Online Strategies of Nonreligious and Atheistic Organizations in Croatia

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Abstract

Croatian society is traditionally and dominantly religious (Catholic), and there are few organizations that gather together nonreligious people and atheists. Starting from three theoretical perspectives on organized nonreligiosity (identity theory, cultural approach to social movements theory, and mediatization theory) this article’s aim is to analyze various strategies these organizations employ in the context of their online activities. The observed strategies function inwardly (forming identity and strengthening the intragroup solidarity) and outwardly (trying to attract new members and sympathizers and to ‘demystify’ nonreligiosity and atheism). The study is based on the content analysis (deductive and inductive) that included materials posted on web pages and official Facebook pages of nonreligious and atheistic organizations in Croatia. In the first phase materials were analyzed with respect to four predetermined strategies (competitiveness/ cooperation, minority discourse, religious mimicry, exposing religion), while in the second phase inductive analysis revealed three additional strategies (inversion, reclaiming patriotism, and reclaiming spirituality).

Keywords

nonreligiosity – atheism – organizations – online strategies – Croatia
1 Introduction

The first organization to gather nonreligious people and atheists appeared in Croatia in 2006. Since then, other, more or less durable, organizations have appeared. Their main agenda is not only to gather nonreligious people and atheists but also to protect their rights and interests in as highly religious a society as Croatian is. There are nine such organizations in Croatia today: Protagora, David, Center for Civil Courage, At3a, LiberOs, I’m not a Believer, Movement for Secular Croatia, Coalition for Secularism, and Atheists and Agnostics of Croatia. Although these organizations (especially formally registered) gather just a small number of members, they are publicly active, their activities are covered by the media, and they have the potential to attract a larger number of sympathizers when it comes to certain issues (faith-based religious education in public schools, abortion, the implicit connection between dominant religion in Croatia and right-wing political positions, and so forth).

This article tries to explore which online strategies Croatian nonreligious organizations use and how they implement them in the specific local context with distinctive religious-secular dynamics. Analyzed strategies function inwardly (strengthening solidarity and cohesion among the members, forming identity and community) and outwardly, toward the general society (increasing visibility, demystifying nonreligiosity, and presenting its positive content making the organizations more acceptable to potential new members and sympathizers). The article draws on three theoretical perspectives on organized nonreligiosity (identity theory, cultural approach to social movements theory, and mediatization theory) and focuses on the online context that provides greater freedom of expression and hence a much livelier and more active form of activism of the nonreligious community in a dominantly religious society.

Croatian society is traditionally and dominantly religious (Catholic), according to all indicators of religiosity. Throughout history, Croatia was part of

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1 Other research also confirmed that nonreligious and atheistic organizations gather just a small percentage of nonreligious or atheistic populations; Stephen Bullivant, “Research Note: Sociology and the Study of Atheism,” Journal of Contemporary Religion 23/3 (2008), 363–368; Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith, Atheist Awakening, Secular Activism and Community in America (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

different political formations, but Catholicism was the most prominent identification for Croats. In the socialist period (1945–1990), Croatia was part of the multi-national and multi-religious Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. During socialism, the official stance of the ruling communist government was scientific atheism of Marxist-Leninist ideology, strongly propagated through the media, education system, and public discourse. The Communist Party publicly opposed religion, making it not only private and socially invisible, but also denoting it as backward and primitive. On the other hand, in the private sphere, patterns of traditional religiosity continued to be transmitted, most often within the nuclear family, through primary religious socialization.

Therefore, religion existed in a “double reality” where two parallel systems of symbolic values were created independently of each other: one in the public sphere, propagated, imposed, and legitimized by the official government, and another, non-institutional, alternative, and private that served as a protector and guardian of traditional and national values. In the period of socialism, religion was the only system that the official government failed to control from within and which offered an alternative worldview based on symbolic values different from those propagated by the system.

During the early 1990s, Croatian society underwent extensive, sudden, and turbulent changes due to the collapse of socialism, and the dramatic war and aggression that followed. Social consolidation after these changes was based on homogenization in a national and religious sense. Furthermore, the ruling political structure at the beginning of the nineties was closely inclined toward the Catholic Church, emphasizing its specific position in socialism, which gave it a legitimizing function for the new system.

The Croatian constitution regulates the church-state relationship on the model of separation, allowing simultaneous cooperation (assistance and protection) in specific areas. Practical implementation of this model became problematic because it opened a wide range of different possible solutions. The model of separation in Croatia was implemented selectively toward different

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3 Croatia was, along with Slovenia, the most religious part of the confessionally diverse former Yugoslavia; Zdenko Roter, “Yugoslavia at the Crossroads: A Sociological Discourse,” Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe 8/2 (1988), 11–24.


6 Srđan Vrcan, Od krize religije k religiji krize (Zagreb: Školska knjiga, 1986).
religious communities. In other words, addressing the relationship between the church and the state in the first phase of Croatian independence meant addressing the relationship between the Catholic Church and the state. In the period from 1996 to 1998, the state signed four contracts with the Holy See: (1) The Contract between the Holy See and the Republic of Croatia on the Spiritual Guidance of Catholics, Members of the Armed Forces and Police; (2) The Contract between the Holy See and the Republic of Croatia on Cooperation in the Field of Education and Culture; (3) The Contract between the Holy See and the Republic of Croatia on Legal Issues; and (4) The Contract between the Holy See and the Republic of Croatia on Economic Issues. These so-called Vatican contracts ensured various rights and privileges to the Catholic Church. For that reason, they provoked different reactions from the very beginning. Organizations that gather nonreligious people and atheists organize annual protests, claiming that the contracts violate the principle of secularity in Croatia and put the Catholic Church in a privileged social position.

