

# ‘We Condemn the Sin, not the Sinner’: Understanding the Attitudes of Adventist and Baptist Believers in Montenegro towards Sexuality

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**Abstract:** Although we have seen studies on religion and sexuality in the West come to dominate the relevant scholarship, the postsocialist environment with a predominantly Orthodox population has received less attention. This paper fills the gap by examining the attitudes of Adventist and Baptist believers in Montenegro, with a particular focus on abortion, premarital sexual activities and non-heteronormative sexuality. Because we were dealing with a minority population, we opted for a qualitative methodology and conducted semi-structured interviews with 17 Adventist and 15 Baptist believers. As observed, our research participants’ position towards sexuality is closely related to the teachings found in the Bible. However, it is possible to observe certain differences between the two groups; for example, the interviewed Adventists tend to be more conservative than the interviewed Baptists. In addition, the male Adventists seem slightly more liberal than female Adventists, whereas the situation is different among Baptists, where women come across as more liberal than men.

**Keywords:** religion, Adventist Church, Baptist Church, abortion, premarital sexual activities, non-heteronormative sexuality

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## Introduction

The last couple of decades have witnessed an expansion of scholarship concerning the link between religion and sexuality, both in the distant past (Endsjø, 2011; Gibson & Begiato, 2017; Lawrence, 2007) and in recent times (Ravitch, 2016; Scott, 2018; Shah et al., 2016). Simultaneously, whatever the religion may be—mainstream or unconventional—its advocates have promoted the idea of the ultimate good and tried to persuade their followers to embrace it wholeheartedly. This has happened even though some of their preaching is malevolent and hypocritical

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(Matthews & Mazzocco, 2017; Moberg, 1987; Yousaf & Gobet, 2013) as well as quite divisive in the context of tolerance, inclusion and equality (Cady & Fessenden, 2013; Jakobsen & Pellegrini, 2003) or in the conflict between religion and sexuality (Alvaré, 2015; Gill, 2012).

Admittedly, questions pertaining to abortion, premarital sexual activities and non-heteronormative sexuality, among others, have become part of everyday life, with athletes, celebrities and politicians coming forward to openly talk about their own experiences, both positive and negative alike. The overall opening of society has also prompted scholarly accounts interested in different religions' standpoints and their undeniable power to shape attitudes towards each of the matters of abortion (Adamczyk, 2008; Barkan, 2014; Brockopp, 2003; Clements, 2014; Frohwirth et al., 2018; Liebertz & Bunch, 2021; Liviatan, 2012), premarital sexual activities (Adamczyk & Hayes, 2012; Barkan, 2006; Hayward, 2019; Uecker, 2008) and non-heteronormative sexuality (Barringer et al., 2013; Derks, 2018; Gushee, 2017; Jäckle & Wenzelburger, 2015; Johnson & Vanderbeck, 2014; Perry & Whitehead, 2016a). Regarding the latter matter, the themes that stand out concern same-sex marriage (Babst et al., 2009; Baunach, 2011; Merino, 2013; Ruiiu & Gonaño, 2020) and the adoption of children (Gross et al., 2018; Swinton & Brock, 2018; Taylor & Snowdon, 2018).

The present paper fills this gap by looking at the Adventist and Baptist churches in Montenegro, a small and predominantly Orthodox country in the Balkans. Although both Protestant factions deem the above topics the most controversial when it comes to sexuality, we seek to establish whether there is a difference in attitudes between them. Their religiosity is approached through the authority of the Bible, which sees the above matters as sins. Namely, the purpose of sex is reproduction, so sex for the sake of pleasure, of which sex before marriage is an example, is a sin (Acts 15:20; Colossians 3:5; Corinthians 5:1, 6:13, 7:2, 10:8, 12:21; Ephesians 5:3; Galatians 5:19; Romans 1:29; Thessalonians 4:3). Referring to the Bible, one of our interlocutors said, 'If God's plan for sex were respected, there would be fewer sexually transmitted diseases, fewer unwanted pregnancies, fewer unmarried mothers, fewer abortions and so forth'. Such an attitude, as the current paper will show, largely characterises the other interviewees as well. Still, as per the Bible, while the sin of abortion is no less forgivable than any other sin, it can be forgiven through faith in Christ (Colossians 1:14; John 3:16; Romans 8:1). On the other hand, homosexuality is a sin because it represents an opposition and disobedience to God (Corinthians 6:9; Genesis 19:1–13; Leviticus 18:22; Romans 1:26–27).

