishop Milutin of Valjevo – who had famously insisted on the power of communion – contracted the virus and died two weeks later at the age of 71.[10] Such cases were held up by disputers as cautionary tales: even high clergy were not immune, proving the point that nature does not exempt the devout. The tone of this argument was one of urgency and empirical realism: viruses do not discriminate, and science must guide policy.

"Obscurantism" vs. Modern Science: Many disputers cast the Church's intransigence as a dangerous anti-scientific attitude belonging to the dark ages. In the view of these mostly secular critics, the communion debate symbolized a broader struggle between enlightenment and superstition. Some explicitly used terms like "obscurantism" or "fanaticism" to describe the refusal to suspend the common spoon. One prominent public intellectual wrote that the insistence that faith will prevent infection is "medieval thinking that has no place in a 21st-century pandemic response." Another commentator quipped, "In the Middle Ages, there was a plague pandemic. Everyone was religious and the only cure was prayer to God. And only prayer. And more prayer. And 25 million people died."

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[10] Later on in 2020, Metropolitan Amfilohije passed away as a result of COVID-19 on October 30, followed by Patriarch Irinej who died on November 11. Three bishops (Stefan, Joanikije, and David) contracted the virus, as an unknown number of priests, deacons, monks and nuns, some of whom also passed away.

crudely suggesting that practical action (or inaction in this case) has tangible consequences regardless of prayer. Such remarks illustrate the ridicule employed by disputers – memes and jokes proliferated.

Fig. 4 "God is watching over you, take it freely!"

The underlying contention was that religion should stay in its lane (spiritual matters) and not presume to override scientific knowledge. Secular-rationalist voices urged the Church to adopt alternative communion methods (such as individual disposable spoons or intinction with no contact), as some Orthodox churches abroad were considering. When Church leaders refused, critics saw it as proof of an irrational rigidity. This theme often carried a tone of exasperation ("Can you believe we're arguing about spoons during a pandemic?") and at times moral superiority, with critics implying they occupied the high ground of reason.

Collective Responsibility and Equality: A significant strand of argument centered on the idea that no group should be above the rules in a public emergency. Serbia was under severe lockdown; ordinary citizens were making sacrifices – missing Easter family gatherings, staying indoors for days due to a 24-hour curfew around Easter. In this light, many found it outrageous that congregations (however small or "controlled") were still sharing communion. This was viewed as the Church demanding special treatment, endangering not just themselves but others (because an infected worshipper could spread illness to the broader community after church). "Rules must apply equally to all" was the rallying cry. Even some who identified as Orthodox believers echoed this point, saying that while they cherished the Eucharist, in a crisis love they neighbour means do not make your neighbour sick. These voices invoked Christian ethics to argue for abstaining from communion: sacrificing one's own desires for the love and safety of others – a clever reframing of religious duty that countered the clergy's line. Additionally, disputers pointed out that other faith communities were complying (e.g. Catholic masses were halted, mosques closed); if the Orthodox Church did not, it was failing in social solidarity. This argument often came with moral indignation:

accusing the Church of irresponsibility, calling it to account for potentially spreading disease. Some commenters bluntly stated that if outbreaks could be traced to communion, the Church should be held legally liable for endangerment. Though mostly hypothetical (proof would be hard to come by), it signalled the level of frustration and the demand that the Church be accountable like everyone else.

Exposing Hypocrisy or Inconsistency: A more tactical argument used by disputers was to point out instances of clergy not following their own proclaimed beliefs. For example, it did not escape notice that, while proclaiming that one cannot get sick in church, some bishops were nonetheless taking precautions in other domains (wearing masks outside liturgy, etc.). When Patriarch Irinej himself in interviews urged believers to "listen to the experts" and stay home if required, critics seized on this as an internal inconsistency – the Patriarch acknowledged the danger, yet the Church still gave communion in practice. When the Patriarch got infected with the virus in November, one comment read: "All you need to know about faith in God and the healing power of religious relics and various holy places is that at the moment the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church is being treated by a council of doctors", again pointing to the inconsistency. Moreover, after Easter, when infections hit the clergy, disputers argued that the Church's narrative had shifted or become evasive. The death of Bishop Milutin was quietly attributed to COVID in official statements, but without any reflection on the communion issue. To critics, this seemed intellectually dishonest and eroded the credibility of the Church's position regarding the claim of safety. Essentially, disputers tried to force defenders into the commonsense reality: if the clergy can get sick and die, then stop insisting nothing is wrong with the practice.

