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UDC: 173:271.2(497.11)

Review article

DOI: 10.5937/ptp2602161K

Received on: March 2, 2026

Approved for publication on:

April 28, 2026

Pages: 161–172

THE ETHICS OF FAMILY RELATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY SERBIA AND THE INFLUENCE OF THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

ABSTRACT: The contemporary family in Serbia is undergoing a complex process of transformation shaped by profound social, economic, and cultural changes. Processes of modernization, globalization, and secularization significantly affect traditional family roles and the ethical norms governing family relations. In this context, the Serbian Orthodox Church represents one of the key social actors seeking to preserve and transmit traditional moral values related to marriage, parenthood, and family solidarity. The subject of this paper is the analysis of the relationship between ethical norms, religious teachings, and the legal protection of the family in contemporary Serbia. The main research question is: To what extent and in what way does the Serbian Orthodox Church actually influence the ethics of family relations within the framework of a secular state governed by the rule of law? The specific contribution of the paper lies in its interdisciplinary approach, which connects ethics, sociology, religion, and family law, with

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the aim of demonstrating how the moral authority of the Church is exercised within the framework of the constitutional protection of the family and the value pluralism of contemporary society. The methodology is based on the analysis of relevant domestic and foreign literature, as well as on a critical examination of contemporary social processes in Serbia.

Keywords: *family, ethics, Serbian Orthodox Church, family law, contemporary society.*

1. Introductory

The family, as the basic unit of society, has always represented a central space for the formation of moral values, cultural patterns, and social identities. In Serbian society, the family holds particular significance as a bearer of tradition, national and religious identity, but also as a sphere in which the consequences of contemporary social changes are most clearly reflected. Contemporary processes of modernization, globalization, and secularization have led to significant transformations of family relations. Changes in the understanding of marriage, parenthood, and gender roles open new ethical dilemmas and raise the question of the sustainability of traditional moral patterns. The subject of this paper is the analysis of the relationship between ethical norms, religious teaching, and the legal protection of the family in contemporary Serbia. The main research question is: to what extent and in what way does the Serbian Orthodox Church today truly influence the ethics of family relations within the framework of a secular and rule-of-law state? The specific contribution of the paper lies in the interdisciplinary integration of ethics, sociology, religion, and family law, with the aim of demonstrating how the moral authority of the Church is exercised within the framework of constitutional protection of the family and the value pluralism of modern society.

2. The Family as a Social and Cultural Institution

The family represents one of the oldest and most stable social institutions, which, in different historical and cultural contexts, has played a key role in the reproduction of society, the socialization of individuals, and the transmission of moral and cultural values. In classical sociological theory, the family is defined as a primary group within which basic biological, emotional, and social functions are realized (Parsons, 1951; Goode, 1982). Parsons

(1951) emphasizes that the family has an irreplaceable function of primary socialization, within which the child adopts the fundamental norms, values, and patterns of behavior necessary for functioning in the wider society. This function of the family is particularly significant with regard to the formation of moral personality, since it is within the family environment that the first attitudes about good and evil, duty, responsibility, and solidarity are shaped. Goode (1982) stresses that the family is not merely a biological community, but a complex social institution that reflects the dominant values and norms of society. In this sense, changes in society inevitably affect the structure and functions of the family. Contemporary sociological analyses indicate that the family in modern societies is undergoing profound transformations, reflected in the flexibilization of family roles, the rise of individualism, and the relativization of traditional family norms (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1992).

