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Nikolina Hazdovac Bajić
Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar

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REPRESENTATION OF NON-RELIGIOUS AND ATHEISTIC IDENTITIES IN A HIGHLY RELIGIOUS SOCIETY

– CROATIAN CASE

By **Nikolina Hazdovac Bajić**

Nikolina Hazdovac Bajić holds a Ph.D. in sociology from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb, Croatia. She works as a postdoctoral fellow at the Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar, regional center Dubrovnik. Her scientific and research interest in the field of sociology of religion concerns traditional church religiosity, non-religiosity and atheism and role of (non)religion in Croatian society, as well as in other Central and Eastern European countries. She is the executive editor of RASCEE (Religion and Society in Central and Eastern Europe) journal. nikolina.hazdovac@pilar.hr

Summary: Since the beginning of the nineties and the collapse of communism, non-religiosity and atheism in Croatia became socially non-desirable and non-conformist positions. In sociological terms, however, these phenomena have been largely overlooked, since scholars have focused mainly on trends in religiosity and public role of religion. The aim of this paper is to get the first scientific insight into the representation of individual non-religious and atheistic identities among the members of the organizations that gather non-religious people and atheists. The paper seeks to answer specific research questions: How are non-religious and atheistic identities presented at the level of everyday life in Croatian society? Do non-religious people and atheists perceive stigma? Which management techniques (if any) are employed in this process? The paper is based on data collected from semi-structured interviews with 22 people. The findings indicate that the interviewed members of non-religious and atheistic organizations perceive their position as stigmatized and that they use various management techniques (passing, covering, selective and voluntarily disclosure) in order to navigate through their day-to-day life. The feeling of stigmatization and discrimination arises from the ubiquity of religion in the public space and from the politicization of issues of (non-)religiosity. Furthermore, interviewees tend to disregard and mitigate occasional situations in which the examples of discriminatory behavior are more pronounced.

Key words: non-religiosity, atheism, organizations of non-religious and atheists, stigma, discrimination, Croatia

Croatian Context

When we talk about non-religion as a phenomenon (and the concept which incorporates various forms, types, and intensity) in the Croatian context, it is necessary to distinguish two

periods in Croatian history: socialist and post-socialist. Social regulation of religion or church-state relationships differed significantly in these two periods. During the socialist period, at the formal-legal level the Constitution guaranteed religious rights and freedoms but at the same time emphasized firm separation between the church and the state and repressed any manifestation of religion in public life (education system, the media). On the other hand, the Communist Party had a public mission to actively work on suppression of religion and propagation of atheism. Religion was thus pushed in the sphere of privacy, invisible and irrelevant to society, while non-religiosity and atheism were propagated through the media, educational system, and public discourse. However, despite the state's efforts to suppress religion, it continued to exist in the private sphere, in traditional forms and expressions. Moreover, Croatia was, together with Slovenia, the most religious (dominantly Catholic) republic of (confessionally diversified) former Yugoslavia.¹

In the early nineties, Croatia, as a part of Yugoslavia, has followed the path of other communist countries which experienced a fall of the system. Changes which occurred were not only political, but economic, ideological, cultural, and deeply structural. Religion in the post-socialist period experienced a period of so-called revitalization.² It became an important factor in the public sphere, in politics, in the media and in the educational system. Srdjan Vrcan³ argues that this strong revitalization of religion was marked by re-traditionalization, re-totalization, and re-collectivization through which society strived to be rooted in religion and tradition. In such a context, religiosity became a socially desirable category and conformist position, and non-religiosity became a nonconformist social stance. This is supported by the data that show a significant reduction of the number of citizens who declared as nonreligious⁴

¹ Cf. Dinka Marinović Jerolimov. "Religijske promjene u Hrvatskoj od 1989. do 1996. godine." [Religious changes in Croatia from 1989 to 1996], in *Religija i integracija* [Religion and integration]. Ed. by Ivan Grubišić and Siniša Zrinščak (Zagreb: Institut društvenih znanosti Ivo Pilar, 1999), 191; Zdenko Roter, "Yugoslavia at the Crossroads: A Sociological Discourse", *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 8, no. 2 (1988): 20–21.

² Cf. Irena Borowik and Grzegorz Babinski, eds. *New Religious Phenomena in Central and Eastern Europe*. (Krakow: Nomos, 1997); Miklós Tomka, "The Changing Social Role of Religion in Eastern and Central Europe: Religious Revival and its Contradictions", *Social Compass* 42, no.1 (1995): 17–26.

³ Srdan Vrcan, "Novi izazovi za suvremenu sociologiju religije. Politizacija religije i religizacija politike u postkomunizmu" [New challenges for contemporary sociology of religion. The politicization of religion and the religisation of politics in post-communism], *Revija za sociologiju*, no. 1-2 (1999): 45-64.

⁴ Cf. Pero Aračić, Gordan Črpić and Krunoslav Nikodem *Postkomunistički horizonti. Obris sustava vrijednosti i religijskih orijentacija u deset postkomunističkih zemalja* [Post-Communist Horizons. Outlines of a value systems and religious orientations in ten post-communist countries]. (Đakovo: Biblioteka Diacovensia, 2003); Dinka Marinović Jerolimov, "Nereligioznost u Hrvatskoj 1968-1990" [Non-religiosity in Croatia 1968-1990], in *Prilozi izučavanju nereligioznosti i ateizma 2* [Contributions to the study of non-religiosity and atheism 2]. Ed. by Š. Bahtijarević (Zagreb: IDIS, 1993), 87-136; Dinka Marinović Jerolimov, "Religijske promjene u Hrvatskoj od 1989. do 1996. godine" [Religious changes in Croatia from 1989 to 1996]; Dinka Marinović Jerolimov, "Tradicionalna religioznost u Hrvatskoj 2004: Između kolektivnog i individualnog" [Traditional religiosity in

(Table 1). The change of desirability of religious/non-religious categories was conditioned by the socio-political context, but also by the strong influence of the Catholic Church, despite the fact that the Croatian constitution declares the state as secular and guarantees freedom of (un)belief. The regulations between church and state within the Croatian constitution are based on the model of separation with simultaneous cooperation in specific areas (ritual, education and charity). In practical terms that model was implemented first with the Catholic Church by signing four contracts with the Holy See 1996–1998 (Vatican Contracts).⁵ The contracts have provoked different public reactions from the very beginning till today.⁶ Even before signing the Vatican Concordat, religious confessional education was introduced in public schools as an optional subject that has no alternative in elementary schools (1991/92). This led to the impression that the Catholic Church has a privileged position in society. The impression was reinforced by the fact that the Law on the Legal Status of Religious Communities was adopted only in 2002 and that, due to the additional conditions it prescribed as necessary for the registration of new religious communities, contributed to the general impression of hierarchization of religious communities.