The impression of a privileged position of the Catholic Church was further reinforced by the fact that faith-based religious education was implemented in public schools even before the signing of the Vatican contracts (in the school year 1991/92). Faith-based religious education is an optional subject, but in elementary schools it has no organized alternative so the children who do not attend it are left to themselves during religious classes. Ančić and Puhovski concluded that there are some elements of discrimination toward the children that do not attend religious education classes (by peers or schools that consider catholic religiosity as a normative social position).

The Law on the Legal Status of Religious Communities, which sought to regulate relations between the state and other religious communities, was adopted only in 2002. It prescribed additional conditions as necessary for the registration of new religious communities and hence reinforced the impression of a hierarchization among religious communities.

From the beginning of the nineties, when Catholic religiosity become a conformist position in Croatia, 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.\(^7\) The great majority of Croatian citizens (about 90%) report confessional adherence (Table 1), while 70%–80% of them

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8 Pero Aračić, Gordan Črpić and Krunoslav Nikodem, Postkomunistički horizonti: Obrisi sustava vrijednosti i religijskih orijentacija u deset postkomunističkih zemalja (Đakovo: Biblioteka Diacovensia, 2003); Marinović Jerolimov, “Nereligioznost.”
TABLE 1
Croatian population according to confessional affiliation, 1991–2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Catholic (%)</th>
<th>Other (%)</th>
<th>No confessional affiliation (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


TABLE 2
Croatian citizens according to (non)religious self-identification, 1999–2018
(European Values Study)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Convinced atheists (%)</th>
<th>Nonreligious (%)</th>
<th>Religious (%)</th>
<th>Does not know/no answer (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>79.9</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>77.8</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>78.3</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: NIKODEM AND ZRINŠČAK (2019)

declare themselves as religious, which positions Croatia among the most religious European countries.9

Nikodem and Zrinščak analyzed the latest data available from the European Values Study and concluded that the numbers of self-declared (non)religious citizens have not changed much in the observed period (Table 2).10

However, despite the overall strong public presence of (Catholic) religion and high indicators of personal religiosity, the religious situation in Croatia is not as simple and clear as it might seem on the surface. Closer examination of the religious population synthesized from a number of research sources shows

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that there is a gradation from almost complete confessional identification of individuals (80–90% of the population) toward the lower levels of religious self-identification (70–80% of the population). Furthermore, only a portion of those who declare as religious accept fundamental religious beliefs (about 50% believe in a personal god, about 50% in a life after death, 50–55% in Heaven, and 40–50% in Hell) and an even smaller portion of them participates regularly in a Mass (20–25% weekly and 12–16% monthly) and accepts church moral teachings on contraception and premarital sex (about 15%), divorce (27%), or extramarital relationships (31%). On the other hand, more than 50% of nonreligious citizens declared confessional adherence (following their family tradition), almost 60% were brought up in faith, more than 10% believe in a personal god, about 25% attend church yearly, and 5% monthly or more often, 15% go on pilgrimages, and around 40% own a cross, altar, icon, or some other religious object for religious purposes.\footnote{Nikolina Hazdovac Bajić, “Science as an Alternative Symbolic Universe among Members and Organizations of Nonreligious People and Atheists in Croatia,” in J. Vorpahl and D. Schuster (eds.), \textit{Communicating Religion and Atheism in Central and Eastern Europe} (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2020), 257–280.}

It can be concluded that religion in Croatia became a part of a broad cultural-symbolic identification framework for most of the population (which includes the religious, but also part of indifferent and nonreligious people). This type of religiosity with traditional, collectivist, and institutional features is strengthened by the public role and position of the Catholic Church, its presence in the education system, media, and public space. On the other hand, due to the specific historical and war-transitional circumstances, Catholicism in Croatia acquired a distinctive political dimension, which includes strong right-wing nationalistic elements. At the same time processes of secularization or individualization can be observed in the dimension of concrete everyday forms of religiosity.\footnote{Concepts like differentiated secularization (Gert Pickel, Detlef Pollack, and Olaf Müller, “Differentiated Secularization in Europe: Comparative Results,” in D. Pollack and O. Müller (eds.), \textit{The Social Significance of Religion in the Enlarged Europe} (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 229–255) and contextual secularization (Gert Pickel, “Contextual Secularization: Theoretical Thoughts and Empirical Implications,” \textit{Religion and Society in Central and Eastern Europe} 4/1 (2011), 3–23; Gert Pickel and Kornelia Sammet (eds.), \textit{Transformations of Religiosity in Central and Eastern Europe Twenty Years after the Breakdown of Communism} (Wiesbaden: Springer Verlag, 2012)) could be used here as they point to the fact that the secularization’s processes vary depending on the context and that they take place differently on different levels of society, at different times and paces.}

Since religiosity and nonreligiosity are inhomogeneous, partially overlapping phenomena, it can be assumed that the organizing of the nonreligious
citizens and atheists is relational and reactive, determined by (objective) social structures or the social regulation of religion and the subjective actions of individual actors. In other words, the mobilization and organization of non-religious people and atheists are prompted by the strong public presence of religion and its social regulation that affects the (perceived) position of non-religious citizens. This article tries to explore which online strategies Croatian nonreligious organizations use and how they implement them to the specific local context with distinctive religious-secular dynamics.