In Serbian society, the family has an exceptionally strong cultural and symbolic significance. AntoniĆ (2010) points out that the family in Serbia represents one of the key pillars of social solidarity and collective identity, especially in periods of historical crises and social upheavals. The traditional model of the family, based on patriarchal relations and a clear division of roles, long represented the dominant pattern in Serbian society. Today, the Serbian family is in a process of profound transition, in which traditional and modern patterns of behavior intertwine. On the one hand, there is still a strong attachment to family values, intergenerational solidarity, and respect for parental authority. On the other hand, contemporary processes of urbanization, migration, and economic insecurity lead to the weakening of traditional family structures. Krstinić, Poćuča and ŠarkiĆ (2024) emphasizes that the contemporary Serbian family is increasingly abandoning strict patriarchal patterns, while at the same time retaining significant elements of traditional culture. This duality between tradition and modernity creates a specific value context within which contemporary family relations are shaped. It is precisely within this space that numerous ethical dilemmas arise, requiring new theoretical and normative reflection. From the perspective of cultural anthropology, the family is viewed as a fundamental mechanism for transmitting cultural patterns and symbolic meanings. In Serbian culture, the family has traditionally been associated with concepts of honor, reputation, and moral responsibility, which further underscores its role in preserving social order. Contemporary changes in the fields of education, employment, and gender relations have led to a redefinition of roles within the family. In modern society, the model of the partnership-based family, founded on the equality of spouses and shared responsibility

for child-rearing, is increasingly affirmed. However, this model often comes into conflict with traditional ethical norms (Sančanin & Krstinić, 2023). The particular importance of the family is reflected in its role in preserving the moral and cultural continuity of society. Without a stable family it is not possible to ensure the long-term stability of the moral order, since the family represents the primary space for the formation of value orientations. In this sense, the analysis of the family as a social and cultural institution constitutes a necessary starting framework for understanding the ethics of family relations. It is precisely at this point that the connection between sociological, cultural, and ethical approaches is established, which will be further developed in the following chapters of the paper.

3. The Ethical Framework of the Orthodox Understanding of the Family

Orthodox teaching views the family as a divinely established community that possesses not only a biological and social, but above all a spiritual and moral dimension. In Orthodox theology, marriage is understood as a sacrament—that is, a union blessed by divine grace—whose purpose is not merely the shared life of the spouses, but also their spiritual growth and mutual perfection. In this context, the family in the Orthodox tradition is often defined as a “little church,” that is, as the primary community in which the Christian way of life is realized. Jerotić (2005) emphasizes that the family is the fundamental space in which the moral personality of the individual is formed and in which the basic Christian virtues—love, fidelity, self-sacrifice, and responsibility—are adopted. The personalist understanding of the person represents one of the central ethical foundations of Orthodox anthropology. According to this approach, the person is not understood as an isolated individual, but as a relational being whose identity is realized in communion with other persons (Zizioulas, 1985). In this sense, marriage and family represent a privileged space for the realization of personal relationships grounded in freedom and love. This personalist approach has far-reaching ethical consequences. Marriage is not understood as a mere legal contract, but as a communion of persons in which freedom is realized through responsibility toward the other. In Orthodox ethics, freedom is not arbitrariness, but the capacity for sacrifice and self-limitation in the name of community. The concept of fidelity holds particular importance in Orthodox ethics. Spousal fidelity does not represent merely a moral duty, but the expression of a deeper ontological bond established in marriage as a sacrament. Jerotić (2005) stresses that fidelity is