Table 1: Religious self-identification in Croatia 1984-2004⁷

Religious self-identification (%)	1984	1989	1996	2004
Convinced believer	10	14	46	50
Religious	25	27	37	38
Uncertain	12	11	8	7
Indifferent	11	11	6	6
Non-religious	35	35	12	8
Opposed to religion	7	2	1	1

Croatia 2004: Between the collective and individual]. *Sociologija sela*, 168, no. 2 (2005): 303-339; Siniša Zrinščak, “Religion and society in tension in Croatia: social and legal status of religious communities,” in *Regulating Religion: Case Studies From Around the Globe*. Ed. by Jim T. Richardson (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2004), 299-318.

⁵ The Vatican Contracts are interstate contracts between Croatia and the Holy See which regulate different rights and the role of the Catholic Church in specific areas: 1. Contract between the Holy See and the Republic of Croatia on the Spiritual Guidance of Catholics, Members of the Armed Forces and Police; 2. Contract between the Holy See and the Republic of Croatia on Cooperation in the Field of Education and Culture; 3. Contract between the Holy See and the Republic of Croatia on Legal Issues; 4. Contract between the Holy See and the Republic of Croatia on Economic Issues.

⁶ Organizations of non-religious people and atheists perceive them as the fundamental problem in the violation of the principle of secularity and every year organize protests for their suspension.

⁷ The question *If you were asked about your relationship to religion, where would you place yourself?*, allowed the respondents to choose from the following answers: 1. *I am a convinced believer and I accept everything my religion teaches*; 2. *I am religious although I do not accept everything my religion teaches*; 3. *I think about this issue a lot but I am not certain whether I believe or not*; 4. *I am indifferent toward religion*; 5. *I am not religious but I don't have nothing against religion*; 6. *I am not religious and I oppose religion*. Religious self-identification mentioned above includes the first two categories: *I am a convinced believer and I accept everything my religion teaches* and *I am religious although I do not accept everything my religion teaches*.

Source: Hazdovac Bajić (2017)⁸

Although religion in the post-socialist period became the broad cultural-symbolic identification framework for great majority of Croats, in the dimension of concrete, everyday, and lived forms of religion, departure from normative religiosity or the gap between declarative, proclaimed, and actual religiosity can be observed. In the recent study Nikodem and Zrinščak⁹ observe, beside non-religiosity and atheism (that is mostly concentrated among urban and more educated population), pronounced polarization among religious citizens. Namely, among the self-identified religious population, the authors identify two groups: one with strong personal and institutional religiosity and other with distanced personal and especially institutional religiosity. Nikodem and Zrinščak hence confirmed previous sociological research¹⁰ that claimed that the religious picture of Croatia is complex and reflects different parallel (sometimes even opposing) processes of different intensities. These processes include secularization and desecularization (or postsecularity), differentiation and de-differentiation, privatization and de-privatization, politicization, mediatization, religious pluralization, and so forth.¹¹

On the other hand, non-religiosity and atheism are in the collective memory and in the public discourse still perceived as the remnants of the old system and as a threat to traditional and national values. The narratives of the church elite revolve around the connection between

⁸ Nikolina Hazdovac Bajić, *Nereligioznost u Hrvatskoj: Sociološki aspekti organiziranja nereligioznih i ateista* [Non-religiosity in Croatia: Sociological aspects of organizing of non-religious and atheists]. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. (Zagreb: Filozofski fakultet, 2017). 64–65.

⁹ Krunoslav Nikodem and Siniša Zrinščak, “Između distancirane crkvenosti i intenzivne osobne religioznosti: Religijske promjene u hrvatskom društvu od 1999. do 2018. godine“ [Between Distant Churchiness and Intense Personal Religiosity: Religious Changes in Croatian Society from 1999 to 2018]. *Društvena istraživanja*, 28, no. 3 (2019): 371–390.

¹⁰ Josip Baloban, Ivan Štengl and Danijel Crnić, “Određeni aspekti crkvenosti u Hrvatskoj u komparaciji s nekoliko europskih zemalja” [Certain aspects of ecclesiasticism in Croatia in comparison with several European countries], in *Vrednote u Hrvatskoj i u Europi – Komparativna analiza* [Values in Croatia and Europe – Comparative analysis]. Ed. by J. Baloban, K. Nikodem, S. Zrinščak (Zagreb: Kršćanska sadašnjost, 2014), 43–92; Krunoslav Nikodem and Siniša Zrinščak, “Croatia’s Religious Story: The Coexistence of Institutionalized and Individual Religiosity,” in *The Social Significance of Religion in the Enlarged Europe*. Ed. by D. Pollack, O. Müller, G. Pickel (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 207–227.

¹¹ These processes are observed also in other Western and Central-Eastern European countries, cf. Steve Bruce, *Secularization. In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain: A Consistent Paradox* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015); Silvio Ferrari and Sabrina Pastorelli, eds., *Religion in Public Spaces: A European Perspective* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012); Inger Furseth, ed., *Religious Complexity in the Public Sphere* (New York: Palgrave, 2018); Slavica Jakelić, *Collectivistic Religions: Religion, Choice, and Identity in Late Modernity* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2010); Gert Pickel, “Contextual secularization: Theoretical thoughts and empirical implications,” *Religion and Society in Central and Eastern Europe*, 4, no. 1 (2011): 3–20; Detlef Pollack, “Modifications in the religious field in Central and Eastern Europe,” *European Societies*, 3, no. 2 (2001): 135–165; Detlef Pollack and Gergely Rosta, *Religion and Modernity: An International Comparison* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Jörg Stolz, Judith Könemann, Mallorie Schneuwly Purdie, Thomas Englberger and Michael Krüggeler, *(Un)believing in Modern Society: Religion, Spirituality, and Religious-Secular Competition* (London: Routledge, 2016).