Out-group Stereotypes of Believers: Just as defenders vilified critics, the critics often painted a caricature of the defenders. On social media and in commentaries, it was common to see worshippers who insisted on communion being described as "ignorant," "brainwashed," "sheep," or "zealots." The more caustic commentary would call them "spoon-lickers," using demeaning language to emphasize the perceived grossness of the act. This was part of the creation of a symbolic boundary: the disputers defined themselves as rational, hygienic, and progressive, while casting the other side as irrational, dirty, and stuck in the past. Such language indicated the deep contempt that had built up. Atheist-leaning voices dredged up classic anti-clerical tropes – accusing the Church of caring more about rituals than lives, or calling priests parasites on society. These general attacks sometimes overshadowed the specific issue, broadening into a critique of the Church's role in Serbian society. However, they reinforced the out-group perspective that the religious worldview was fundamentally incomprehensible and inferior to the secular worldview. In phenomeological terms, the critics could not "bracket" their natural attitude in order to understand the believers' province of meaning – instead they simply negated it as nonsense.

Taken together, the disputers' arguments rested on a this-worldly, evidence-based reality. They appealed to universalistic principles (science, equality under the law) and portrayed themselves as the champions of public interest, even of rational faith. Indeed, some devout but moderate individuals sided with this camp, arguing that God does not require believers to abandon common sense – "God gave us brains to use," as one commenter wrote, "and priests should protect their flock's physical well-being too." This internal critique from religious laity showed that the boundary was not simply religion vs. science, but dogmatic traditionalism vs. a more reformist or conciliatory view. However, in the heated climate, such nuances were often lost, and the public narrative remained one of the polarized extremes.

4.3. Symbolic Boundaries and Hostility: In-Group/Out-Group Dynamics

The analysis of the arguments above reveals how each side not only made points about communion, but also engaged in significant boundary-drawing. Each camp delineated an in-group ("the righteous", "the rational") and an out-group ("the impious", "the irrational"), projecting onto the other all that it found unacceptable. This manifested in mutual hostility and very limited dialogue. Schütz's observation that the out-group tends to fundamentally misunderstand the in-group's life-world was starkly borne out. The secular side often failed to grasp the depth of devotion and fear of sacrilege motivating believers – to them, it was "just a spoon" and the believers were obstinate. Conversely, the religious side failed to acknowledge the legitimacy of health fears – to them, it was "just lack of faith" and critics were malevolent. Each interpreted the other's position in the most uncharitable way, reinforcing their own sense of superiority.[11] It is insightful to examine some symbolic boundary markers that each side used:

For the Defenders (Religious In-Group): Markers included faith (vs. unbelief), obedience to God (vs. worldly concern), and patriotism/identity (vs. "anti-Serbian" cosmopolitanism). A devout in-group member would signal their identity by, for example, quoting scripture or saints on the Eucharist, expressing willingness to risk earthly health for spiritual benefit, and by castigating those who attacked the Church. Pious language and nationalist overtones were thus boundary markers. We see an intertwining of religious and national boundaries, consistent with Serbia's socio-historical context where Orthodoxy is a core element of national identity. The out-group (the disputers) was typified as outsiders, frequently labeled with "they" and "those people" who allegedly hate the church or are slaves to foreign (Western) thinking. This resonates with Lamont's notion that symbolic boundaries often coincide with moral boundaries: the defenders imputed immorality or moral failing (impiety, disrespect) to the critics, placing them outside the moral community.