the foundation of the stability of family relations and a prerequisite for the healthy moral development of children. Parenthood in the Orthodox tradition is understood as a special form of service and responsibility. Parents have the duty not only to provide material conditions for their children's lives, but also to raise them in the spirit of Christian values. According to certain authors, the canon law of the Orthodox Church always links parental rights with parental duties, thereby emphasizing the moral dimension of parenthood. From the standpoint of canon law, marriage represents an institution with clearly defined moral and normative consequences. Canonical norms establish strict conditions for the conclusion and dissolution of marriage, precisely with the aim of protecting the family as a moral community. Here, the connection between religious morality and the legal regulation of family relations becomes evident. This connection becomes particularly significant within the contemporary legal order of the Republic of Serbia. The Constitution of the Republic of Serbia (2006), in Article 66, explicitly provides that "the family, mother, single parent and child shall enjoy special protection of the State," thereby defining the family as a constitutionally protected value. The constitutional protection of the family represents a normative expression of the generally accepted moral position regarding the special importance of the family for society. The Family Law of the Republic of Serbia (2005) further elaborates this constitutional principle by regulating marriage, parental rights, relations between parents and children, and measures for the protection of the family. Ponjavić (2016) emphasizes that the Family Law is not merely a technical set of norms, but also a normative expression of a particular value system in which marriage and family are recognized as fundamental social institutions. In this sense, one may speak of a complex triangle: Orthodox ethics – moral values – state legal protection of the family. Law is never value-neutral, but always reflects a particular moral and cultural context. In the case of the family, that context in Serbia remains strongly marked by Orthodox tradition. However, contemporary processes of secularization and the pluralization of values have led to an increasing gap between traditional religious ethics and positive law. The task of the modern rule-of-law state is to find a balance between the constitutional protection of the family, individual freedom, and religious pluralism. It is precisely at this point that the key dilemmas of contemporary family ethics arise: how to preserve traditional moral values while at the same time respecting individual freedom and the diversity of modern family forms. These dilemmas constitute a necessary introduction to the analysis of the relationship between the Serbian Orthodox Church, the state, and the constitutional protection of the family.

4. Orthodox Church, the State and the Constitutional Protection of the Family

The Constitution of the Republic of Serbia (2006), in Article 66, establishes the special protection of the family as a fundamental social value. This protection represents a normative expression of moral consensus. The Family Law further elaborates this principle through the regulation of marriage, parental rights, and the protection of the child.

The principle of secularity limits the direct influence of the Church on legislation, but not its moral influence within public discourse.

5. Contemporary Challenges of the Family: Between Tradition and Modernity

The contemporary family in Serbia is facing numerous challenges arising from profound social, economic, and cultural changes. Processes of modernization, globalization, urbanization, and technological development significantly affect the structure of the family, the manner in which family roles are performed, and the stability of family relationships. These changes call traditional models of the family into question and require renewed ethical and legal reflection. One of the most pronounced challenges is the demographic crisis. For decades, Serbia has been confronted with declining birth rates, population aging, and a reduction in the number of family members. These developments have far-reaching consequences not only for the demographic structure of society, but also for its economic sustainability and social stability. In this context, the family increasingly finds itself under pressure from economic insecurity and social risks. A particular issue is the rise in the number of divorces and the instability of marital relationships. Contemporary sociological analyses indicate that divorce no longer represents a social taboo, but rather an acceptable strategy for resolving marital conflicts (Giddens, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). The increase in divorce rates is one of the indicators of deeper value changes affecting the family as an institution. From the perspective of family law, these changes require a more flexible legal regulation of marital and family relations. Contemporary family law seeks to reconcile the protection of the family with the protection of the individual rights of spouses and children. Divorce, parental rights, and child protection are increasingly regulated in accordance with the principle of the best interests of the child, which represents one of the fundamental principles of the Family Law (2005). Another important challenge concerns changes in

gender roles and relationships between spouses. Modern society increasingly affirms the equality of men and women, both in the sphere of work and within the family. Many authors point out that the traditional division-of-roles model—where the man is the provider of material support and the woman the primary caregiver—is gradually giving way to the partnership model of the family. However, this process often leads to new tensions and conflicts within the family. From an ethical standpoint, changes in gender roles raise numerous moral questions: issues of the fair distribution of family responsibilities, the reconciliation of professional and family life, and parental responsibility toward children. Contemporary ethics of family relations must respect the equality and autonomy of spouses, while at the same time preserving the principles of solidarity and mutual responsibility.