the national and the religious (“God and Croats”) assuming every real Croat is also a Catholic.¹² In other words, religion is important for social belonging. After Ivo Josipović, former President of the Republic of Croatia, publicly declared himself as agnostic, a distinguished theologian gave a few interviews in the media questioning the fact that an agnostic person could be the president of an almost completely Catholic population.¹³ Besides that, the powerful role of the Catholic Church in the public sphere and the ubiquity of religion in social life create a context that non-religious people and atheists perceive unequal and discriminatory. This was confirmed by the research conducted among parents of non-religious pupils who do not attend the religious instruction class in public schools, who claimed that their children were discriminated against either by other children or by the overall social climate in society and at schools that favored religiosity as a normative social position.¹⁴ Also, during the last decade the non-religious and atheists begun to organize in formal and informal groups and organizations in order to protect and promote their rights and interests. Through their public appearances (e.g. at the occasion of the Atheist Bus Campaign, the Reason Rally or protests against the contracts with the Holy See) and organizing in general, they show their inclination to action. In that way they are positioning themselves in the public space as the opposition to the overall religious Catholic worldview which is in their opinion constantly imposed to all Croatian citizens. Although these organizations gather relatively small number of people, regarding certain issues they can attract broader social support.

Theoretical Background

The increased interest of scholars in topics of non-religion and atheism is evident in the fast-growing production of articles, studies, and books from the beginning of the 21st century onward.¹⁵ Despite this increased interest, so far the only sociology of non-religion was written

¹² Strong ethno-national-religious homogenisation was additionally strengthened during the war of aggression on Croatia in 1991, for all the parties involved.

¹³ Available at <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/matulic-predsjednik-mora-odluciti-je-li-vjernik-ili-pak-nevjernik-178941> (accessed 9.9.2019).

¹⁴ Branko Ančić and Tamara Puhovski, *Vjera u obrazovanje i obrazovanje u vjeri* [Faith in education and education in faith]. (Zagreb: Forum za slobodu odgoja, 2011).

¹⁵ On the other hand, non-religiosity in Croatia is, especially after nineties, in sociological sense almost completely ignored. Ančić i Puhovski wrote about the attitudes of non-religious parents toward religious education in schools. See Ančić and Puhovski, *Vjera u obrazovanje i obrazovanje u vjeri* [Faith in education and education in faith], 2011), and Čulig et al. carried out an empirical study that has attempted to verify the types of atheists on a sample of the student population (Benjamin Čulig, Ksenija Klasnić and Jelena Jakšić, “Empirijska verifikacija tipologije ateizma” [Empirical verification of the typologies of atheism], *Revija za sociologiju* 41, no. 2 (2011): 185–212. In addition to these two papers, Marinović Jerolimov and Hazdovac Bajić analyzed the case study of the 2009 Atheist Bus Campaign in Croatian capital, Zagreb (Dinka Marinović Jerolimov and Nikolina Hazdovac Bajić, “Atheist Bus Campaign in Croatia; One Day Stand,” in *The Atheist Bus Campaign, Global Manifestations and Responses*. Ed. by S. Tomlins, S. Bullivant (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 114-138.

in 1971 by Colin Campbell. With his study, Campbell has laid the foundation for all the future research of non-religiosity describing it as a relational, reactive, and dynamic response toward religion. Campbell's focus was on 19th century non-religious social movements in the US and UK. This focus determined also the definition of non-religiosity as "behaviours (feelings, attitudes, actions and beliefs) that express simply hostility to and rejection" of religious expression and belonging.¹⁶ Formulated in this way, Campbell's definition overlooks a whole range of non-religious manifestations which can vary from indifference, interest, appreciation and approval to the benevolence towards religion. Lois Lee¹⁷ tried to offer a more inclusive definition of non-religiosity as "any position, prospects or practice which is primarily defined in relation to religion, but that is considered different from the religious."¹⁸ Based on Lee's concept, non-religiosity is in this paper defined as conscious and intentional manifestation of significant differentiation with respect to religion in any dimension of religiosity (feelings, attitudes, beliefs, practice, knowledge, experience, belonging, etc.). Religion in this context implies primarily the religion which is culturally relevant to the individual in his or her specific socio-cultural context, or religion in general.

Atheism is in the simplest way defined as non-believing in God.¹⁹ Atheism is, in the Western societies with dominant theistic religions, one form and type of non-religiosity focused on the cognitive level or belief. Although atheism and non-religiosity coincide in that part of their contents, they are not synonyms. Besides the fact that some religious traditions are considered atheistic because they don't have the idea of God as their core notion (e.g. Buddhism, Jainism, Confucianism), there are also individuals and organizations in the Western monotheistic context that reject the belief in the personal God, and are therefore atheists, but approve and/or respect other aspects of religion like aesthetic or ritual elements, moral principles, identification with the community, and so forth.²⁰ On the other hand, non-religiosity is a phenomenon that can manifest on other levels of religiosity, beside cognitive.

¹⁶ Colin Campbell, *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion*. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 43.

¹⁷ Lois Lee, "Locating Nonreligion, in Mind, Body and Space: New Research Methods for a New Field," *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion*, no. 3 (2012): 135-157; Lois Lee, *Recognizing the Non-religious Reimagining the Secular*. (Oxford: University Press, 2015).

¹⁸ Lee, *Recognizing the Non-religious Reimagining the Secular*, 2015; 32.

¹⁹ For more detailed discussion about the term see Stephen Bullivant, "Defining Atheism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*. Ed. by S. Bullivant i M. Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 11-21; Paul Cliteur, *The Secular Outlook: In Defense of Moral and Political Secularism*. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), Lee, "Locating Nonreligion, in Mind, Body and Space", 2012; M. Martin, "Atheism and Religion," in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*. Ed. by M. Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 217-232; Phil Zuckerman, *Atheism and Secularity*. (Santa Barbara, California: Praeger, 2010).

²⁰ Like Christian Atheism, Humanistic Judaism, Alain de Botton and his "School for Life," Unitarian Universalism and other.