According to the latest estimates, there were only 235 Adventists and 150 Baptist believers in Montenegro; although not numerous, they come right after the Orthodox, Islamic and Catholic religious communities. The members of these two religious minorities have mostly converted from the Orthodox faith; they represent different age groups, with a small difference that Adventists are slightly older than Baptists (Bakrač et al., 2020). Given these circumstances, Adventists and Baptists have experienced various forms of discrimination. Although often called sects (and this has a negative connotation in the Balkans), the

two churches have encountered obstacles, if not prohibition, to building places of worship and acts of hate speech and physical assaults (Bakrač et al., 2020).

Looking at the official Adventist position, 'abortion [is] out of harmony with God's plan for human life' and 'sexual intimacy belongs only within the marital relationship of a man and a woman' (Seventh-day Adventist Church, 2012, 2019). In terms of non-heteronormativity, the approach towards homosexuals should correspond to that which Christ adopted towards a woman caught in adultery: 'I do not condemn you. Now go and sin no more' (John 8, 11; also, Bakioki et al., 1994, p. 384; Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, 2015). The official position of Montenegrin Baptists reflects the position of their international fellows; while against abortion, they seem to display greater empathy 'with all who struggle with the difficult circumstances that lead them to consider abortion' (American Baptist Churches, 1994). Here, non-heteronormative individuals should be denounced because their existence is 'contrary to God's good and holy purposes in creation and redemption' (*Baptist Press*, 2019).

The present paper starts by providing a brief overview of Montenegrin society in terms of sexual freedoms while bearing in mind the accommodation of such liberties in broader religious environments. We then proceed to justify our methodological approach, including the selection of respondents and details about data collection and analysis. The main part of the current paper is dedicated to the answers gathered through the semistructured interviews and our analysis. Finally, the concluding section will round off our main findings, which can serve as a basis for future research.

### **The attitude of Montenegrin society towards sexuality**

In contrast to its old days, the post-1945 Montenegro experienced a loosening of patriarchal upbringing in matters of sexuality. This was because of the process of modernisation and nature of the real-socialist fabric, which largely embraced a Marxist view of religion. A more liberal attitude was especially evident when it came to abortion and premarital sexual activities. Despite a decline in moralistic standpoints about sexuality during real socialism, scholars have rightly observed that the public nevertheless continued to cultivate a traditional judgement vis-à-vis certain groups or kinds of behaviour (Marković, 2007, p. 128). Concerning non-heteronormativity, 'gays were marginalised in the social reality of socialist Yugoslavia' (Jovanović, 2016a, p. 57). As per other records, looking at the number of derogatory terms used to portray non-heteronormative individuals, they were comparable to those used for police officers or people with disabilities (Šipka, 2011, pp. 356–364). In fact, non-heteronormative individuals were perceived as having a disease, which was defined by the *Medical Encyclopedia* of the Yugoslav Lexicographical Institute as 'perversion when choosing an erotic object' (Kostić, 1961, p. 133).

The disintegration of the Yugoslav federation in the early 1990s witnessed the revitalisation of religion and desecularisation of post-Yugoslav societies,

which have also been marked by numerous episodes of animosity and intolerance in terms of national and ethnoreligious belonging (Ognjenović & Jozelić, 2014; Radeljić & Topić, 2015). Still, in terms of the abortion question and treatment of sexual minorities, some progress has occurred, including greater visibility of non-heteronormative individuals and the decriminalisation of same-sex partnerships as well as the introduction of regulations aimed at reducing sexual discrimination against sexual minorities. These changes are widely related to the region's democratisation and Europeanisation efforts, especially once the respective countries had started negotiating their accession to the European Union (Bilić, 2016; Godzisz, 2019; Sloomaeckers et al., 2016).

