

## THE ROMANIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH: POST COMMUNIST TRANSFORMATION

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### Introduction

Critical evaluation is always an important and necessary instrument of progress. If this is valid when it comes to persons, it is all the more so when it comes to institutions and organizations, whose progress and destiny affect the lives of millions of people.

As one knows, and it is good for us to reiterate, the Church in Romania is the institution that, before any other, that enjoys the largest confidence and trust on the part of the population. This trust is based on the Spirit of Truth on whose foundation rests the spiritual and filial relation between Church and faithful, be it in time of peace or oppression.

This is good news, yet no novelty. That is the way things were forever probably, even though hundreds of years ago there were no statisticians to do special research on this topic.

In the presentation that follows I do not intend to treat exhaustively any of the aspects of the Church's life or of its impact on the life and history of Romanians; I will approach these aspects here only partially.

I considered the aspects here mentioned, some dealt with more in detail, some more generally, sufficient for the purpose of the present paper. The paper can be taken as a starting point for a treatment of the topic at a different length.

The references I will make here will regard only the situation of the Romanian Orthodox Church, and not that of the Greek-Catholic or Roman Catholic Churches, of the Protestant or Neo-Protestant denominations or of the Islamic or Mozaic religions.

### The Church before 1989

The trust of the people in the Romanian Orthodox Church that I mentioned above is a natural attitude since from the beginning of its existence on the territories inhabited by Daco-Romanians, the Church identified itself with the life of its faithful. Probably there is no need for examples in this sense. They are so numerous, those that are common knowledge and those that are less known, that they could fill volumes, not pages.

Even in the Communist time, so difficult and painful, beyond some failures of some of its representatives or of some of its faithful, there were many more meritorious, brave and responsible acts through which the Church, clergy and believers, made themselves known and thus made history. A telling example is the way in which the Church defended the real spiritual and cultural values of the nation against the Communist offensive of harshest oppression, even in situations where the Church was betrayed by some of its own sons and daughters who became Communists, atheists, sovietizing agents and who hurt it even worse than where it would have been hurt by strangers.

Every compromise has its own price, but sometimes compromise is a working strategy and in many cases a method of survival. That was the case of the Romanian Orthodox Church (and evidently, of the Christian Churches in the other countries oppressed by the Communist regime).

Yet, because the word “compromise” might have a negative connotation, it is good to specify that the Church did not make any compromise with regards to Christian doctrine which represents the essence of its mission in the world.

Administratively the Church’s situation was affected indeed. But can one call it compromise to execute orders received in the state of slavery in an atheistic, despotic regime?

Were there circumstances, in particular at the administrative level, where the Church took recourse to compromise, to negotiation or dealings when these were supposed to help it survive, yet without them hurting the essential faith values promoted by it? Yes. The compromise, in the general sense of the term, in the positive not the negative one, is sometimes necessary, in particular when the life of millions of people might depend on it. This type of compromise was made by the Orthodox Church, but also by the other Churches and/or denominations that functioned legally in Romania.

Prof. Paul Caravia reminds one that after the Communists came to power the Roman-Catholic Church which was left with two bishops, out of eight that it used to have, had to make its own compromises.<sup>1</sup> In the case of the Orthodox Church in Romania, this strategy proved to be helpful; both the Church and the nation considered themselves to have really been protected by God in a very particular way.

I am saying this because in other countries oppressed by Communist regimes similar compromises had to be made, yet in our case the situation of the Church was much better than in other places. I want only to mention a city like Kishinev with about 100 churches of which about 90 were closed. This was in the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic of Moldova. In Romania, in a city like Botosani, with about 30 churches, six or seven were closed. And the case of Albania where absolutely all churches were closed is well known.

In the 1950s, when I was a child and when my parents took me to church, the holy place was always full of believers. In the 1970s, when I was a theology student in Bucharest the churches where I used to go were always full. After I got ordained and functioned as a priest in rural locations and then in the city, the churches where I held the liturgical services were full.

In the 1980s when the World Council of Churches in Geneva offered a statistical review of the volume of religious publications by countries and denominations, among all countries with socialist regimes, the greatest volume of religious publications was found in Romania, even more than in Greece.