The study of non-religion with a focus on associations and organizations of non-religious people, especially atheists, causes a lot of attention among sociologists of religion, who, in their research within their respective socio-cultural context, largely rely on organizational theory, the theory of subcultural identity, identity politics and new social movements.²¹ On the other hand, there is body of literature that seeks to explore in more depth individual non-religious and atheist identities²² that are “constructed by individuals on a day-to-day basis in the context of their social realities.”²³ Some research also show that non-religious or atheistic identity in predominantly religious societies carries a certain stigma²⁴ and that individuals with stronger atheistic identities, those who are more open about their atheism, and those who come from religious families, experience more discrimination.²⁵

My study is informed by this production on contemporary non-religious and atheistic individual identities, but also on the classical work of Ervin Goffman²⁶ on identity, stigma and stigma management. Starting from the basic presumption that identities are fluid and variable categories, dependent on social context, Goffman differentiates between virtual (assumed or anticipated for certain categories of people) and actual social identity. When a discrepancy between virtual and actual social identity occurs based on some personal characteristic, a

²¹ Amarnath Amarasingam ed., *Religion and the New Atheism: A Critical Appraisal*. (Leiden: Brill, 2010); Richard Cimino and Cristopher Smith, “Secular Humanism and Atheism beyond Progressive Secularism,” *Sociology of Religion* 68, no. 4 (2007): 407-424; Richard Cimino and Cristopher Smith, *Atheist Awakening, Secular Activism and Community in America*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Ryan T. Cragun, Christel Manning and Lori Fazzino, eds., *Organized Secularism in the United States*. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017); Katja M. Guenther, Kerry Mulligan and Cameron Papp, “From the Outside In: Crossing Boundaries to Build Collective Identity in the New Atheist Movement,” *Social Problems* 60, no. 4 (2013): 457-475; Stephen LeDrew, “Discovering Atheism: Heterogeneity in Trajectories to Atheist Identity and Activism,” *Sociology of Religion* 74, no. 4 (2013): 431-453; Stephen LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism: The Politics of a Modern Movement*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Marcus Mann, “Triangle Atheists: Stigma, Identity, and Community Among Atheists in North Carolina’s Triangle Region,” *Secularism and Nonreligion* 11, no.4 (2015): 1–12; Jesse M. Smith, “Creating a Godless Community: The Collective Identity Work of Contemporary American Atheists,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 52, no 1 (2013): 80–99.

²² Rebecca Catto and Janet Eccles, “(Dis)Believing and Belonging: Investigating the Narratives of Young British Atheists,” *Temenos* 49, no.1 (2013): 37-63; Cristopher R. Cotter, “Without God Yet Not Without Nuance: A Qualitative Study of Atheism and Non-religion Among Scottish University Students,” in *Atheist Identities–Spaces and Social Contexts*. Ed. by L. Beaman, S. Tomlins (New York: Springer, 2015), 171-196; Lee, “Locating Nonreligion, in Mind, Body and Space,” 2012; Lee, *Recognizing the non-religious reimagining the secular*, 2015; Lorna Mumford, “Living Non-religious Identity in London,” in *Atheist Identities–Spaces and Social Contexts*. Ed. by L. Beaman, S. Tomlins (New York: Springer, 2015), 153-170; Jesse M. Smith, “Becoming an Atheist in America: Constructing Identity and Meaning from the Rejection of Theism,” *Sociology of Religion* 72, no.2 (2011): 215-237; Phil Zuckerman, “Contrasting irreligious orientations: Atheism and secularity in the USA and Scandinavia,” *Approaching Religion* 2, no. 1 (2012): 8-20.

²³ Lori Beaman and Stephen Tomlins, “Introduction” in *Atheist Identities–Spaces and Social Contexts*. Ed. by L. Beaman, S. Tomlins (New York: Springer, 2015), 13.

²⁴ Joseph H. Hammer, Ryan T. Cragun, Karen Hwang and Jesse M. Smith, “Forms, Frequency, and Correlates of Perceived Anti-Atheist Discrimination,” *Secularism and Nonreligion* 1, no. 4 (2012): 3-67; Mann, “Triangle Atheists,” 2015; Smith, “Creating a Godless Community,” 2013.

²⁵ Hammer et al., “Forms, Frequency, and Correlates of Perceived Anti-Atheist Discrimination,” 2012, p. 3.

²⁶ Erving Goffman, *Stigma*. (London, Penguin, 1963).

person can suffer various social consequences (prejudice, discrimination, exclusion, violence). This characteristic is stigma. There are two types of stigma: discredited (clearly known or visible) and discreditable (not apparent or visible). The experience of a stigmatized person depends on a type of stigma and consequently type of management techniques that are at disposal. Since non-religious or atheistic identities are discreditable stigmas, they can be kept unrevealed or spoken about openly.

Stigma management techniques described by Goffman include passing, covering, and information control. Passing indicates effort to keep potentially stigmatized attribute hidden by posing as an individual that belongs to a desired social category, or in this case as religious. Covering means concealing the stigma, trying not to draw attention to the stigmatizing characteristic. In the case of non-religious and atheists it would include topical avoidance or opting not to discuss (non)religiosity. Information control includes division of social contacts (compartmentalization of social networks to categories toward which person can be either opened or try to pass), keeping distance and control of contact with stigmatized group and voluntarily disclosure.

Methodology

The aim of this paper is to get the first scientific insight into the representation of individual non-religious and atheistic identities among the members of the organizations that gather non-religious people and atheists in Croatia.²⁷ The paper seeks to answer specific research questions: Do members of non-religious and atheistic organizations in Croatia perceive stigma related to their non-religious or atheistic identity? How are non-religious and atheistic identities presented at the level of everyday life? Which management techniques (if any) are employed in this process?

The population of members of the non-religious and atheists' organizations in Croatia was chosen for practical reasons, since non-religiosity and atheism are in the general population dispersed and therefore difficult to reach. Although members of the organizations are "highly codified examples of non-religiosity,"²⁸ it is important to note that they are not representative

²⁷ A total of nine organizations were included in the research. Five of them were formally registered associations (*Protagora, LiberOs, At3a, David, Center for Civil Courage*) and four were informal (*Atheists and Agnostics of Croatia, I'm not a believer, Movement for Secular Croatia and Coalition for Secularism*). Formal organizations have an internal structure with elected bodies and their clearly defined functions and powers. Such an organizational model resembles political models with democratic practices of decision making. On the other hand, informal organizations are not legally registered. They gather and act when they think it is needed. This sort of "unorganized organization" implies antagonism toward authoritarianism to such an extent that they do not have a hierarchy, leader, or authority to manage the group.