Still, the importance of the abortion question is confirmed by its capacity to generate major disagreements within the Montenegrin public space (Šćepanović, 2022), with the debate ranging from moralistic to legalistic considerations, which also characterises many other societies (Lizotte, 2015; Silber Mohamed, 2018). Montenegro is a highly traditional society characterised by a preference for male children. Indeed, data show that 70 percent of all abortion cases are intentional and have nothing to do with medical reasons; more precisely, despite being against abortion, Montenegrin society nevertheless tolerates the selective abortion of female foetuses. The preference for male children has affected the human sex ratio, which stands at 110 boys to 100 girls—a problem largely ignored by the authorities and only officially acknowledged following an involvement of the Council of Europe in 2012, which required investigation into the issue of selective abortion and its negative effects on the Montenegrin state (Government of Montenegro, 2013b; Šćepanović, 2017).

The Orthodox Church's standpoint on homosexuality is generally negative; this is illustrated by the church's statements, which criticise anything falling outside heteronormativity and, thus, tolerate the violent disapproval of public marches of the LGBTQ+ population (Jovanović, 2016b, pp. 88–91). This lack of understanding goes so far that even adverse weather conditions that occasionally occur during pride parades are explained as God's punishment for those organising such events (Jovanović & Krstić, 2020, p. 38). Put differently, despite the fact that Montenegro has sought to host pride parades since 2013, some of which have been met with different levels of protest and violence, the overall attitude towards non-heteronormative sexuality paints the image of Montenegro as conservative, lagging behind other states in the region, such as Croatia and Slovenia (Kalezić & Brković, 2016; Spasić, 1990). A 2020 analysis that accompanied some previously conducted surveys and strategies (Government of Montenegro, 2013a; Juventas, 2012; Spektra, 2018) presented numerous indicators showing that sexual minorities in Montenegro were at particular risk of discrimination (CEDEM, 2020). The data revealed that the portion of citizens with a generally negative attitude towards the non-heteronormative community was the biggest (almost 40 percent), whereas those with neutral and positive attitudes stood at 30 percent and 5.3 percent, respectively; 24.7 percent did not respond. The same study revealed that 61 percent of citizens are against the adoption of children by same-sex

couples, and almost 53 percent are against same-sex marriages (CEDEM, 2020). According to another more recent study, every fifth citizen believed that non-heteronormative people are no better than criminals and that they should be punished (Ipsos, 2022). When it comes to social distance, over 43 percent of citizens would not want them in their neighbourhood, and over 46 percent would not want them as their coworkers. Finally, 75 percent of citizens do not want kinship with such individuals, and 90 percent refuse to have close relationships through marriage or children with any member of the non-heteronormative community (CEDEM, 2020).

Such a standpoint does find its roots elsewhere; in the words of Dag Øistein Endsjø, '[m]any often forget how absolutely negative the attitude of Buddhism and Christianity is towards all forms of sex (...) Jesus and the Apostle Paul emphasised abstinence from sex as the best option. (...) The answer to the question, "Who would Jesus sleep with?" would be very simple: no one. If someone wants to act like Jesus, he or she is not supposed to have sex at all' (2011, pp. 37–41). In fact, some religions tend to treat sexual freedoms, including homosexuality and the right to abortion, as 'ungodly', 'unnatural' or 'impure' (Yip, 2005; see also Jovanović, 2010, 2013; McDowell, 2011). Such attitudes stem from heteronormative interpretations of religious literature, which encourages anti-homosexual attitudes (Olson et al., 2006; Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2009), while, as per scholarly examinations, religious people rely on fear of God's punishment to justify their anti-homosexual views (Burdette et al., 2005; Doebler, 2015; Finke & Adamczyk, 2008; Regnerus & Smith, 1998).

### **Methodological considerations**

Although the quantitative approach is suitable for researching large religious communities—for example, to examine the distribution of different religious beliefs and their intensity according to one of the agreed scales—the qualitative approach is suitable for researching small, unexplored social groups (Davie, 2007), of which the Adventist and Baptist churches in Montenegro are cases in point. We opted for semistructured interviews because they allowed for additional questions; as suggested in the literature, such an approach allows for clarifications that are helpful in obtaining the most accurate response (Halmi, 2005; Seidman, 2006; Wengraf, 2001). As well put by one study, 'to understand other persons' constructions of reality we would do well to ask them ... in such a way that they can tell us in their terms (rather than those imposed rigidly and a priori by ourselves) and in a depth which addresses the rich context that is the substance of their meaning' (Jones, 1985, p. 46). In addition, we agree with authors insisting on the importance of linguistic expression when an analysis of confession or narrative is to be conducted (Franzosi, 1998; Yamane, 2002).