Therefore the millions of people of Romania could have access to some religious assistance, in all those years of difficulty and pain, as much as was then possible. But it was more than in other places under similar regimes. The great majority of people could go to church, could go to confession, take Holy Communion, listen to the Sunday liturgical services, ask for religious services at home and in the church. In the rural locations, even though with difficulty, even new churches were built. That did not happen in cities, however.

By saying all these things, I do not mean to be triumphalistic or idealist. The Church had, in some of its representatives, regrettable failures also, as always when we talk about human beings. Yet, in general, the failure was followed by redress. As in one of the prayers we have in the Service of Holy Unction, where we read: “As many times as you will fall, get up and you will be saved.”

The failures were exceptions. The overwhelming majority of the Church’s representatives was taking care of its specific pastoral and administrative work.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Caravia, *The Imprisoned Church, Romania 1944-1989*, published by the Romanian Academy, The National Institute for the Study of Totalitarianism, Bucharest, 1999, p. 34.

The faithful, on the other hand, were direct witnesses of the persecution, arrest, torturing and killing of thousands of Orthodox priests who had been legionaries or considered to be sympathizing with legionaries or who were only suspected to be so, without having been in reality. The same thing happened with the other priests denounced or suspected to have been adepts of, or sympathizers of, other political parties than the Communist one.

As Cicerone Ioanitoiu tells in one of his studies,<sup>2</sup> approximately 4000 Orthodox priests were sent to jail in the Communist prisons, some for two or three times, others being exterminated.<sup>3</sup> From the upper ranks of the hierarchy 17 bishops were demoted, 15 were exiled.<sup>4</sup> Many had to endure long years of detention. Some of them are still living today.

In another book published by the Romanian Academy,<sup>5</sup> where the writers present only 180 informative notes, reports, referrals and accounts, addresses of various informers, militia and security agents, administrative functionaries from the Communist system at the local or national level, over 1800 references are made to Orthodox bishops, priests, deacons, theology professors, theology students, monks, chanters, believers, who opposed the Communist regime – democratic as it was called – and who were conducting intense activities – so-called anti-democratic – who were speaking against the Communist government and the Bolsheviks, and who were writing articles of anti-communist propaganda in the ecclesiastical press. All this from a mere 180 files! Yet, how many similar documents would have also been around and then, how many thousands of Church representatives must be mentioned to have been detected, arrested and persecuted for their anti-Communist views.

Here is for example, a portrait by Radu Ciuceanu of Patriarch Justinian Marina based on those secret police documents, now known to the public:

“Few times the Communist Party of Romania failed to catch those who were meant to occupy front ranks and functions, in particular in such a sensitive and hot zone as that of faith where the Orthodox tradition blended its destiny with the existence of the Romanian people itself. And also few times, the ruse of a naïve rural priest worthy of the abilities of an Oltenian water bearer reached the perfection of a long lasting political program, at a moment when the ship of the Church, in a country occupied by the red armies was threatened with shipwreck and dissolution. It was the merit of this “thief of horses” Justinian Marina. He achieved through a political strategy built with unparalleled skill, to trick all those who were supervising him, to disappoint the masters from whom he received his rank, thus becoming without delay and reply, a Thomas Becket of Romania”.<sup>6</sup>

When I was a dean for the Dorohoi Deanery in Romania, of approximately 100 priests that I had under my jurisdiction, almost a quarter had spent time in Communist prisons. If we expand the proportion to a national level, we have a clearer picture of the priests’ persecution and suffering. Evidently, they were taken away from the public life, but after their prison terms they came back into the midst of the people – those who came back, of course.

Consequently it was the people, the faithful, who knew best who their priest was. The fact that for a long period of time the priests’ children did not have access to higher education, whether the priest was accused of having a hostile attitude towards the regime or not, was well known to

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<sup>2</sup> *The Literary Romania [Romania Literara]*, May 10, 1997, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Caravia, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> Cristina Paiusan and Radu Ciuceanu, *The Romanian Orthodox Church under the Communist Regime*, Vol. I, 1945-1958, Bucharest 2001.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, back cover.

everybody. I think it would be arrogant and unjust for us to believe that today we know better about the life of generations of priests during 50 years of Communism, than their own faithful in their village and city parishes.