²⁸ Lee, *Recognizing the Non-religious Reimagining the Secular*, 2015; 64.

of the whole population of non-religious and atheists, and that “disbelieving without belonging” is still a normative position.²⁹

This paper is a part of a broader study that deals with organizations of non-religious and atheists in Croatia using mixed methodology.³⁰ In the first phase of the research,³¹ a survey was conducted among the members of these organizations and at the end of each survey the respondents were offered the opportunity to leave their contact if they wished to participate in the interview.³² In the second phase of the research, semi-structured interviews were conducted to further elaborate the topics from the questionnaire. The interviews were not focused only on non-religious and atheist identities of the interviewees but sought to capture the broader social context associated with organized forms of non-religiosity and atheism. The topic of identity was subsequently explored from the collected qualitative material.

Semi-structured, but still open and conversational, interviews offered a possibility for interviewees to express their opinions in a close and less formal setting in order to bring forth a wealth of information. Thus, interlocutors were able to speak as freely and widely as they wished about the topics that they considered particularly important, while still adhering to the given research direction. This type of interview caused also the significant difference in the duration of some interviews, with the longest one being two hours, and the shortest one 50 minutes. The majority of interviews lasted about 90 minutes.

Persons who volunteered for the interview were asked for verbal informed consent, whereby they were informed about the subject, purpose, and objectives of the research, ways of using the information collected, ways of protecting anonymity, and the voluntary nature of participation. Interviews were conducted face-to-face (12) or via Skype (10) according to a pre-arranged location and time. All were audio recorded with verbal consent of interlocutors and later transcribed, coded and analyzed using the software package NVivo. The whole process was done by one person. The transcription was done *verbatim* immediately or as soon as possible after each individual interview. During transcription, individual speech characteristics

²⁹ Stephen Bullivant, “Research Note: Sociology and the Study of Atheism,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 23, no. 3 (2008), 365.

³⁰ Hazdovac Bajić, *Nereligioznost u Hrvatskoj: Sociološki aspekti organiziranja nereligioznih i ateista* [Non-religiosity in Croatia: Sociological aspects of organizing of non-religious and atheists], 2017.

³¹ Initial access to the research participants was through representatives of organizations, who were contacted through information available on the organizations' websites. Preliminary interviews were conducted with all the representatives in order to gather information on organizations, number of members and the structure. Permission to conduct a questionnaire among members was also gained during these interviews.

³² The withdrawal rate for the interview was high, 68 persons were contacted of whom 22 were interviewed. All interviewees were members of the organizations, but they were not all active.

(such as dialect features) were translated into standard Croatian to protect the anonymity of the interlocutors. For the same reason, the names and other information that might indicate identity were changed. In order to protect the confidentiality, the interviewees were asked in advance not to comment on the content of the interview after it was done. Interviews were conducted at the premises most suited to the interviewees, their home, the researcher's workplace or any other place according to the interviewee's wishes, except premises used by the organizations to further preserve and protect confidentiality. Audio records, transcripts, and all the other data was later stored in an archive accessible only to the researcher. The interlocutors were also informed about it in the instructions.

Table 2. Socio-demographic characteristics of the interview sample

Gender	Age	Residence	Education	Childhood upbringing ³³
M (12)	up to 20 (1)	Urban (18)	High school (6)	Religious (12)
F (10)	20-29 (2)	Rural (4)	University degree (13)	Non-religious (10)
	30-39 (5)		PhD (3)	
	40-49 (7)			
	50-59 (3)			
	60-69 (2)			
	70 and older (2)			

Collected data was analyzed using a thematic approach which enables “identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes)” describing them in rich details.³⁴ The analysis process took several steps. After transcription, the material was encoded line by line. The initial codes were grouped into categories and then the categories into themes. Grouping into themes, or conceptualization of initial codes, though derived from the bottom-up (from the interviewee's answers), nevertheless formed somewhat in line with the thematic structure of the interview.³⁵ This paper, as it addresses the specific research questions in the context of a

³³ Data relating to the upbringing in the interlocutor’s nuclear family are presented here. However, there are cases where the interlocutors received religious upbringing from their grandparents or other members of the extended family, even though they were raised non-religiously by their parents.

³⁴Victoria Braun and Virginia Clarke, “Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology,” *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006), p. 6.

³⁵ The interview was thematically divided into 9 sections. In the first part interviewer sought to relax interviewees through informal introduction. The second part was about their self-identification in relation to religion, the term they most commonly use, its definition and content, and the core values that they held important. The third part focused on the development of non-religious and atheistic identities and included questions about socialization within the family with respect to religion, (non)religious attitudes of parents and other close family members, influences on today's attitudes (in the form of persons, literature, events, circumstances), familiarity with new

semi-structured interview³⁶--how members of non-religious and atheistic organizations present their (stigmatized) identities and find ways to manage and negotiate them in a highly religious society--focuses on one theme *Presentation and Management of Non-religious and Atheistic Identities*.³⁷

Results and Discussion

Perceived Stigma and Stigma Management Techniques

During the interviews, interviewees explained that they were careful and cautious in expressing their opinions about religion, indicating that they feel certain stigma that is attached to their non-religious or atheistic identity. Some of them pointed out that they first assess situations in which they can be open about their identities and attitudes. In other words, they divide social contacts and employ selective disclosure among them. Marina said:

It's easy to say what you are within the close circle of people, no matter what that other person is. You sometimes get strange looks, but it is what it is. Outside that circle, it is not easy and then I carefully decide what to say, to whom and in what way (Marina, 36).

As can be seen from Marina's quotation, behaviors within and outside the close circle of people are different. The interlocutors feel that non-religiosity and atheism are not identities that are

atheism and circumstances of possible periods of personal religiosity. The fourth part dealt with the importance of non-religiosity for the interlocutors, whether they were important in the selection of close persons, whether they were ever a source of embarrassment or problems, are they often theme of conversations. The fifth part dealt with social relations and contained questions about the knowledge of (non)religious attitudes of close persons, the influence of non-religiosity and atheism on relations with close persons, the upbringing of children with respect to religion. The sixth part focused on the relation to religion in general with questions related to the interest in religion and knowledge of religion, attitude to religion, criticism of religion, etc. The seventh part of the interview dealt with religion in the Croatian context, attitude towards the dominant religion and the church, possible problems that are perceived in this regard, the relationship between religion and politics, the issue of religious instruction in public schools, and the position of non-religious persons and atheists in Croatia. Eighth part related to participation in organized forms of non-religiosity and atheism, motifs for joining organization, opinion of these organizations (their objectives, activities and performance), participation in informal gatherings, etc. The ninth part dealt with the so-called existential questions: what do the interlocutors think about what happens to a person after death, possible spiritual experiences, their own moral principles, the notion of the sacred and the marking of life cycles in the form of rituals.