The above flexibility assists researchers with 'flexibility of mind', which is necessary 'to overturn old ways of looking at the world, to ask new questions, to

revise research designs appropriately, and then to collect data of a different type than originally intended' (King et al., 1994, p. 12). However, looking at this from a different angle, this flexibility is also important given its capacity to limit the intervention of the interviewer and, in more extreme scenarios, production—if not imposition—of misleading knowledge. This is of the utmost significance in cases when the core of the research heavily relies on interviews. All this points out another necessity: that of having a similar set of questions and repeating them to different respondents, which enables a comparison of the answers and, consequently, the discovery of the dominant standpoints or some proper patterns and practices (Radeljić, 2015, p. 5). Finally, apart from being a mode to gain information, the semistructured approach is the most appropriate way to measure validity (Cannell & Kahn, 1968, p. 530).

Our study involved 17 Adventist and 15 Baptist believers. The interviews took place during the period January–May 2021; they were conducted face to face at a prearranged, mutually agreeable time and place, and although they were conducted in the local language, we subsequently felt the need to translate them into English. More precisely, regarding the Adventists, six female and 11 male respondents participated, eight of whom had a high school diploma and nine with a higher education. The sample included three respondents aged 20–30 years old, 10 between 30 and 50 years old and four over 50 years old. When it comes to the Baptists, we interviewed eight females and seven males, 10 of whom had completed high school and five had a university degree. All our respondents were between 20 and 40 years old. We often relied on the snowball technique to find additional believers willing to talk to us until we reached the desired number of respondents. Once we reached a total of 32, we stopped because we realised that we had arrived at the point of 'theoretical saturation'—when data collection concerning a particular topic can stop (Bryman, 2012, p. 419). All the names were kept anonymous; the interviewees were allocated a pseudonym when quoted in our findings. Because they were made aware of the fact that anonymity would be guaranteed, all of them agreed and gave their consent to be interviewed and recorded for the duration of the interview and subsequently have their interview transcribed as per the research requirements. We opted for verbatim transcription, performed immediately or as soon as possible after each interview.

Every interview tackled abortion, premarital sexual activities and attitudes towards non-heteronormative sexuality. The conversational character of the interviews allowed the respondents to express themselves freely on the topics they considered particularly important while following the previously explained scope and direction of research conducted (Krueger, 2013; LeDrew, 2013; Smith, 2013). The length of interviews varied, with the shortest lasting 40 minutes and the longest lasting about an hour (most interviews took around 50 minutes). Once transcribed, the interviews were coded and analysed with the assistance of NVivo software. The initial coding was performed line by line, after which the codes were grouped into categories, with the categories then grouped into themes.

## What do our respondents say?

### *Abortion*

Based on our research, male Adventist and Baptist believers tend to offer a more balanced attitude than the female members of both churches. They single out two key reasons as to why termination of pregnancy ‘could be accepted’—in the case of rape and when the health of the child or mother is in danger. As argued by an Adventist Church member, abortion is a matter that depends on the given situation:

A year ago, when my wife got pregnant, we thought about abortion in terms of pros and cons. I’d support it only if the health of a woman carrying the child is at risk; otherwise, in case someone does not want to have a child, I would not permit that whim. (Miloš)

Although Miloš accepts abortion in cases directly relating to the health of the child or mother, another Adventist accepts it in the case of rape. In his words:

If a woman thinks she should have an abortion, that’s her choice. Specifically, I spent 15–20 days in Bosnia and Herzegovina and heard that a large number of women were raped. Is it not up to her to decide what to do? A raped woman who’s has gotten pregnant should be allowed to decide what she wants. (Sekula)

Alongside the above observations, a Baptist believer says:

I am against abortion. It’s about life, and I know there are debates about it, kind of pros and cons arguments. God does not approve of such behaviour. I think it is murder. I know that medicine considers a foetus a nonliving being, but I think it is a living being—from the beginning of conception to birth. If they pointed a gun at a child when born, it would be murder. Then, why not treat it as murder while in the womb? Is it because they are invisible? However, in nonstandard cases (i.e., when the mother’s life is endangered or when a woman is raped), then the freedom to choose should apply. (Poluga)

