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STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE AND RELIGIOUS STABILISATION IN PERIPHERAL CAPITALISM: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ORTHODOX DISCOURSE IN SERBIA AND GREECE (2009–2026)

This paper examines the role of the Orthodox churches in shaping societal responses to socio-economic crises within the context of peripheral capitalism, through a comparative analysis of Serbia and Greece from 2009 to 2026. It proceeds from the assumption that religious institutions remain significant social actors, particularly in times of crises, and investigates how Orthodox discourse interprets the causes and consequences of economic disruptions, as well as its potential contribution to the stabilisation or transformation of the existing social order.

The theoretical framework is grounded in the concept of structural violence, as defined by Johan Galtung, referring to the socially structured inequalities that systematically constrain individuals' and groups' capacity to realise their full potential. This perspective is further developed by Paul Farmer, who emphasises the material consequences of the global economic arrangements for poverty and social vulnerability. The analysis is also informed by the political economy of neoliberalism (David Harvey) and world-systems theory (Immanuel Wallerstein), which situate peripheral economies such as Serbia and Greece in structurally dependent positions within the global capitalist system.

The role of religion is approached through both classical and contemporary theories of its social function. Max Weber's insights into the relationship between religion and economic systems, Peter Berger's thesis of religion as a mechanism of symbolic legitimation, and Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony provide a basis for interpreting religious discourse as a potential vehicle of social stabilisation. This perspective is further enriched by Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of the religious field as a site of symbolic reproduction of power.

Methodologically, the paper employs qualitative discourse analysis, drawing on critical discourse analysis (Norman Fairclough) and a Foucauldian understanding of discourse as a practice that produces and reproduces power relations. The corpus includes: (1) official statements and pastoral letters of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Greek Orthodox Church; (2) public statements by high-ranking clergy concerning economic reforms, austerity measures, social policy, and the post-pandemic context; (3) reports on humanitarian and social programmes of church institutions; and (4) media interviews during key moments of crisis. The analysis focuses on three indicators: (a) the naming of the causes of crises; (b) positioning toward state and supranational economic actors; and (c) the discursive translation of socio-economic problems into moral and identity-based registers.

The paper advances the hypothesis that the Orthodox churches in both contexts primarily function as agents of social stabilisation, even when explicitly acknowledging socio-economic injustices. Contemporary church statements illustrate this dynamic. For instance, in the 2025 Christmas Epistle, the Serbian Patriarch linked economic insecurity, inflation, inequality, and poverty to a broader crisis of trust in institutions, framing economic issues in moral and social terms, while emphasising solidarity and cohesion rather than systemic confrontation.

Similarly, responses of the Greek Orthodox Church during the financial crisis (2014–2015) foregrounded human dignity and social solidarity, while articulating a somewhat more pronounced critique of market logic and international economic actors. Statements by certain bishops—emphasising the primacy of freedom and human dignity over reducing the person to an economic unit—indicate a normative critique, albeit without a sustained challenge to the broader political-economic order.

Comparative findings suggest a difference in the degree of explicit criticism of international actors—more pronounced in the Greek case—but also reveal a structural similarity in the function of religious discourse as a mechanism for mitigating social tensions. The translation of socio-economic problems into a moral register can be interpreted through the concept of moral economy (Karl Polanyi; Didier Fassin), as well as through processes of depoliticisation

characteristic of neoliberal governance (Wendy Brown), in which structural issues are reframed as ethical or cultural concerns.

In this sense, the Orthodox churches may be understood as socially stabilising actors in managing the consequences of economic crises on the periphery of European capitalism. Their discourse simultaneously contains elements of normative critique and symbolic stabilisation, pointing to an ambivalent position between legitimatisation and potential resistance. The paper thus contributes to a broader understanding of the relationship between religion, political economy, and social stability, while raising questions about the limits of religious discourse as a space of critique in contemporary capitalist societies.

Keywords: structural violence, Orthodoxy, religious discourse, neoliberalism, peripheral capitalism, social stabilisation, Serbia, Greece