2 Theoretical Background

Organized forms of nonreligiosity and atheism in this article refer to formal (legally registered) or informal organizations that connect individuals either directly or through the internet, and which come together to achieve a common codified goal or goals concerning their nonreligiosity or atheism.

The first and until today only sociology of nonreligion, written by Colin Campbell in 1971, focuses on the nineteenth-century nonreligious social movements in the US and UK. In the most comprehensive existing study of organized nonreligiosity and atheism in the US, Cimino and Smith gave an overview of nonreligious and atheistic activism and community, divisions within it, strategies and identity policies, the role of the media (especially new media) in creating and maintaining cohesion and promoting group goals and activities, the impact of New Atheism, and different aspects of gatherings and rituals in forming community, identity, and intragroup solidarity.

The media have come to play an important role in the performance of individual and social (non)religious identities, the construction of the community and authority, and in the representation and development of social and

15 Cimino and Smith, Atheist Awakening, 8.
16 Campbell, Toward a Sociology.
17 Cimino and Smith, Atheist Awakening.
religious conflicts. In recent decades the development of digital media has become a space of diverse opportunities for informing and connecting non-religious people and atheists, distributing materials, and raising awareness of the existence of this specific population within itself, as well as within the wider society. In addition to the quantitative leap in the amount and scope of available materials, the internet can connect geographically often dispersed (and even isolated) individuals, and introduce them to the existence of organizations and associations of this type, which has significant effects on mobilization and activism of the nonreligious people and atheists. In this way, the internet became the space for nonreligious expression, community creation, and negotiation of identity. Based on their view of mediatization theory, Cimino and Smith point out that the new media and related technologies simultaneously create a material terrain on which and through which social knowledge and social experience are shaped and adopted. In other words, an electronically defined common place, which is electronically reproduced, can also be viewed as a public space that is deterritorialized. The online environment in this case offers the possibility to publish content that does not have the opportunity to appear in other media.

Scientific production on organized forms of nonreligiosity and atheism, especially in the United States, is largely based on identity theories, new social movements, and subcultural identity, and organizational theory. Starting from the US context, Cimino and Smith argue that the nonreligious and atheistic organizations take on a subcultural identity due to the failure of secularism to impose itself as the dominant way of interpreting the world (superior to religious interpretations). Namely, in circumstances in which a group of people feels threatened in some way within the wider society, its internal solidarity, loyalty, and cohesion strengthen, while personal identity is associated with a group. Defense and protection of the subcultural group become equivalent

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20 Cimino and Smith, Atheist Awakening, 71.
21 Cimino and Smith, “Secular Humanism,” 408.
to personal defense and protection.\textsuperscript{22} Opposition symbols and messages are emphasized to create counter loyalty against the wider society. At the same time, Cimino and Smith do not deny the existence of a social movement and see the concept of subculture as latent in the approach to organized forms of nonreligiosity and atheism as a new social movement.\textsuperscript{23} The line along which these two approaches are complementary is a detachment from economic issues and focus on identity policies. These authors identified three basic strategies that nonreligious and atheistic organizations use to survive and gain new members in a predominantly religious American society: (1) competitiveness among organizations; (2) imitating various aspects of the religious organizations; and (3) use of minority discourse and identity politics to turn the issue of atheism into a human rights issue.

The most frequent preoccupations of nonreligious and atheistic organizations are the attempts to “expose” religion (at all levels, from intellectual to moral) and a proactive advocation of nonreligiosity and atheism by invoking the authority of science, humanism, and reason.\textsuperscript{24} However, in a predominantly religious society (such as the US, but also Croatia), the focus on which the ‘mission’ of these organizations is based is a religion fused with political ideology and positions of political power. Starting from this contextual similarity, this article wants to explore possible similarities and differences between strategies described by Cimino and Smith and those used by the nonreligious organizations in Croatia.

Along with the described theoretical approach to organized nonreligiosity and atheism, this study is also based on a cultural approach to social movements and its basic idea that the social movements not only present a challenge to political institutions, but that they seek to change and recreate the culture by questioning the existing identities and ways of interpreting and understanding the world.\textsuperscript{25} D’Anjou and Van Male claim that the social movements create content that has to fulfill two contradictory tasks: it has to be contrary to the dominant culture while at the same time it wants to embed these contrary views as


\textsuperscript{23} Cimino and Smith, \textit{Atheist Awakening}, 45.

\textsuperscript{24} Smith, “Creating a Godless Community,” 28.

a legitimate part of the dominant culture. Similarly, Snow et al. argue that the social movements “draw upon cultural repositories to develop resonant emergent beliefs and practices, or they reinterpret those cultural resources to accord more closely with a movement’s claims and goals.”

It is important to note that it cannot be claimed with certainty that various nonreligious and atheistic organizations in Croatia form a clearly defined social movement, but their activities, actions, and public appearances can be seen as its beginning. Because nonreligious and atheistic organizations in Croatia were influenced by the social movements (especially New Atheism) from the countries of Western Europe and the US, it can be assumed that they use similar strategies that d’Anjou and Van Male, and Snow et al. described.