The exceptions that could be invoked did not represent the rule but its exception, and as always, they confirm the rule. Yet, in retrospective, we are looking not at exceptions but at the general situation.

The best and most authorized critic of the Romanian Orthodox Church is not the former Communist, the former or present atheist, the former or present religiously indifferent, the Catholic, Protestant, Muslim or Jew, but the Orthodox people, the believers themselves, the faithful of the Church. Their critique is expressed in current statistics. The Church is the institution that to this day enjoys the highest trust among Romanians.

The failures of some Church representatives must have existed in the course of past centuries as well. But that doesn't mean that one can erase the Church's merit for always having identified itself with the struggle, suffering, longings and aspirations of its nation and faithful. In other words the Church brought its direct and effective contribution to the foundational and structural events that marked the history of Romanians such as the 1848 Revolution, the Union of the Romanian Principalities in 1859, the independence war in 1877, the First and Second World Wars, to list only a few in recent history.

About the Church's essential contribution at the cultural level, to the formation and development of the Romanian nation, one could write volumes. It is sufficient to reiterate here that the Orthodox monasteries and, in general, the ecclesiastic organizations, played a central role in the creation of this culture,<sup>7</sup> and, as Mircea Croitoru reminds one, the Romanian literature is "exclusively religious in its Daco-Roman roots", and "it grows on a trunk that is preponderantly Christian and at the dawn of our written history shows its rich growth and development".<sup>8</sup>

If we refer also to the capital works of renowned patrologist Prof. Dr. Ioan Coman and to the learned metropolitan Dr. Nestor Vornicescu, who both analyzed the phenomenon of the Romanian culture in the 4<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, we can conclude without hesitation that the Romanian Orthodox Church was the main founder of the Romanian culture, whose shining should be evidenced much more systematically and elaborately than it is done today.

## **The Church after 1989**

### *Social Activities*

It is known that during the years of Communist domination the Church was forced to renounce its social activities that it used to develop normally, by virtue of its vocation. It had to content itself with the liturgical, sacramental dimension of its existence. Fr. George Calciu, who spent many years in Communist jails, reminds one of a word by Metropolitan Nicolae Mladin of Transylvania who, referring to the possibility that the Church involve itself in social activities, had said: "Under the communists you can rise high up to heaven. But as soon as you want to expand horizontally, you are cut mercilessly in one instant".<sup>9</sup>

One of the most important realizations of the Church after 1989 is its engagement at the social level. The Romanian Orthodox Church was able since 1989 to create and develop institutionally at both the central and regional levels, departments, programs, branches that cover

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<sup>7</sup> Dan Horia Mazilu, "Cuvant inainte" [foreword] to *1700 de ani de poezie religioasa [1700 Years of Religious Poetry]*, Ed. Ager, Bucharest, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 20.

<sup>9</sup> *Viata Cultelor [The Life of Religious Denominations]*, year XII, nr. 547 March 21 2004, electronic version.

a vast and diverse area of social work. The Diaconia and the philanthropical programs and the helping activities have taken on a clear contour, they have become traditionalized and structured in a way that allows and generates efficiency.

For example, in the Romanian Patriarchate there are now over 40 offices for coordination of social work and assistance activities, where over 200 social workers, who are also qualified in theology, are working. They have diplomas of field specialization, and they have obtained their jobs through competition. The number of social assistance establishments founded and administered by the Patriarchate is over 350 and includes shelters for children (108), for the elderly (51), soup kitchens and bakeries (106), clinics and pharmacies (37), counseling centers (37), centers for the victims of human trafficking (2), centers for assistance for families in difficulty (19).<sup>10</sup>

These institutions are developing programs for helping children who come from poor families, for the prevention of school drop-outs, for orphan children, for those in correctional facilities, for the help of the Roma population.