For the Disputers (Secular/Health In-Group): Markers included rationality and education (vs. ignorance), modernity (vs. backwardness), and civic responsibility (vs. irresponsibility). An in-group member here might cite scientific facts or regulations, emphasize their concern for community welfare, and perhaps share a meme mocking the Church's stance – all signals of identifying with a modern, skeptical mindset. They drew a cultural boundary between the "enlightened public" and "religious hardliners." These disputers saw themselves as the guardians of common sense, and thus they often spoke in the name of "we, the rational majority," casting the defenders as a fringe (even if in Serbia the Church has a nominally broad following, the online secular milieu can create an impression that most people agree the practice is absurd). This group also infused moral judgment: the Church's insistence was not just foolish, but selfish and dangerous. Thus, they too excluded the other on moral grounds – violating the duty of care in a pandemic was a cardinal sin in their moral universe.

It is important to note that these two realities and their boundaries were to some extent conflicted within individuals and institutions as well. There were internal tensions: the Patriarch's mixed messaging, some doctors who were Orthodox believers themselves grappling with how to advise. Such nuances (including some faithful who quietly felt uneasy about the spoon), however, were largely obscured in the polarized public

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[11] "[C]ognitive dissonances arising possibly due to an encounter with the material object of the prejudice do not lead to a correction or negation of the typification, but rather to a strengthening of its claim regarding its ordering of reality, which often finds expression in the emotionally colored sentiment of a counterfactual ought-to-be" (Srubar 2005, 21).

narrative, which crystalized around the two extremes we have described. Polarization was exacerbated by the affordances of social media (where outrage, snark and malice get amplified) and by the alignment of this debate with longstanding cultural divides in Serbia (religious vs. secular worldviews, which map onto political divides as well).

5. CONCLUSION

The symbolic struggles over Holy Communion in Serbia's COVID-19 lockdown illustrate how a public crisis can activate deep underlying differences in worldviews. What might superficially look like a dispute about hygiene turned out to be a collision of sacred and secular realities, entwined with issues of authority, identity, and trust. By applying Schütz's phenomenologically oriented sociology, we saw that each side was anchored in a different finite province of meaning, with its own internal logic and relevances. This made genuine communication difficult – it was as if they spoke different "languages" of truth. Supplementing this with Bourdieu and Lamont's perspectives, we understood the dispute as not only a cognitive gap but a power struggle and boundary struggle: each camp fought to have its definition be the dominant one and drew moral lines to exclude the other.

The netnographic and thematic analysis revealed a rich typology of arguments: from claims of divine immunity and tradition on the one hand, to appeals to science and public duty on the other. These arguments were not arbitrary; they cohered into two narrative universes. Visual artifacts like memes and caricatures served as potent expressions of these narratives – whether it was a satirical cartoon of a virus on a communion spoon or an image of Orthodox faithful communing under the slogan "fear not!", each encapsulated a whole stance in symbolic form. The typology developed herein (summarized in Table 1 below) provides a structured understanding of how exactly the two camps framed the issue:

Table 1 Typology of Arguments in the Struggle on Communion

Defenders (Religious Traditionalists)	**Disputers** (Secular/Medical Critics)
1. **Sacred Tradition Argument**: The ritual must remain unchanged after 2000 years; altering it is unthinkable sacrilege.	1. **Public Health Argument**: In a pandemic, there are no exceptions – a shared spoon poses a risk of infection and must be suspended for safety.
2. **Divine Protection Argument**: The Eucharist is holy and cannot transmit disease; faith ensures spiritual immunity (e.g., "no one ever got sick from communion").	2. **Scientific Rationality Argument**: Germ theory and evidence show disease spreads via saliva; believing otherwise is irrational, "medieval" thinking.
3. **Higher Authority Argument**: God's law and church autonomy supersede state orders; the state cannot dictate church rites (implying communion is beyond secular jurisdiction).	3. **Equality/Accountability Argument**: Everyone must follow the same rules; the Church is not above the law and should be held responsible for endangering others if it refuses compliance.
4. **Persecution Narrative**: Claims of anti-Church forces exploiting the situation to attack Orthodoxy; defenders see themselves as protectors of faith under assault.	4. **Hypocrisy/Realism Argument**: Points out the clergy themselves face illness and sometimes quietly take precautions; urges the Church to face reality and not hold double standards.
5. **Moral–Spiritual Framing**: Emphasizes duty to God, salvation of souls; framing the issue as a test of faith and loyalty.	5. **Moral–Civic Framing**: Emphasizes duty to community, saving lives; framing the issue as a test of social responsibility and love of one's neighbour.