3 Methodology

Based on the three theoretical perspectives on organized nonreligiosity and atheism described earlier (identity theory, cultural approach to social movements theory, and mediatization theory), this article aims to identify and analyze online strategies used by the organized nonreligious community in Croatia. The article seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) Which strategies can be observed in the online activities of nonreligious organizations in Croatia? (2) What are the similarities or differences concerning strategies already described in the literature? (3) How are those various strategies carried out in the Croatian context? (4) What are the goals of these strategies?

The study is based on qualitative content analysis (QICA) of all the materials posted on the official web pages and Facebook pages of nonreligious and atheistic organizations in Croatia. Materials were collected in the period from February 2019 to February 2021. Content analysis used in this study starts from predetermined categories or strategies already described in the literature. This

type of content analysis is called deductive or directed qualitative content analysis (DQlCA). This method is proven to be useful “to test, to corroborate the pertinence of the theory/ies guiding the study or to extend the application of the theory/ies to contexts/cultures other than those in which that/those theory/ies was/were developed.”³⁰ DQlCA is guided by a more structured process than a conventional content analysis,³¹ and usually includes several phases or steps.³² This study started with the pretesting of the main categories and then followed the procedure proposed by Kibiswa.³³

Selected texts were imported into the software program NVivo and then coded using four predetermined categories: (1) competitiveness/cooperation among organizations;³⁴ (2) minority discourse (use of minority discourse to turn the issue of atheism into a human rights issue); (3) religious mimicry (imitating various aspects of religious organizations); and (4) exposing religion (finding and discussing the events and situations related to religious practices or representatives that deviate from what is considered a generally accepted moral system or rationality).³⁵ Text that could not be coded was left uncoded. Later, in the second step of the analysis, all the texts were reread to reanalyze the material and determine whether the initial codes were reliable and whether the uncoded text could be classified in a new category. In this step, three additional categories were found: (5) inversion (turning negatively perceived notions into positive); (6) reclaiming patriotism; and (7) reclaiming spirituality.

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³¹ Hsieh Hsiu-Fang and Sarah E. Shannon, “Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis,” *Qualitative Health Research* 15/9 (2005), 1281.
³³ Kibiswa (“Directed Qualitative Content Analysis”) proposed three phases and an eight-step schema: (1) Preparation phase (developing the study frame, identifying key concepts as initial coding categories and their operational definitions; determining the unit of analysis and sampling materials; getting a sense of the data; pretesting of the main categories); (2) Data analysis phase (data coding and organizing, making connections, interpreting them and drawing conclusions; verifying interpretations and ensuring trustworthiness); (3) Final phase—reporting results (making an appropriate outline for a presentation of results; description of the research history and findings).
³⁴ The initial category called competitiveness was subsequently changed to cooperation. During the pretesting phase, it was noticed that there weren’t data in the materials that pointed to competitiveness, which was further proven through the data analysis phase.
³⁵ Cimino and Smith, *Atheist Awakening*; Smith, “Creating a Godless Community.”
4 Results

4.1 Cooperation among Organizations

Analysis of the selected material found that there is no competition between nonreligious and atheistic organizations in Croatia. Quite the opposite—data showed that they work together and cooperate to promote their ideas and activism. Formal organizations gather a small number of members who often function as small, tightly knit communities. Furthermore, core members that are the most active are members of multiple organizations and create deeper relationships among themselves. In one text on the Protagoras website, one member wrote: “And there is another difference, we are members, but also friends ... almost a family.”

During various public appearances and reactions, multiple organizations gather and create joint statements (e.g., the open letter regarding the COVID-19 pandemic in Croatia, the statement regarding Judith Reisman’s visit and lecture in the Croatian Parliament, the organization of yearly protests against the Vatican contracts, activities connected to religious education in public schools, etc.). In that way, they take a unified public stand on certain issues.

Lack of apparent competitiveness and disagreements among Croatian non-religious and atheistic organizations creates the impression of unity among them. From the tactical side, this is a more thoughtful move than conflicting because by cooperating and combined efforts they appear more numerous, more vocal, and more coherent toward the general public and potential members. Networks created through memberships in various organizations, as well as joint appearances and activities thus aim to attract more potential sympathizers and future members.

38 Judith Reisman (1935–2021) was a controversial American conservative author, communicator, and lecturer. Her main interests were around the connections of homosexuality and pornography with pedophilia. She advocated sexual abstinence until marriage.
http://www.civilcourage.hr/blog-post/povodom-gostovanja-judith-reisman-u-saboru/.
39 https://protagora.hr/reakcija-na-diskriminaciju-ucenika-koji-ne-pohadaju-vjeronauk/.
40 https://protagora.hr/reakcija-na-diskriminaciju-ucenika-koji-ne-pohadaju-vjeronauk/.
4.2 **Minority Discourse**

The perception of discrimination or social disadvantage of nonreligious people and atheists often results in the use of minority discourse. Phrases like “second-class citizens,” “minority,” “disadvantaged,” and “stigmatized” are used for nonreligious people and atheists in the analyzed texts.