One needs to add here the programs for religious assistance in hospitals, in units of social protection where well over 300 churches and chapels exist with well over 300 priests. There are also programs of religious assistance in prisons, where over 50 churches and chapels exist with as many working priests, and programs of religious assistance in the military units where over 80 churches and chapels are functioning with about 80 military priests.

In order for one to have a more precise idea of the length of these activities it is good to mention here that the amount of money allocated by the Romanian Patriarchate in one single year (2006, according to a statistical report) for the social and philanthropical work was of 37,500,000 lei or 11,000,000 euro, a huge sum considering the value of the currency and the salary and market price in that year. It was money that came from the Church's own dioceses, from donations, sponsors and external financing sources.<sup>11</sup>

For the entire work of social assistance the Church trains its own workers. For this purpose it has introduced in theological schools at the university level sections and programs for social assistance that generate yearly the qualified personnel for the field.

Another expression of the social engagement of the Church is evident in the constitution of the local committees of bioethics that exist in Cluj, Jassy, Bucharest, as well as a National Committee on Bioethics with the special task to study and evaluate the specific issues raised by this scientific sector, such as abortion, contraception, genetic manipulation, in vitro procreation, organ transplants. These committees are creating the documentation base on which the Church will express its official position.

This type of involvement in contemporary society offers the Church the chance to recuperate the ground lost when it could not be involved in the life of the nation at this level, to become a voice that speaks with authority on these issues, the way its sister, the Roman Catholic Church for example, does.<sup>12</sup>

#### *Theological education*

Another truly exceptional achievement of the Romanian Orthodox Church in the period we are studying here is related to theological education. Religion has been reintroduced as a compulsory discipline at the high school level, a subject taught by over 10.000 teachers in the entire

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<sup>10</sup> Daniel Ciobotea, "The Situation of the Romanian Orthodox Church and Its Ecumenical Connections in the Context of the New Europe (1989-2009) [in Romanian], in *Meridianul romanesc [The Romanian Meridian]*, year 36, vol. 13, nr 619, July 11, 2009, Santa Clarita, CA, pp 16-17.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.patriarhia.ro/pag1/bissocietate.htm>.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.

country. Instead of five theological seminaries and two schools of theology at the university level, as existed throughout the entire period of the Patriarchate before 1989, now one counts 39 Orthodox theological seminaries at the high school level (with over 700 teachers and over 6000 students annually), schools of religious chanters and post high school departments with double specialization in theology and nursing, 15 schools of theology at the university level with eight specializations whose approximately 450 professors teach over 11.000 students (7000 male and 4000 female). There are masters programs at eleven of the 15 mentioned schools of theology, and doctoral programs at the theological schools in Bucharest, Sibiu, Cluj and Oradea. The Romanian Orthodox Church now offers scholarships for students from the Republic of Moldova and from other Romanian speaking areas around the current borders of the country.<sup>13</sup>

#### *Parish life*

Related to the spectacular growth of religious education is the phenomenon of the multiplication of parishes, monasteries and hermitages, as is that of the priests, monks and nuns. In order to better serve the faithful in the big churches and parishes after 1989 there were created posts of assistant priests and deacons. In many cases, in particular in cities, the large parishes have been restructured in order to allow for the creation of new parishes where new churches have been built. In towns and villages with two churches of which only one was in use, the other one has been reopened too. Small parishes, which before 1989 were affiliated to neighboring bigger churches, have again become self standing. Even very small villages with no church now has a church.

The immense increase in the numbers of monasteries and hermitages in the entire country (637) with the proportionate growth in number of monks and nuns (over 8000) indicates that in Romania there is no crisis of vocation for the monastic life either.

#### *Media*

One of the most important achievements of the Church after 1989 is the unprecedented use of mass-media technology. In a world dominated by communication, the Church remains faithful to the traditional means of conveying the right teaching of faith, but is open to modern technology in missionary work. Thus the "Basilica" Press Center of the Romanian Patriarchate was set up in Bucharest shortly after the inauguration of Patriarch Daniel Ciobotea in the fall of 2007. The new institution is located in the Patriarchal Palace and made up of five branches: the "Trinitas" radio station, the "Trinitas" TV station, a group of three publications ("Lumina" - "The Light", a daily newspaper; "Lumina de Duminica" - "Sunday Light", a weekly publication; "Vestitorul Ortodoxiei" - "Herald of Orthodoxy", a monthly magazine), the "Basilica" news agency and the Press and Public Relations Office. There are also a multitude of other magazines and publishing houses for religious books, from those belonging to major church dioceses, to those belonging to deaneries and even parishes. The radio stations and programs that were created at the diocesan centers are part of this revival, too.