³⁶ Other research questions were: How do members of organizations of non-religious persons and atheists define their own non-religiosity and atheism and what is its content?; How are individual non-religious and atheistic identities formed among members of organizations?; What is the attitude of the members of organizations of non-religious persons and atheists towards the dominant religion and the Catholic Church in Croatia, and what are the points of contention regarding the position of the dominant religion and the Church in Croatia?; What is the attitude of the members to the organized community of non-religious persons and atheists?

³⁷ Other themes covered by the analysis were: Becoming non-religious or atheist, Values, Beliefs, Social Relations, Perception of Religion in the Croatian Context, and Perception of Organized Forms of Non-Religion and Atheism.

widely accepted or favored, and therefore some of them do not express their views openly, i.e. they evaluate in which situations they can do so to avoid problematic situations or confrontations. Ana expresses similar thinking:

Within my family, with my close friends and colleagues, I have no hesitation. But, generally, there can be some tense situations. Sometimes you feel it would be better to remain silent on such issues. Because one can sense that some people might ... overreact (Ana, 53).

Dividing social contacts into groups allows non-religious or atheistic individual to be open in some of them or try to pass or cover in others. Marina describes a situation at work where she passes:

There is a certain atmosphere at my workplace, openly religious, so to say. I have one colleague, who is particularly vocal and ... talks a lot, badly about atheists, communists, and so on. I never oppose to him, I don't want to get into a discussion, there is no point. [...] Everybody thinks I'm a believer and I would never tell them anything to convince them otherwise. I don't want to create unpleasant situations and conflicts (Marina, 36).

Another situation in which interviewees tend to pass is related to the decision whether to enroll their children in confessional religious education at school. Igor explains gravity of the situation:

What bothers me the most is the religious education in schools, which is almost a compulsory subject since every effort has been made to include almost all the children in it. So, not enrolling your child in religious education is a very serious decision, it is a decision by which you can expose your child to some undesirable situation that should not exist at school. You are in a situation in which either somebody imposes certain beliefs, with which you don't agree, upon your child or you are pushing your child into minority group that is most susceptible to peer violence. And this is not my subjective impression, there are research about it (Igor, 47).

Doris, although she has no children, expresses similar thoughts:

Optional, but not really optional. Parents and children do not have many options because of the situation. Parents can be nonconformists and risk to expose children to the situation I found myself in when I was a child. I was mocked and ridiculed, rejected and confronted with hostility (Doris, 27).

Since interviewees find confessional religious education at schools discriminatory for the children that are not attending it, some of them try to pass, or conform to the majority, like Marina and Vedran:

I think that I will enroll my son to the religious education. I don't want to put him in some difficult situations already in the first grade, when he will have enough to deal with as it is. I thought about it a lot and discussed it with my husband. I don't know whether this is the right decision. But why should my child suffer because of my attitudes? He is too young to understand. And, if you want, I myself attended religious education at school and yet today I have attitudes that I have (Marina, 36).

My older son was baptised and he attended religious education at school. [...] It was more difficult, you know, after the war ... Namely my wife and I were not married in church, we were not baptized, but my mom suggested that it would be better for my son and so we did it (Vedran, 49).

Some interviewees express the very personal nature of (non)religious beliefs and think that they have no right to make decisions in the name of the child:

One time, I felt very sorry for my younger child. I said, 'We are not Catholics', and he asked 'Then what are we?' I realized then that I had no right to speak from the position of 'we' so I said, 'I'm an atheist, and you have to find out on your own'. That stuck with me, when he said 'Mom, what are we?' When it comes to these beliefs, 'we' does not exist (Željka, 57).

Therefore, decision on attending religious education in school is sometimes left to the child to decide. Interviewees emphasize that when it comes to raising children, they would not give up on their attitudes. That doesn't mean that they would raise children non-religiously or atheistically, but that they wouldn't raise them religiously. In other words, they explain it is important to them not to impose any kind of attitude on children, so that they can one day build their own identities, even if they turn out to be religious. According to one interviewee:

I would try to educate them in a neutral way, I would introduce them to the fact that religion exists, I would tell them that there are different religions, but I would not impose my opinions. I would let them to decide for themselves when the time came (Petra, 25).

On the other hand, some interlocutors described that decision about their children's enrollment into religious education as a turning point for them, causing their (stronger) non-religious and

atheistic engagement in public. In other words, it prompted them to voluntarily disclose their non-religious or atheistic identity. Igor describes his experience:

The turning point for me was when my oldest son first went to elementary school. Actually then I saw the extent to which all this religious indoctrination was present in public schools. I could have spent my entire life without being affected with these things, but we wanted to provide our children with an upbringing that would be neutral in that sense and to allow them eventually to choose whether or not they would be believers one day. It seems to me that in Croatia this is not possible without some significant personal involvement of parents. So, I became involved in civic organizations declaring my views (Igor, 47).

Some interviewees explain how they openly express their identity without hesitation in every situation. These are mostly persons who are more prominent and active within the organized community of non-religious people and atheists and are probably more accustomed to publicly declare themselves. Mislav states:

I said publicly that I was an atheist. I mean, now it sounds like I came out of the closet, like a gay or something. This is proscribed, but I say it publicly (Mislav, 43).

Similarly, Ivan says:

I have no problem introducing myself as an atheist and, actually I do it every day. That's not a problem at all. I have no intention of hiding or saying something that might bother someone (Ivan, 33).

Beside openly disclosing one's identity, some interviewees said that they don't like talking about (non)religious issues with people who they know or assume to be religious. This topic avoidance can be understood as covering. Marko said:

Well there may be some hypothetical situation where I might keep silent. But I don't think I'd say that I am a believer if it is opportune for me in that situation. However, I would keep silent if in that case it would be wiser to say nothing (Marko, 32).

Mirjana also explains:

I'm surrounded by them [believers], I tolerate it. I don't talk about these things among people, I suppose some of them know that I'm an atheist, but we don't have a bad relationship because of it (Mirjana, 61).