Among the list of their basic activities, most organizations stress providing protection and support to individuals discriminated against based on their religious non-affiliation. Protagora’s statute states the following as one of its main obligations: “to provide protection and support to citizens who are discriminated against or disadvantaged in any way due to their nonreligious orientation or in their efforts to fight for equal treatment in a certain environment … to publicly disclose specific forms of religious discrimination or incitement to religious discrimination.” 41

One of the regularly recurring themes is presenting events that testify to discrimination based on nonreligiosity, thus perpetuating the idea of the endangered personal freedoms and rights of the nonreligious minority as opposed to the strong, loud, and socially powerful Catholic Church. The Movement for Secular Croatia argues on its Facebook page: “Unfortunately, it is not enough for the Church to have a privileged position in relation to all other communities and associations, but it constantly invokes the majority which it (allegedly) represents, forgetting that democracy, which it appeals to, is measured by the respect for the minority, and not majority rights.” 42

Religious education in Croatian public schools is perceived as a most obvious form of discrimination and unequal treatment of nonreligious children:

> in recent years, religious education is increasingly gaining a negative image of religious indoctrination which has no place in public schools in a secular state, as well as a subject that stigmatizes children who do not attend it. More and more parents are outraged that their children, if they do not want to attend religious education, have to sit in school hallways, in libraries, or even in religious education classes as the so-called passive listeners, especially at the time of the corona pandemic. 43

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Other sources of discrimination are seen in the existing model of financing the church from the state budget where nonreligious people are “forced” to financially support the functioning of religious communities by paying taxes, and the saturation of public space with religious symbols that make them feel uncomfortable. Nonreligious and atheistic organizations also point out the common practice of “inviting” individuals to participate in Catholic religious services and expecting them to attend regardless of their nonreligiousity or different religiosity, especially in state institutions (schools for example).

The use of the minority discourse strengthens intragroup solidarity. Cimino and Smith claim that in a social environment where two groups oppose it is not uncommon for both groups to use minority discourse. In this way, they seek to create a perception that they are at a disadvantage and hence endangered in a way, which ultimately strengthens the group and encourages the mobilization of its members.

4.3 Religious Mimicry
Since religiosity in the Croatian context represents a normative position, non-religiosity and atheism are seen as a form of deviation. Nonreligious and atheistic organizations strive to deconstruct their deviant status and to fit into the normative social structure by using religious mimicry that refers to subversive actions that sought to retain the religious form while replacing religious content with the nonreligious, atheistic, or secular.

There are numerous examples of religious mimicry in the analyzed texts. One of them is the idea of reregistering some of the organizations as communities of beliefs. Namely, Article 40 of the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia guarantees the freedom of public expression of religion or other beliefs, which means that religious faith and other beliefs have an equal status legally. Hence, it could be possible to legally register some nonreligious or atheistic organization as a community of beliefs, which could enable them to later regulate their relationship with the state as other religious communities do. In that case, atheism (agnosticism, skepticism, or humanism) would acquire legally equal

44 Cimino and Smith, *Atheist Awakening*, 125. It is not unusual for members of the clergy or for members of different lay groups that are close to the Catholic Church in Croatia to use minority discourse, claiming that there is a “growing spread of discrimination, intolerance, contempt, belittling and underestimation manifested towards members of the Christian faith and towards the representatives of Catholic attitudes in Croatian public” (Croatian cardinal Josip Bozanić, available at http://zg-nadbiskupija.hr/print.aspx?id=4526, retrieved 10 October 2020.)
status to any other religious belief. Although this idea exists, it is questionable whether it would be legally feasible.

Other examples of religious mimicry can be seen in rituals, the most famous of which is the Festivus—For the Rest of Us,\(^45\) which is a “non-holiday party,” held at Christmas, and conceived as a “relaxed gathering of atheists, agnostics, and nonreligious people, who share similar views and support the activism of associations and initiatives that promote secularism.”\(^46\)

The Centre for Civil Courage organizes humanist workshops for elementary school children. The workshops are conceived as an alternative for religious education:

Imposition of religious ideology is systematically implemented in all social aspects and especially within the educational system, which stresses the importance of opinion-forming among children in respect to women, human rights or science. Thus we have decided to give the children the right tools in the form of freethinking and feminist workshops.\(^47\)

Workshops are sometimes marked by the final celebration, held in a festive mood, with music and entertainment for the whole family. During the ceremony, diplomas are awarded to children, as a kind of rite reminiscent of the first communion, as suggested by the organizers. The president of the Centre for Civic Courage, Nada Topić Peratović, is also the author of the book *Humanism for Children*,\(^48\) published in Croatian and English, which serves as an alternative to textbooks of the Catholic Catechism:

In the first nonreligious and humanistic book for children, not only in Croatia but in the whole region as well, *Humanism for Children*, author Nada Topić Peratović, introduces children to the world of humanistic

\(^45\) Festivus is a fictional holiday derived from American pop culture. It became popular in the late 1990s after an episode of the popular sitcom *Seinfeld* was devoted to it. It is conceived as an alternative to Christmas. It parodies Christmas family gatherings and consumerism while remaining completely secular.