#### **Looking Ahead**

The Romanian Orthodox Church functions today in a context of critical importance for the life of the nation. It must recuperate in efficient ways the time lost during the 50 years of Communist domination. As I indicated already, it is well involved on this way of recuperation. Yet, there is a lot still to do. One cannot do everything suddenly, overnight. Yet the more elaborated and richer the action plan, the better the chances for necessary progress. In this context suggestions

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.patriarhia.ro/Departamente/invatreligios.htm>.

offered with good intentions are welcome.

Here are a few from the many suggestions possible:

1. At the political level: there is need for a more pronounced engagement of the Church. I agree with Fr. George Calciu who insistently asked that the Church not desert the political arena. Not in the sense of the clergy's membership in political parties. In this sense, the interdiction that the Church's Holy Synod issued against clergy becoming members of political parties was wise. Fr. Calciu wanted a Church that makes proposals to the government, opposes it when necessary, analyzes and reacts.

The Church can gather sufficient signatures – millions – even for changing the President, Fr. Calciu stated.<sup>14</sup> “The only army one can fear ... is the immense army of the Orthodox believers”<sup>15</sup> he said. Therefore we speak here of a Church that is dynamic, maturely and fully engaged in the life of the nation, which means engagement in the life of its own faithful and its care for them.

2. At the cultural and theological levels: I believe that it is necessary that the Church create new departments of translation so that the major works of Romanian theologians be published in languages of international circulation.

Hundreds of works of value by Romanian theologians are dispersed in Church magazines (many, as mentioned) remain on the shelves of archives and libraries, insufficiently studied. I remember that because of the scarcity of paper for printing during the oppression years of the Communist regime, the works of theology professors and of doctoral candidates were published in church magazines in a very small font, so that in many cases, a paper of 30, 40 pages published there in such small print could easily be republished as a book, if done in regular characters and spacing. In my view the republication and translation of such works is a priority at the theological and cultural level, obviously together with new research and publications, which already is in good progress.

Speaking of departments, I see as necessary the creation of a new department of press and publications, much more vigorous than the existing one, at the central, Patriarchal level. There it would be useful to have special positions created for theologian journalists who would be responsible to dialogue with the lay press on behalf of the Church; this could be done according to categories and fields, so that when the Church is attacked, depending on field and level, a specialized person in this job would be responsible to study, analyze the situation and give the needed reply to those who knowingly or unknowingly, with good or bad will, blame the Church for different reasons. These theologian-journalists would not only provide information often lacking when attacks are published, but would also raise awareness in the Church at the levels where the responsibility resides, in order to have any errors committed by Church people corrected.

Such a type of department could be complemented by another one that would be solely responsible for the public image of the Church and its public relations.

3. At the economic level: I believe it is necessary for the Church to create more and new structures and constituencies for fundraising, having in view particular institutions and people outside the country, all the more so now that the Church is engaged in the great project to build “The Cathedral of the Nation's Salvation” in Bucharest. This project is in itself an act of justice and restitution since

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<sup>14</sup> *Viata Cultelor [The Life of Religious Denominations]*, year XII, Nr. 547, March 21, 2004, p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 2.

it was originally initiated by Primate Metropolitan Elie Miron Cristea at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

4. At the ecumenical level: I see a more dynamic involvement of the Church in bilateral relations with other Christian churches, a more visible presence at international ecumenical encounters, the development of new initiatives for ecumenical programs in Romania, beyond the existing ones, so that the life of the Romanian Orthodox Church could be better known outside in the world.