This management technique is also noticeable in close(r) relationships:

Some of my friends are hard core believers. I'm not. But we're just not talking about it. [...] We can be friends if we are not talking about it, honestly. Just don't mention it and then it'll be ok (Mario, 40).

As can be seen from the previous quotes, in usual daily interactions with other people as well as in some closer relationships where other aspects are more important, (non)religious identity for some interviewees does not stand out as an essential issue. However, in situations where it appears in a conversation and when there are disagreements, discussions, or some tension about it, they tend to leave that topic aside and avoid it in future. In other words, to “save” the relationship they “put in brackets” their non-religious or atheistic identities. The same approach is also expected from religious people. In that way personal freedom of (non)belief can be respected. Such micro-relations are expected to be reproduced on the level of society as enforcement of the principles of secularity.

However, interviewees make a difference between relationship with their partner and other relationships, emphasizing that the closest relationship (with a partner) would be difficult to establish with a person who is religious. Doris explains:

Although it sounds cruel, it is very important to me that my partner has similar worldview in this regard, not because I could not love him or reject him just because of his beliefs, but because I think it would cause unwanted problems in the future. I think it is rational to think this way. I am a person who has no compromise in that sense, and I would never put myself in the situation where I would have to be married in a church or to baptize children because of another person (Doris, 27).

Sharing similar non-religious or atheistic identity with partner is not only a prerequisite for creating a deeper emotional connection and closer relationship, but also very practical issue that reflects on many other decisions, especially those related to the upbringing of children:

It plays a big role when it comes to my partner [non-religiosity or atheism]. I think if I want to live with someone all my life, with my permanent partner, my spouse, there would probably be problems if I would insist on a non-religious upbringing and she, if she was a believer, would insist on a religious upbringing (Mislav, 43).

Stigma and Discrimination

Describing other people’s reactions on their non-religiosity or atheism, interviewees mention a wide variety of responses, from interest and surprise, wonder and confusion, to

insults, verbal threats, threatening messages and harsher (even physical) attacks. Describing problems that sometimes occur, some interviewees tend to show them as negligible and not related to some form of discrimination. Hence, they don't think that they are discriminated against. On the other hand, interviewees point out that their position in Croatian society is worse than the position of religious people, but they have hard time in pinpointing where their sense of stigmatization comes from. Since they employ various management techniques in order to minimize negative reactions, discriminatory situations are reduced. Furthermore, some interlocutors explain that they personally had never encountered problems after expressing their non-religiosity or atheism. However, on several occasions during the interviews it was revealed that in fact there were different problematic situations. When asked if he ever had a problem with expressing his atheism, Mario answered "No". Later in the interview he stated:

When I was in college, it was in the late 90's, they called me a Chetnik³⁸ because I didn't believe in God. These were the people I was sort of friend with, but still they said things like that. They used to say that I was not a real Croat if I didn't believe in God (Mario, 40).

Similarly, Doris describes her experience when she was in elementary school:

In elementary school my peers mocked me and said that I was going to end up in Hell because I was not baptized. Even the nun, who taught religious education, was saying things like that. I felt rejected and often came home crying. I was asking my parents to baptize me. I was eight or nine. I couldn't understand about religion or God. I only saw that other children gather around something and I wanted to belong. Finally, my parents baptized me when I was in fourth grade (Doris, 27).

In the next quote, Andrija recalls a job interview he attended:

I remember one company for the sale of health services, where I was the most qualified of all the applicants because I already had 20 years of experience. In an interview, the business owner asked me what music I listened and whether I listened to some sort of religious music. When I answered negatively, he directly asked me if I was a believer. So, I told him that these were personal issues and that it had nothing to do with the job. I didn't get the job. And, there were other situations like this (Andrija, 71).

³⁸ Chetniks were members of Serbian nationalist movement that was especially active during WWII. In contemporary usage they symbolize nationalist chauvinist Serbian pretensions on Croatia expressed during the Homeland War (1990-1995). Today in the colloquial use in Croatia Chetnik denotes, in an extremely derogative way, a person with pronounced anti-Croatian stance.

Downplaying the significance or seriousness of negative reactions can be seen especially among interviewees that are more active in the organizations. They tend to explain these reactions as a response to public activism and not to non-religiosity or atheism per se. The most prominent example of this Željka gave in her interview:

Well, I had some problems, but... When you're activist in a small town, you are almost ridiculous person. I'm not wanted in local government, although I'm the most competent for some jobs. I'm unwanted in school. I run a debate club and few times when I went to school to make arrangements with children who would like to participate, there were complaints about letting me on the school premises. Also, when I was carrying my second pregnancy, it was in 1992, I was with some friends and some unknown guy asked me, out of the bloom, if I was going to baptize my child. I could not be quiet, so I told him 'No'. And then, as I was leaving, he pushed me and I fell on the ground. I was visibly pregnant. So, there were problematic situations, but nothing to disrupt my life seriously. Imagine what would be happening to me if I had AIDS or only one leg (Željka, 57).

Ivan also described his experience:

Unpleasant situations? Yes, many, many, many times. This happens most often in various public debates and discussions. You literally find yourself in a situation where a person reacts in a very ugly way no matter how much you try to explain something. So, it's not like there aren't those situations. Now, I am extremely active, so maybe it has to do a lot more with my activism. Some of my non-religious friends who aren't active, they don't have those problems (Ivan, 33).

Given that these are isolated cases and not systematic or institutionalized examples of violence (verbal or physical), they are relativized and dismissed as not serious or important. Although interviewees experience unpleasant and problematic situations, like those described, they are not characterized as discrimination. On the other hand, they use terms like "minority", "second-class citizens", "secondary", "other" and similar referring to themselves, indicating that they share sense of otherness and perception that they are outsiders. Since it seems that interviewees have high threshold for discrimination and don't define some discriminatory situations as such, the question is where does their sense of being discriminated against come from. Employing various management techniques in order to prevent negative consequences of expressing non-religious and atheistic identities, interviewees don't feel (often) discriminatory reactions on a day-to-day basis. However, on the more general level they

perceive various tendencies in society that indicate their position of inequality in a more subtle and suggestive way, like imposition of majority attitudes as normal (through media, public discourse, education system, etc.) while excluding, treating as unimportant or invisible or even shaming those who do not share it. This process is particularly evident through two examples: 1) treating phenomena of non-religiosity and atheism as political issues and 2) presence of ubiquitous, almost "banal"³⁹ religiosity in the public space and public institutions, gatherings and events, media, education system and so forth.