A particular challenge is the influence of mass media and digital technologies on family life. Modern communication technologies transform the way family relationships are realized, but at the same time may weaken direct communication and shared family time. Media culture increasingly shapes the value orientations of young people, often in contrast with traditional moral norms. In this context, the Serbian Orthodox Church adopts a critical stance toward processes that lead to the relativization of marriage and family values. Without a stable family, neither the moral nor the cultural identity of society can be preserved. The Church warns of the dangers of individualism and consumer culture, which undermine the foundations of family solidarity. Nevertheless, contemporary challenges require new models of dialogue between tradition and modernity. The ethics of family relations must develop in accordance with changes in the social context, but without abandoning the fundamental moral principles that constitute the foundation of family life. It is precisely in this space that the key tension of contemporary family ethics arises: how to reconcile the demands of freedom, equality, and autonomy with the need for stability, responsibility, and solidarity within the family. This complex set of challenges demonstrates that the contemporary family is undergoing a process of profound transformation in which ethical and legal issues are inseparably connected. The analysis of these challenges provides a necessary basis for understanding the scope and limitations of the ethical influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which will be the subject of the following chapter.

6. The Scope and Limitations of the Ethical Influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church

Although the Serbian Orthodox Church represents one of the most significant moral authorities in Serbian society, its ethical influence on contemporary family relations has clear scope, but also substantial limitations. These limitations arise both from the internal transformations of society and from the normative framework of the modern rule-of-law state. In conditions of value pluralism and secular organization, the moral authority of the Church can no longer function as a universally binding social norm, but rather primarily as a point of orientation within the sphere of public and private ethics. Sančanin and Krstinić (2023) emphasizes that the contemporary influence of the Church is not based on normative coercion, but on cultural authority and the strength of tradition. In this sense, the ethical influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church is realized primarily through educational, pastoral, and cultural activities, and far less through the direct shaping of legal norms. This model of influence corresponds to the principles of the modern secular state, yet at the same time limits the reach of religious ethics within the public sphere.

From the perspective of the sociology of religion, Berger (1999) points out that processes of secularization lead to the weakening of the institutional influence of religious communities, though not necessarily to the disappearance of religious values from social life. In the Serbian context, religion retains a strong cultural function, but its direct influence on individual behavior becomes increasingly selective. This selectivity means that individuals more frequently adopt certain elements of religious ethics while neglecting others or adapting them to their own life circumstances. The Law on Churches and Religious Communities (2006) provides the legal framework that constitutes one of the key limitations on the Church's ethical influence. The principle of secularity implies the separation of Church and State, preventing the adoption of a single religious morality as normatively binding for all citizens. The constitutional protection of the family must be value-inclusive and grounded in the principle of equality, regardless of individuals' religious beliefs.

Law and morality perform different functions in society. While morality strives toward an ideal, law must regulate real social relations, often through compromises between opposing values. In this sense, the ethical demands of Orthodoxy often exceed the possibilities of positive law, which must take into account the complexity of contemporary family forms and the diversity of lifestyles. A particular limitation of the ethical influence of the Serbian

Orthodox Church is reflected in generational differences. The younger generation increasingly adopts values of individualism, autonomy, and self-realization, which frequently come into tension with traditional religious norms (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). In this context, the moral authority of the Church loses part of its binding force and becomes one among several possible ethical reference points. Nevertheless, the scope of the ethical influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church should not be underestimated. Religious values continue to play an important role in shaping the moral conscience of individuals, especially in the process of raising children. The family remains the principal medium for transmitting these values, which enables the Church to exercise an indirect yet long-term influence on the moral profile of society. The Church also plays a significant role in preserving cultural and identity continuity, particularly in conditions of globalization and cultural homogenization.

In this sense, the ethical influence of the Church is not limited to individual moral prescriptions, but encompasses a broader cultural framework within which the value orientations of society are shaped. It may be concluded that the ethical influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church in contemporary Serbia is realized within a space of constant tension between tradition and modernity, between morality and law, and between religious authority and the secular order. It is precisely within this space that the key dilemmas of contemporary family ethics arise, requiring further theoretical and normative consideration.