On the other hand, female respondents belonging to both churches are more conservative and strictly attached to the Bible’s argument, maintaining that ‘[a]ll life is sacred. Human life is especially so’ (Genesis 9:8). They are reserved when termination of pregnancy is potentially a matter of health and survival. In contrast to the male participants, their reflections are longer and characterised by extended pauses between thoughts; as clarified, this suggests a certain struggle and the burden of conscience. When presenting their arguments, the dominant word is ‘murder’. The Adventist Meri says:

I don’t approve of abortion unless it’s a matter of death. If the foetus had some anomalies, I’m not sure what I’d suggest. Actually, bless those who’d carry it to the end.

My friend wanted a child for many years and then at one point she found out that her foetus had an anomaly, so she terminated the pregnancy. Can't really comment further. (Meri)

Another believer of the Adventist Church insists:

Abortion is murder. Even if my life were at stake, I'd still give birth. This is because I believe that God has a plan for everything. Maybe my attitude would be different if I were married and had children. For now, I see abortion as the shedding of innocent blood. (Marija)

The position of a member of the Baptist Church reads as follows:

I'm not really for abortion; it's against God's will for someone to reject a child once they've got pregnant. I don't support women doing it. I have three children myself; I know what it was like when I got pregnant. They told me to do tests to make sure everything was okay with the baby. However, I didn't do the tests. I prayed instead: 'God, if your will is that everything should be fine, that this child should be born, let it be born, I trust you and I will take care of him/her, no matter what the child will be like, but if it's not your will and I should not give birth to a child, then make something happen'. What happened to me was that I had a miscarriage the second time I was pregnant. That was God's will, and therefore, I'm relaxed. (Kotoranka)

When it comes to the female respondents, it is noticeable that conscience or inner voice is hugely important; as suggested by Kotoranka, she felt rewarded for respecting and appreciating the life of her unborn child. In her view, the potential risk to the health of the child or mother cannot justify abortion, which 'can lead to major disorders, including anxiety and depression'. Based on the sample, it seems that females are much more aware of the consequences of having an abortion than men, which may help us understand their rigid attitude. If we bring such an attitude closer to a religious context, we should not lose sight of the fact that, according to some sociological studies, women tend to be more religious than men (Francis, 1997; Walter & Davie, 1998).

### *Premarital sexual activities*

The believers interviewed in both churches do not show a favourable attitude towards sexual activities before marriage. However, the reasons they give to justify their opinions mainly differ depending on gender. Female believers list womanhood, moral issues and sexually transmitted diseases as key. Accordingly, Marija—an Adventist member—emphasises the possibility of a woman humiliating herself and being excluded from their community:

Premarital sexual activity isn't okay because we shouldn't humiliate ourselves. I'm not married, and I haven't had sexual intercourse. There should be one man and one

woman in the marital union. In the village I come from, there were few premarital sexual activities. I was fairly young when I joined the Adventist Church, and religious teachings helped me refrain from having sex before marriage. (Marija)

Another interviewee states the possibility of sexually transmitted diseases and numbness of the love-related senses as her reasons to disapprove of premarital sexual experiences:

There shouldn't be sexual intercourse before marriage. I didn't engage in anything myself. Young men who change partners are likely to attract illnesses and lose the sense of love; if someone has had 20 partners, how can they be expected to worship the twenty-first one? Women who normally start dating when they want to get married should be worshipped. (Meri)

A Baptist believer has the same view. She is straightforward:

I think one should have sex only when married; it's best to have sex in marriage for the safety of both partners. (Sara)

The Seventh-day Adventist men also condemn sexual activity before marriage, but they seem more liberal than women. Their opposition to premarital sexual activities stems from their perception of family and the risk of unwanted pregnancy, which would lead to—possibly equally unwanted—marriage. Andrej outlines the strengthening of the mind and family ties as the main argument:

I had premarital relations, but I want to teach my children that such behaviour isn't good. For our mind to be strong and for our family ties to be durable, it only makes sense to have one partner throughout life. (Andrej)

In the words of another believer:

I'm inclined to believe that young people who practice premarital sexual relations do it while experiencing some kind of ecstasy, and therefore, the whole thing isn't that terrible. I was sexually active before marriage. Maybe that was wrong, but on the other hand, even in marriage, you can't be entirely sure whether you're made for each other. Once married, many young couples start having sex, then they conceive a child, then they quickly organise a wedding, and after less than a year, when the child has not even celebrated his/her first birthday, the marriage has already fallen apart. (Miloš)

What can be gathered from the interviewed Adventists and Baptists is that they generally do not support premarital sexual activities. In the words of Miloš, while 'the whole thing isn't that terrible', he and others are aware of possible risks, such as the risk of conception, without having met the respective partner in the best way. Such an approach is particularly evident in narratives that involve premari-

tal sexual activities when the 'sinners' were neither religious nor members of the church.

With the above in mind, it is interesting to note that the interviewed female believers did not have sex before marriage. While citing the Bible, Marija notes that 'the religious teachings helped [her] to refrain from having sex before marriage'. (As per Hebrews 13:4, the Bible promotes abstinence before marriage. Sex before marriage is just as wrong as adultery and other types of sexual immorality because it implies having sexual relations with someone to whom we are not married. Sex between a husband and wife is the only form of sexual intercourse that God approves.) This also suggests that religious teachings are stronger among the female compared with male interviewees, which leaves an impression of religion as a guide regulating sexual activity. When it comes to males, for the Baptist Olah, who got married young precisely because he did not want to have sex before marriage, it was his family's moral upbringing that influenced him the most:

Premarital sexual activities shouldn't be practiced. My wife and I were waiting for marriage. Many people found our decisions strange; they kept telling us that we were fools. Sexual activities as sexual activities, it's all nice and fine, but it can also have unpleasant consequences. Look at abortion. Why do young people decide to have an abortion? First, they are not ready to have a child; second, they are not financially stable enough to afford a child; third, there is family pressure, and as far as I heard, my own mother was advised to have an abortion when she was pregnant with me because she was 16. Even when she was not religious, her view was that she should give birth to her child, even if it had been easier to visit a clinic and have an abortion. Her moral consciousness taught her that life was sacred. In fact, there are reasons why God permitted these activities in marriage only, precisely for the reasons that I've just listed. Every life is given by God. If we took matters into our own hands, there'd be many abortions and clinics in our neighbourhoods, as we can see elsewhere around the world. It seems we've learned nothing so far; it won't touch our conscience. (Olah)

Taking into consideration our respondents' narratives, we can conclude that religious teachings, especially the New Testament, are key in the context of premarital sexual activities. Both Adventists and Baptists express their religiosity through the authority of the Bible. They see it as the only source of God's word, which serves to judge every Christian as well as to teach them what is needed for salvation. This illustrates a Baptist believer's standpoint on marriage and sex before marriage:

My husband and I had been dating for four and a half years, and it wasn't easy because we wanted to save ourselves for each other. However, although many Christians fail precisely on these issues, I'd say it's not impossible to restrain yourself. It takes a lot of faith and prayer, but that's how a strong character is built. (Ana)

As per our respondents, while most male Adventists did engage in premarital sexual activities, none of the male Baptists confirmed anything similar.

*Non-heteronormative communities*

Concerning non-heteronormativity, the believers interviewed in both churches are generally critical, with the difference being that the Adventists are more radical than the Baptists. Overall, when referring to non-heteronormative people, our respondents use words such as sin, illness and abnormality. However, the following fact is worthy of recognition: In the conversations about abortion and premarital sexual activities, the male believers of both churches are not guided solely by their religious attitude on the particular issue, but they also share some rational reasons as to why termination of pregnancy could be justified or why engagement in premarital sexual activities is not good. However, when it comes to non-heteronormativity, only religious arguments seem to matter (they are exploited by the Adventist believers, in particular). For example, the Adventist Andrej defends his standpoint by saying:

My fellow Adventists and I look at that way of life as sinful. However, this doesn't mean that the person who belongs to that part of society has no alternative. My personal view is that God created a man and a woman. If we talk about Christianity as the successor of Judaism, we only recognise the relationship between a man and a woman as a basis for a family. (Andrej)

Another Adventist argues:

It's a disease that should be treated like other diseases. More precisely, I think it's a mental disorder that can be congenital, but it can also be acquired under the influence of others. There's always something that these people have preferred, so they started doing it under the influence of their surroundings. Maybe a girl wasn't a lesbian, but she became a lesbian under the influence of a friend. (Miloš)

The importance of the Bible regarding non-heteronormativity is stressed by the following Adventist:

My attitude reflects that of the Bible, according to which such things aren't something normal. I can't respect something that contradicts the Bible, which the Bible considers abnormal. God curses such things. When Christ came to earth, he said, 'I haven't come to abolish the law, but to fulfil it'. (Meri)

A retired interviewee thinks similarly:

Such things are wrong; even God says so. I don't approve of LGBTQ marriage, either. By no means would I allow them to adopt children. Fortunately, I don't have anyone among my friends who's gay. If a friend admitted to me that he was gay, I'd say that I couldn't hang out with them anymore. (Jelena)

Whatever the believers' attitudes towards non-heteronormativity, their views concerning the possibility of marriage and adoption of children among sexu-

al minorities are increasingly discriminatory. Although research on the topic remains limited, some initial findings have been right to suggest that same-sex marriage and gay and lesbian parenting tend to be viewed more negatively than heteronormative marriages and parenting, even in Western societies (Morse et al., 2007; Perry, 2013; Perry & Whitehead, 2016b; Pew Research Center, 2017). The findings also show that religiosity is a relevant determinant of attitudes towards non-heteronormative parenting. When asked about marriage, one of our Adventist interviewees says:

I don't approve of it. If we speak from the spiritual point of view and conception of the Bible, we don't see it in the Bible, and as such, we don't support it. The Lord directed us not to let such things happen. It's strictly written in the Old Testament. (Andrej)

Indeed, the following statement confirms the importance of the Bible for the Adventist Church in discussions about non-heteronormative communities, including same-sex marriage and the adoption of children; when being asked what his opinion would be if the Bible offered nothing about the matter, Andrej responds with the following:

If it weren't included there, we should consider it differently. However, given that it's already been mentioned and written about, we must take it seriously. (Andrej)

Meri displays the following standpoint:

I don't support same-sex marriage. I don't understand public parades and declarations. If a person has a problem, let them live that way, but it's simply unacceptable that two women or two men raise a child. God created a man, Adam, in his own image, and then a woman from his rib, Eve, so that Adam would not be bored. (Meri)

When being asked about LGBTQ parenting, Andrej thinks it is a difficult question:

Because I don't support that kind of life, I can't support the adoption of children by same-sex couples, either. We cannot know if the child wants to live in a same-sex marriage if it cannot consciously decide. (Andrej)

In the view of another Adventist:

I don't approve of LGBTQ parenting. A child should be put on the right path. I've repeatedly asked myself, If gays and lesbians think that what they are doing is right, how will they survive and how will life continue? If we're all gays and lesbians, there will be no more of us. The world will be extinct in 50 years. Therefore, gays and lesbians shouldn't be allowed to adopt children since they'd raise their children in their own spirit. (Miloš)

A similar view is shared by others:

I don't approve of LGBTQ parenting. A child should have a mother and a father—a man and a woman. Many things have affected me throughout my life, some of which I like and others I don't. As a mature person, I managed to get rid of some things and some have stayed despite my efforts. With all this in mind, this kind of parenting isn't right; a child would be raised wrongly if they had two fathers or two mothers. Such an option distorts the perception of the world, family, everything. (Meri)

Female Adventists display a tougher stance than the male Adventists. On the other hand, Baptist believers, both men and women, seem to project more liberal views than Adventists, with the difference being that male Baptists possess a slightly harsher standpoint than the female Baptists. For example, a Baptist Church believer states the following:

My attitude towards the LGBTQ population is that things are neither black nor white here. These people are emotionally challenged. Thinking of them, I primarily see a person with a preference for the same sex. I think it's a choice and not a matter of birth. (...) Therefore, I imagine a person in front of me who makes bad choices in their life, but I don't condemn them. (...) I'd hang out with such people, but I don't have members of the LGBTQ population among my friends, at least as far as I know. (...) I don't support LGBTQ marriage because there's no need for that. (Danijel)