\(^48\) The book *Humanism for Children* was inspired by the American booklet *Humanism for Kids*, published by the Family of Humanists in 1985. The Croatian version of the book contains translated text from the American original in the smaller part, and the rest is the original work of Nada Topić Peratović.
thought in a child-friendly manner. Humanistic theories are further enriched by feminist and human rights values.\textsuperscript{49}

Some of the activities listed here (such as the Festivus celebrations and the publication of the book \textit{Humanism for Children}) were inspired by the work of atheistic and secular-humanist associations from the UK and the US, but some came from the specific Croatian context. One of them is the production and distribution of stickers and calendars at the end of every calendar year.\textsuperscript{50} Stickers with religious motifs and the inscription “Peace to this house” and Catholic calendars are usually distributed at the end of the calendar year by priests of the Catholic Church during the blessing of houses. These objects are rooted in the Croatian (folk) religious tradition and are a common feature in the majority of Croatian households. Stickers and calendars made by nonreligious and atheistic organizations are modeled on those distributed by priests. Stickers have the inscription “Reason to this house,” and photographs of famous scientists, atheists, writers, and the like. Secular calendars are also made in the model of the Catholic calendar and, instead of marking days by Catholic saints and holidays, they mark secular holidays (such as Earth Day or Democracy Day), natural cycles (solstices), and birthdays of famous scientists, artists, and humanists:

Secular calendars are the response to the religious calendars that overwhelm us at every turn. The secular calendars follow the matrix of religious calendars, but with them, we want to give an alternative. These calendars present real ‘saints’ rather than religious saints. Real ‘saints’ are the people who have entrusted humanity with their deeds; scientists, innovators, artists, architects, writers, philosophers, publicists, human rights activists … all bound together by the fact that they left the world as a better place than they have found it.\textsuperscript{51}

Using religious mimicry in practices and artifacts that are usually part of the conventional religious inventory, nonreligious and atheistic organizations try not only to undermine and question dominant typifications but also to offer affirmative values and positive content to nonreligiosity and atheism.

\textsuperscript{50} Production of stickers and calendars is a project of the organizations Movement for Secular Croatia and Atheists and Agnostics of Croatia.
4.4 **Exposing Religion**

In the analyzed materials, there is a frequent emphasis on situations that are, or could be, interpreted as problematic and which involve religious practices, religious representatives, or religious presence in the public space (media, education system, and public discourse). Presented situations are deemed problematic because they deviate from the generally accepted moral and value system. A persistent focusing on such situations suggests that there is a deeper problem in society that requires a solution and ultimately wants to encourage a reaction not only among nonreligious and atheists but also in society at large. To characterize the situation as problematic, it is necessary to offer a framework (that tells “the intended audience what is happening and how they should organize their perception, cognition, and views”) and reasoning (that offers value aspects and “describe why the problematic situation is as it is”).

A popular way of exposing religion(s) is its mockery. Leaders of the group Atheists and Agnostics of Croatia encourage their members by saying:

> Blasphemy is allowed and welcome. Namely, since gods do not exist, all jokes on the subject are welcome. Every human being deserves the respect as a human being, but ideas do not deserve respect just because they exist, they must deserve respect—they must be proven to be good and valid [through scientific verification].

Ridicule of religious representatives, beliefs, and practices is common in computer-mediated communication and indicates a kind of intellectual superiority and effort to gain approval from the wider society emphasizing the absurdity of religious belief and the scandalous actions of some believers or part of the clergy. At the same time, it is questioning and undermining the so-called unquestionable religious truths. It also serves as an outlet for expressing frustrations and as a means for creating boundaries between “us” and “them.” Widespread use of humor offers a relatively non-threatening challenge to religion while still provoking people to reflect.

4.5 **Inversion**

Most public activities of nonreligious and atheistic organizations in Croatia emphasize the achievement of the principle of secularity as their main objec-

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52 d’Anjou and Van Male, “Between Old and New,” 211.
The idea of secularity is considered neutral enough to attract a large(r) number of sympathizers. Furthermore, it doesn’t represent the negation, but an affirmative value for which all members of society could equally advocate since it is presented as a common good. In other words, secularity as a value does not oppose religion and religiosity, on the contrary, it is presented as a principle that serves the well-being of the whole society and thus as a benefit for all members of society (even for those who are religious).

The transcript of one of the speeches held at the annual protest against Vatican contracts (published on one of the websites) advocates for secularity as one of the main pillars of the just society:

“We are gathered here today, both believers and non-believers, to show unity and let politicians know, clear and loud, that we do not want to be second-class citizens in our country! Secularity is not atheism, it is not an ideology, it is not left nor right. Secularity is the separation of the state and religious organizations, a worldview-neutral state in which all citizens, believers or non-believers, as well as all religious groups, are equal before the law. Unfortunately, Croatia is like that only on paper."

From this, it can be seen that the organizations call for unity in resistance to politics (rather than to church or religion), which is perceived as a factor responsible for not implementing the principles of a secular state in Croatia. The political regulation of the relationship between the church and the state is imposed as the crucial problem, while the negative ideas related to nonreligiosity and atheism are sought to be inverted into positive ones. In other words, the main goal of organizations is not to act against the church and religion but to strive for secularity which is a prerequisite for a more just and better society.