This confrontation eventually eased as the first wave of the pandemic receded. But it has left a lasting question: how can societies navigate such "conflicted realities" in times when cooperation is critical? Appeals to abstract principles alone (whether "have faith" or "follow science") may fall on deaf ears across the reality divide. Dialogues that translate meanings between communities – for instance, using theological language of love and protection to encourage health compliance, or using scientific reassurance to respect (not mock) religious needs – might bridge the gap. In some Orthodox contexts outside Serbia, a "middle way" emerged: offering communion with multiple sterilized spoons (see: Jovanović 2022, 84–88), thus trying to satisfy both reality definitions to a degree. Such a compromise was absent in Serbia's case at first, but arguably could have reduced conflict if attempted – it requires each side to relinquish a bit of definitional power for the greater good.

From a sociological perspective, this case study validates the continuing relevance of phenomenologically oriented sociology and the social construction of reality in understanding modern crises. Even in a global pandemic – a seemingly straightforward biological threat – the interpretation of what is "really real" can differ vastly among groups. Crises do not only demand technical solutions; they compel us to reconcile different interpretations of reality. Schütz's work, though mid-20th century, proved a "vital lens" here, illuminating how the pandemic in Serbia was not just a public health problem but a meaning-making challenge. It showed how competing life-worlds were activated and how they collided, disrupting what many assumed was a shared baseline of understanding.

In conclusion, the Holy Communion dispute during the COVID-19 pandemic in Serbia was a microcosm of a larger phenomenon: the pluralism of realities in contemporary societies and the struggles over which reality claims authority in the public sphere. Only by acknowledging the legitimacy and depth of people's lived realities – while also seeking common ground or translation across them – can such symbolic conflicts be resolved or at least mitigated. As Serbia's example shows, when realities remain in conflict, social unity itself suffers. The problem for the future is how to foster mutual intelligibility and respect between different reality-defining communities, be it in matters of religion and science or other value domains, so that the next crisis might find us less divided in our response to what is real and what must be done.

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SUKOBLJENE STVARNOSTI: ŠICOVSKI DODATAK TEORETIZOVANJU SIMBOLIČKE BORBE OKO PRIČEŠĆA U SRBIJI TOKOM KOVID-A

Ovaj rad je posvećen analizi i tumačenju žučne javne debate izazvane organizovanjem pričešća tokom pandemije. Izvođenje ovog rituala tokom važenja mera izolacije, donetih zbog pandemije COVID-19 2020. godine, izazvalo je intenzivne i veoma polarizovane reakcije javnosti. Debate su živopisno oslikavale simboličke borbe ili kulturne ratove karakteristične za društvo u Srbiji. Burdijeova teorija sukoba oko klasifikacije i razmatranje simboličkih granica Mišel Lamon dali su okvir za ranije razmatranje ovih sporova (Jovanović 2022). U ovom članku biće učinjen pokušaj teorijskog preoblikovanja. Uzimajući u obzir navode iz Šicovog ogleda „Jednakost i značenjska struktura društvenog sveta" o „načinu života grupe kako ga vide oni unutar- i oni van-grupe", biće napravljen prikaz društveno potvrđenih tipizacija organizovanih kroz sisteme relevantnosti pomenutih konfliktnih grupa. Ovo će zauzvrat pružiti uvid u „relativni prirodni pogled na svet" (relativ natürliche Weltanschauung) konfliktnih grupa: načine na koje one definišu situaciju u društvenom kosmosu, pri čemu ove definicije postaju integralni element same situacije. Izraženo neprijateljstvo između „branilaca" i „osporivača" pričešća tokom COVID-a može se razumeti uz oslanjanje na Šicovu diskusiju o tumačenju sveta onih van-grupe koji se uzima zdravo za gotovo od strane pripadnika unutar-grupe.

Ključne reči: *simbolički sukobi, definicije stvarnosti, moć definisanja, sistemi relevantnosti, unutar-grupno i van-grupno.*