Other interviewed Baptists cite religion to justify their standpoint:

I have no problem with these people, nor with them declaring as gay. The only problem is their public exposure. I'm ready to love them since they are also people. Unfortunately, the way they think is wrong. Not only do they think that what they are doing is right, but they also try to impose it on others, which is wrong. People should love each other, but we can't love that sin—it's not natural. You may like a person of the same sex, but that doesn't mean you have to fulfil your desires. (...) I'd certainly hang out with them for the simple reason that we all need salvation to show them the love of God, but I wouldn't approve of their orientation, just as I wouldn't approve of my friend cheating on their partner. Marriage can only be between a man and a woman. (...) Marriage was created by God, and it should last from the moment you said yes before the registrar and God until the end of your life, even if it went against you. (Olah)

As already mentioned, the interviewed female believers of the Baptist Church are more flexible than men. In Sara's words:

People should have the right to live their own lives as they wish and to express love the way they want. I wouldn't forbid anything from anyone, but I don't support it; God created a man and a woman. I can't explain it, but I'm more tolerant of the relationship between two men than two women. Somehow, I hear the term gay more than the term lesbian; maybe that's the reason. (Sara)

Similarly, another female believer insists:

I don't support it, but I don't condemn it, either. I was in Denmark. I saw a guy wearing a pink lace shirt, with makeup on. It looked disgusting; it's not natural. But I won't condemn it. (...) I wouldn't reject any of my friends if I found out that they had such inclinations. We live in a world in which my daughter could tell me that she is attracted to the same sex. (...) One day, same-sex marriage will be possible here as well. (...) I'm not against adoption of children by same-sex couples; should it really happen, maybe gay couples would take better care of children than heterosexual couples. On the other hand, maybe they wouldn't set a good example for the child; the child would go through life with the conviction that such a scenario is normal. (Kotoranka)

Based on our research, although those respondents belonging to the two churches rely on religious underpinnings against non-heteronormativity to justify their attitudes, the Baptist respondents come across as less hostile. It is difficult to explain why this is so.

## Conclusion

Religious affiliation is one of the greatest correlates of attitudes about sexual freedoms (Baker et al., 2020; Ellison et al., 2005; Emerson, 1996; Nie & Price, 2020; Sullins, 1999). Looking at the views of Adventist and Baptist believers in Montenegro on such issues, although the two communities' attitudes show similarities at a general level, we do notice certain differences at the individual level. This fluidity has especially been perceived when we ruled out the possibility of answering only with yes or no. Although general opinions seem to reflect messages from the Bible, individual points of view as to what our respondents support or do not support vary to some extent and depend on the situation. These variations have also been observed in other studies of a similar type (Drukman, 2001; Liebertz & Bunch, 2021; Whitehead, 2018).

Our respondents display a critical attitude towards abortion: They mostly perceive it as an act of murder. Looking at the interviewees' age and education, no obvious difference could be observed between them; still, a kind of discrepancy is evident in the gender structure of the interviewed believers. When it comes to premarital sexual activities, where a negative attitude is also present, male Adventists are more liberal than women, with some male interviewees openly saying that they had sex before marriage. This is not the case with our Baptist male respondents; in fact, no major differences could be observed between the male and female interviewees of the Baptist Church. In terms of non-heteronormative people, the believers interviewed in both churches do not have a benevolent attitude towards them. Still, as per our analysis, the Adventists come across as more conservative than the Baptists. Although among our Adventist respondents men are slightly more tolerant than women, among the Baptist group, it is the other

way around. The women's tolerant approach is evident when it comes to issues related to socialising with members of non-heteronormative communities as well as the questions of marriage and parenting.

Our research is far from exhaustive, and as such, it invites additional contributions of either a qualitative or quantitative nature. It would be interesting to compare the situation in Montenegro with that in other postsocialist states in terms of the relationship between the dominant religious denomination and religious minorities and the views of their respective believers on matters such as sexuality. Moreover, the scholarship would benefit from assessments concerning the impact of democratisation and Europeanisation on the attitude towards sexual freedoms; more precisely, because EU accession implies certain reforms, it would make sense to have some data about the extent to which such processes manage to penetrate value systems, hence providing alternatives to some largely intolerant understandings.

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