Another example of inversion can be seen in the rhetoric regarding Vatican contracts. Cancellation or revision of these contracts is presented by the orga-

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54 Secularity here refers to a principle of neutrality toward religion(s) in public space. Although the term secularism is often used with this meaning, I’m drawing on Brian Wilson and on Talal Asad who differentiate between secularity as “an attitude of indifference toward religious institutions and practices, and even religious issues as such” and secularism as “an aggressive programmatic meaning” of secularity: Brian Wilson, “Secularization,” in L. Jones (ed.), The Encyclopedia of Religion Detroit: Macmillan, 2005), 8214–8215; Talal Asad, Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 23.

nizations as not only a step toward a more secular and hence better society, but also as a move that would be economically viable for individuals and society as a whole:

Politicians decided for us—about our future, the future of our children, our grandchildren, great-grandchildren ... They decided that the Church hierarchy should permanently have our hard-earned money, leaving us no choice to decide for ourselves whether we want to give it to them! ... The Catholic Church receives billions from the growing taxes imposed on us. Imagine what could have been done with that money. Maybe repay the highways that go into concession today? Maybe we could have more hospitals, schools, kindergartens, better railroads and trains, better irrigation systems, flood defense.\(^\text{56}\)

In this way, the termination of the Vatican contracts is inverted from a worldview question into an economic one.

### 4.6 Reclaiming Patriotism

Religious affiliation with the Catholic Church is the dominant identification pattern which usually also implies (strong) national identity in the Croatian context. Individuals who deviate from the pattern of Croat-Catholic are often labeled pejoratively as “Yugo-nostalgics,” “neo-communists,” “left-liberals,” “left-ideological,” and the like. Due to the efforts to “detach” the concepts of nonreligiosity and atheism from such established stereotypes, organizations try to reclaim patriotism as a value by connoting it differently: not through the concept of religion, but respect for the civic obligations and laws of the country. An example of this can be seen in a text formed as a letter to an ideal-typical Croatian patriot:

I know nothing about you, I don’t know your age, your education, and your social status. I only know that you love your homeland Croatia, that you are a patriot, and that you constantly emphasize and show it ... You must be a Catholic and a good believer; you go to Mass every Sunday, occasionally to confession and communion, always with an idea that only a Catholic can be a good Croat, and a patriot. Rest of us, who do not go to Mass on Sundays ... and who are, God forbid, even atheists, you see as antinational elements, sold souls, as communists and Yugoslav nostalgics, as

enemies and haters of Croatia, as national traitors ... You are trying, my dear Patriot, to rob us of our homeland. But we too love our home, our homeland, we just don't talk about it, we don't advertise it. Love for the homeland is, like any love, an intimate experience, not expressed and not exposed in public. We want to say that we love our country and that we are for the rule of the law and equality of all, believers and non-believers, before the same laws.\(^{57}\)

National iconography (flag, coat of arms) is often displayed on the organizations' web pages and during public gatherings,\(^{58}\) while prominent figures from Croatian history, especially politicians, are associated with anticlerical, nonreligious, or atheistic worldviews. Stjepan Radić (1871–1928), the famous Croatian politician, known as the icon of modern Croatian political identity, is thus shown in a different light, as a fierce critic of the Catholic Church and its clergy.\(^{59}\) Similarly, Ante Starčević (1823–1896), known as the “Father of the Homeland,” political leader and main ideologue of Croatian nationalism, was associated with his prominent anticlerical stances, because of which he was disliked by the church at the time.\(^{60}\) This attempt to deconstruct the alleged historical connection between religion and Croatian nationalism can be seen in the following example:

We can remember two great men from the Croatian history. They both were believers and vehemently opposed the Church's interference in state affairs. Because of that, both endured great difficulties in their private and public lives. One is Stjepan Radić and the other is Ante Starčević. These are two big, key names in our history. Because of their attitudes, they would be labeled today as enemies of both the Church and the


\(^{58}\) For example, Movement for Secular Croatia (https://www.facebook.com/sekularna/, retrieved 24 January 2021) has a national flag and Stjepan Radić on its profile picture.

\(^{59}\) Stjepan Radić (1871–1928), together with his brother Antun Radić, was the founder of the Croatian People's Peasant Party (Hrvatska pučka seljačka stranka). He was assassinated in the National Assembly in 1928. He was shot, along with several other Croatian MPs, by a Serbian member of the parliament, Puniša Račić. This assassination showed the depth of political and national (and religious) divisions in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Radić's political activities and the circumstances of his death left a deep mark on Croatian political culture.

\(^{60}\) Ante Starčević (1823–1896) was one of the greatest figures of national history, the leader of political Croatianhood, and the great opponent of all perceived anti-Croatian policy in the region. He was one of the founders of the Croatian Party of Rights (Stranka prava).
state. And if Starčević and Radić are enemies, then I am glad to be in such a company.\textsuperscript{61}

In the profile photo of the organization Atheists and Agnostics of Croatia, the atheist flag is in the foreground, while the Knin fortress is in the background.\textsuperscript{62} The Knin fortress is a symbol of Croatian statehood,\textsuperscript{63} so here, independence and freedom are not only brought into symbolic connection with a surprising element, but also this iconic national space has been symbolically conquered.

Using this strategy, patriotism is affirmed as an idea, but in a new context, separated from its religious rootedness. The subversiveness of such action refers to the appropriation of ideas, historical figures, and spaces that are familiar to the majority of citizens on a historical, traditional, and emotional level. The dominant and normative cultural repository is then associated in an unexpected way precisely with an identity that is stereotyped as contradictory to the normative and the common.