7. Conclusion

The ethics of family relations in contemporary Serbia represents a complex and multi-layered field in which traditional moral values, religious teaching, and the normative frameworks of the modern rule-of-law state intersect. In this context, the family appears as an institution in transition, exposed to strong social, economic, and cultural changes that call into question its stability, functions, and value foundations. The analysis has shown that the Serbian Orthodox Church continues to exert a significant ethical influence on the shaping of family values, particularly with regard to the understanding of marriage as a permanent union, parenthood as a moral duty, and family solidarity as a fundamental principle of social life. However, this influence can no longer be understood as direct normative action, but rather as a moral and cultural authority operating within the conditions of a secular and pluralistic society. The Constitution of the Republic of Serbia and the Family Law provide strong legal protection for the family as a fundamental social value, while at the

same time establishing the principle of secularity and value pluralism. Within this framework, the ethical positions of the Serbian Orthodox Church may serve as an important point of orientation for believers and for the broader cultural context, but not as a binding model for all members of society. It is precisely in this relationship between morality and law that the key tension of contemporary family ethics arises. It is particularly important to recognize that contemporary challenges facing the family cannot be resolved exclusively by legal means, nor solely through moral appeals. The demographic crisis, rising divorce rates, changes in gender roles, and the influence of digital culture require an integrated approach that connects legal regulation, social policy, and ethical reflection. In this sense, dialogue between the state, the Church, and the academic community represents a necessary condition for preserving the family as a stable social institution. It may be concluded that the future of the family in Serbia depends on the ability to establish a productive balance between tradition and modernity, between moral ideals and legal standards, and between religious and secular values. For this reason, the ethics of family relations in contemporary Serbia remains one of the key fields in which not only the fate of the family is decided, but also the long-term moral, cultural, and legal identity of Serbian society.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, K.D., S.Đ., and V.Z.; methodology, S.Đ.; formal analysis V.Z. and S.Đ.; writing – original draft preparation, S. Đ. and K.D.; writing – review and editing, S.Đ. and K.D. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article and/or supplementary material. Further inquiries may be directed to the corresponding author(s).

Informed Consent for Participation in the Study / Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

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ETIKA PORODIČNIH ODNOSA U SAVREMENOJ SRBIJI I UTICAJ SRPSKE PRAVOSLAVNE CRKVE

APSTRAKT: Savremena porodica u Srbiji prolazi kroz složen proces transformacije, oblikovan dubokim društvenim, ekonomskim i kulturnim promenama. Procesi modernizacije, globalizacije i sekularizacije značajno utiču na tradicionalne porodične uloge i etičke norme koje uređuju porodične odnose. U tom kontekstu, Srpska pravoslavna crkva predstavlja jedan od ključnih društvenih aktera, koji nastoji da očuva i prenese tradicionalne moralne vrednosti vezane za brak, roditeljstvo i porodičnu solidarnost. Predmet ovog rada jeste analiza odnosa između etičkih normi, verskog učenja i pravne zaštite porodice u savremenoj Srbiji. Osnovno istraživačko pitanje glasi: U kojoj meri i na koji način Srpska pravoslavna crkva danas zaista utiče na etiku porodičnih odnosa u okviru sekularne i pravne države? Poseban doprinos rada ogleda se u interdisciplinarnom pristupu koji povezuje etiku, sociologiju, religiju i porodično pravo, sa ciljem da se pokaže na koji način se moralni autoritet Crkve ostvaruje u okviru ustavne zaštite porodice i vrednosnog pluralizma savremenog društva. Metod rada zasniva se na analizi relevantne domaće i strane literature, kao i na kritičkom sagledavanju savremenih društvenih procesa u Srbiji.

Ključne reči: porodica, etika, Srpska pravoslavna crkva, porodično pravo, savremeno društvo.

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