The firm connection between nationality and religion in Croatia implies that non-religiosity and atheism are anti-national phenomena connected with communism even today. Thus, non-religiosity and atheism are in the part of Croatian public often regarded as the ("wrong") political stance. Placing non-religiosity and atheism in the domain of politics dismisses any form of criticism of religion and Church and discredits non-religious and atheistic voices in public, further stigmatizing them.

In his interview, Lovro states:

Today in the Croatian society, where the current government is a supporter of religious ideas, any non-religious initiative is automatically condemned as a political opposition and excluded from the discourse (Lovro, 33).

Mladen and Doris express similar thoughts:

And it is not easy when you hear from the Church how we almost promote evil or fight for violent atheization and so on. We get that famous epithet of the Yugo-Communists. It is as if the Yugoslavs and the Communists invented atheism, so now we go after Tito (Mladen, 58).

When dealing with specific political situations, like this one about abortion, it really seems that people do not like us, atheists, agnostics, non-religious people. Communists, Yugo-nostalgics, we are always stuck with these attributes. So, in this sense, a really bad atmosphere prevails when it comes to us, we are not in an enviable position (Doris, 27).

On the other hand, the omnipresence of religion and religious symbols that interviewees notice in the public space creates the impression of religiosity as a normative social category

³⁹ „Banal“ religiosity here refers to the Billig's concept of „banal nationalism“ that is present in public space and includes symbols that are everywhere, but in the background, overlooked, unnoticed, almost invisible, yet constantly involved in the creation and reproduction of the dominant cultural norms. See more in Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism*. (London: SAGE, 1995).

and consequently evokes discomfort and feelings of uncertainty and difference among them. This can be seen in the following quotes:

When my wife and I just bought this apartment, do you know who came to visit us first? From the church! Close here there is a church which bell wakes me up during the summer already at 6 or 7 in the morning. Then those crosses in public spaces, schools, courts, hospitals... I go to hospital and there is a chaplain there. Like I need some priest to ease my troubles at the hospital. And then, I have to explain to him that I don't want that and justify why I don't want it (Andrija, 71).

What bothers me, also, is when they go to bless houses around Christmas. Then I have to justify myself, to put the sticker on the door that I don't want the blessing because I'm not ... a believer (Mirjana, 48).

Some interviewees internalized the sense of minority identity in such social context and feel anxiety about their social position:

I definitely think that we are, as a minority, now at risk. Some of the things that are happening ... I am slightly worried in which direction this will all go. Because, in general, attacking any minority is not good (Davor, 45).

Since there are not many of us, I think that our position is similar to that of all other small groups, like gays, other national minorities, members of other stigmatized groups, patients, drug addicts and so on. The fact is that 95% of people look at them in a very ugly way. So, I think our position is bad (Mislav, 43).

However, apart from this impression of inequality (except for the specific problem of religious education), manifested at the general level of society through the politicization and labelling of non-religious people and atheists, and the "banal" ubiquity of religion in public and in other segments of social life, discrimination at the individual level is not so much present or so obvious and recognized. The interviewees point out that problems that they encounter are sporadic and not serious, although they believe that it would be easier for them if they were part of the dominant group because the non-religious or atheistic identity requires constant explanations or justifications (which are not always pleasant).

Some interviewees expressed dissatisfaction and disagreement with "too strong" activism against religion and Church. No matter how they personally feel about it, they think that organizations that gather non-religious and atheists in Croatia should choose their battles

more carefully and be less provocative in their public appearances. In other words, they should tend to fit in the society and not to provoke it.

They [most members of the organizations] focus on where they could exacerbate rather than where they could calm the situation. There is no need to force some actions that raise tensions in society rather than lower them. Problems are not solved this way. In fact, only result is creating counter-effect among believers (Mislav, 43).

The way they act creates an image of us as extreme, hard-core atheists who hate believers, who would remove the Church from society ... Now Christians say they are threatened, that they feel threatened. Well, I think the tactics should be changed (Doris, 27).

Goffman describes this process as “self-betraying kind of stratification” through which a stigmatized individual “exhibits a tendency to stratify his ‘own’ according to the degree to which their stigma is apparent and intrusive.”⁴⁰ In other words, a stigmatized individual disagrees or even feels disrespect or contempt toward members of his/her own group who cannot or will not fit into mainstream normative standards that values positive value systems and not confrontational ones.

Concluding Remarks

Non-religiosity and atheism in the Croatian context are the phenomena that are strongly connoted with the socialist period because of its open systematic promotion of secularization. However, non-religiosity and atheism that are present in Croatian society today, are not (only) the reflex of certain ideological and political orientation, but also an organic phenomenon that is burdened with stigma in a highly religious post-socialist society. Members of non-religious and atheistic organizations perceive their position as unequal and stigmatized. The strong presence of religion in the public sphere, media, public space and especially education system can create an impression of religiosity as a normative identity and feeling of exclusion for those who are different. Politization and ideologization of (non)religiosity in this situation can further generate non-religious and atheistic stigma.

Interviewed members of non-religious and atheistic organizations navigate through daily situations with an internalized sense of otherness. Employing different management techniques, they tend to avoid and minimize tensions, debates, explanations, and possible

⁴⁰ Goffman, *Stigma*, 130.

discriminatory situations. That way they claim that they do not feel discrimination in their everyday lives. On the other hand, although they speak of non-discrimination, more or less clear discriminatory situations can occasionally be identified from their responses. However, they are often not recognized as such. Only situation that is clearly recognized as discriminatory among some interviewees is the case of students that do not attend religious education in public schools.

In this way, the impression of a general otherness, discomfort or inequality perceived through a social climate and public discourse that “favor” religiosity is not a strong enough motive for some members of the organizations to provoke a stronger response, but on the contrary, it more often encourages conformism and criticism toward “their own” if they are too “hard core atheists” who tend to exacerbate the situation rather than calming it down.

The presented case of the daily presentation of non-religious and atheistic identities in an otherwise highly religious Croatian society once again affirms the multidimensional and complex dynamics of (non)religious presence in society, manifested in various (and sometimes even contrary) trends at different levels of society. Hence, instead of trying to frame these dynamics in all-encompassing theoretical models, sometimes it can be more revealing to describe the microprocesses of defining and re-defining meanings inside specific social contexts as a frame of reference.