4.7 Reclaiming Spirituality

Phenomena between far ends of the religious–nonreligious continuum blur boundaries of the binary division into religious and nonreligious. Campbell and other sociologists of religion described various types of these phenomena, thus trying to dismantle the still often present simplified understanding of religiosity and nonreligiosity as two separate monoliths.\textsuperscript{64} The tendency to

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\textsuperscript{63} The town of Knin was the center of the rebel Serbian population during the Croatian War for Independence. Knin was liberated in the last big Croatian military operation in 1995. Raising the Croatian flag at the Knin fortress was an important symbolic event that announced the imminent end of the Croatian War for Independence.

separate spirituality from institutional religion and reclaim it in the context of nonreligiosity is another example of this “blurry middle.” Milan Polić (1946–2015), Croatian philosopher and founder of Protagora noticed: “If an atheist is indifferent to God, he or she is neither necessarily deprived of a spirit, nor of faith, nor rejects the possibility of cognition ... Because, it is possible to think and speak about the truth and the world, and to live and be spiritual beside God.”

Although attitudes are not completely unified, the general stance on the institutional forms of religion can primarily be characterized more as antagonism, non-acceptance, or resistance. On the other hand, it is generally acceptable to explore spirituality and spiritual practices, no matter how they are defined and which direction they are facing, horizontal or vertical. In that sense, if one wants to be a member of Protagora, a declaration in writing is required that one “is not a member of any religious community and does not profess any religion,” but at the same time “personal doubts about the existence of some transcendent principle, force or being that do not result in religious attitude and actions are not an obstacle to full membership in Protagora.”

On the other hand, the key determinant of nonreligious spirituality is the fact that it is not institutionally mediated (but individually immediate) and that arises from experiences and activities that are humanly significant. Furthermore, it is reduced to an intimate, personal experience that has no pretension to impose itself as general or universal for all. Text on David’s web page summons this idea:

How to silence one's mind, to activate one's higher will, to learn to detach oneself from one's senses while remaining awake, to penetrate through the veil of the multitude to the original Oneness—this is something no one can teach us, something that depends solely on us and our intimate, entirely individual determination and intention, passion and hunger for the truth of our existence. One man has never made a tradition out of himself for himself. Tradition requires a generational sequence in time. Spirituality, however, does not go beyond one man; it always dwells on

that one man, only on him, on the pure nudity of his isolated position in the universe.\textsuperscript{68}

Behind this attitude of faith and spirituality as the individual search of each person for his or her existential meaning is the “secularly sacred” value of personal freedom.\textsuperscript{69} Thus, an individual can realize his or her spirituality in any way (transcendentally or secularly) as long as it is in the realm of the private. As soon as a belief or faith is institutionalized, it transcends the boundaries of the individual, loses its essence of a personal search for meaning, and enters the public arena in which it gets entangled in the issues which are not only in the domain of the spiritual.

5 Concluding Remarks

Nonreligious and atheistic organizations in Croatia form online collective spaces that offer their members and supporters a general orientation for making claims. Strategic repertoires of nonreligious organizations in relation with their opponents, allies, sympathizers, and bystanders produce social, political, and cultural ideas that are closely related to the construction of collective identities.

The prevailing understanding in the sociological tradition considers religion as a substantive and culturally rich and diverse phenomenon, while its antonyms (nonreligiosity or atheism) are seen as a reflection of other social processes or phenomena that are determined primarily by a negative attitude toward religion, never in its affirmative content.\textsuperscript{70} Often, nonreligiosity is seen as an empty nonsubstantive signifier that remains in social space and/or relationships after the withdrawal of religion and religiosity.\textsuperscript{71} The efforts of nonreligious and atheistic organizations in Croatia to fit into the normative social structure, in which beliefs rather than their negations are valued, determined a


significant part of their activities. For this reason, their main objectives are not only to create community but also to demystify nonreligiosity and atheism by showing their positive content.

Analysis showed that there is a variety of strategies used among Croatian nonreligious organizations, from those that can be characterized as defensive (minority discourse and religious mimicry) or offensive (exposing religion), to those that strive to reclaim values that are not stereotypically close to the notions of nonreligiosity and atheism (spirituality or patriotism). Furthermore, a specific Croatian context in which the number of potential members or sympathizers is limited, determined the necessity for a harmonious relationship between the organizations instead of competitiveness, as well as emphasizing some more general values (like secularity) as their main agenda.

This analysis showed that strategies that are already described in the sociological literature are also used in the Croatian context, with certain similarities, as well as some differences which arise from the specific social-historical circumstances. These specificities are even more pronounced in the three strategies that are ‘new.’ They are mainly related to restoring the content and the value of nonreligiosity by deconstructing firmly established stereotypical ideas—that a good Croatian is necessarily a Catholic, that spirituality can be experienced only through religion, and that anti-religiousness is the primary goal of nonreligious organizations.

Using described strategies, nonreligious and atheistic organizations in Croatia try to navigate in a society that, although nominally religious, goes through different simultaneous and sometimes opposite processes of various intensities. Whether the strategies they use will convey clear, interesting, and consistent messages about themselves and their goals, and whether they will adequately reach different social groups, remains to be seen. In that sense, it would be useful in the future to approach this topic with a quantitative methodology to gain a more complete insight.

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