5. At the level of the diaspora: there is a need for more attention to be given to the Romanians surrounding the current borders of the country. Special departments for this purpose could be created in nearby dioceses. Yet the Romanian diaspora in other parts of the world is not to be neglected and there should be more effort by the Church to strengthen the feeling of belonging of these people to the nation and the Church from which they departed physically and geographically or even spiritually.

In this context a good idea would be to promote more intensely the partnerships between parishes in Romania and Romanian parishes abroad, or between those in Romania and others from different Christian traditions in the West in particular.

This type of partnership should be developed not only at the religious level but also at the level of social assistance between agencies, organizations, institutions and foundations sponsored by the Church in Romania and others in the West in particular.

### **Conclusions**

It is not easy to describe in a few words such a complex phenomenon as that indicated in the title of this presentation. However, I considered that some important aspects in the life of the Church could serve as basis for reflection and discussion, that could help create a road, the most adequate, on which the Romanian Orthodox Church could follow, keeping in mind its specific character and the role it played in the history of its people.

I mention this not in the sense that the Church hierarchy does not know what is to be done, but in the sense of the participation of all, clergy and faithful, in the difficult and immense work in which the Church is engaged.

I also know that it is easy to suggest what needs to be done and much more difficult for the one who suggests to make personal efforts, in concrete ways, to help in the implementation of these ideas, or to offer practical, efficient solutions. However the reflection and dialogue cannot but be useful.

When there is love, understanding, good will, and respect, reflections developed through dialogue can indeed be constructive and can become a foundational rock for the building of a new way.

## WHICH ORTHODOXY, WHOSE ISLAM: JOURNALISTIC ACCOUNTS VERSUS SCHOLARLY ANALYSIS

By Ina Merdjanova

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It was with increasing discomfiture that I read the article “‘Secular Orthodoxy’ versus ‘Religious Islam’ in Postcommunist Bulgaria” by Daniela Kalkandjieva.<sup>1</sup> It discusses “some problems of Christian-Muslim dialogue in postcommunist Bulgaria”, basing the author’s argument on abundant references to various newspaper publications in Bulgaria for the period 2005-2007.

I find particularly problematic the perceived opposition between ‘secular’ Orthodox Christianity and ‘religious’ Islam, even when inverted commas are used. It can hardly be justified by reference alone to the higher level of religiosity among the Muslim population than among the Orthodox majority (often affiliated to Orthodoxy mainly by virtue of tradition). The fact that Orthodoxy has played a ‘secular’ function through its rendition into a marker of national identity does not make it more ‘secular’ than Islam. In Bulgaria at least, Islam is widely perceived as a marker of identity in the case of the Turks too, who are the largest Muslim community in the country. The higher level of religiosity of Muslims in Bulgaria is related to their minority situation and to the specific social and economic contexts in which they live rather than to some imaginary ability of Islam to foster stronger allegiances than Orthodox Christianity. As a whole, such dichotomization remains a thin rhetorical construct, which might have had some explanatory power if explanations had been given in some detail or at least briefly clarified it (a comparison with what the American sociologist Robert Bellah called ‘civil religion’ might have been a possible way of going about such clarification). Otherwise, the un-nuanced use of the term ‘secular’ with regard to Orthodox Christianity obscures, rather than explains, anything of the multidimensional and convoluted transformation of religion in postcommunist society.

A number of statements in the article related to Muslim minorities are misleading. For example, she states that “we should bear in mind that the communist authorities were flexible about ethnic differences while more consistently pursuing the aim of destroying religion.” (p.424) While this was to some extent true for the first decade of communism, when the new regime favored ethnic identities at the expense of religious ones, from the late 1950s onwards these policies underwent a radical change. Feeling uneasy with the growing number of Muslims of different ethnic origin, who gradually started self-identifying as Turks, the Communist Party undertook serious steps at curtailing the cultural and religious rights of Muslim minorities in the 1960s and 1970s. Moreover, in the early 1970s the communist regime in Bulgaria launched a drastic strategy of eradicating ethnic differences in the name of the construction a homogenized socialist nation. The 1971 Constitution lacks any mention of ethnic minorities (or minorities of any kind), while the official political and media discourse in the 1970s introduced the designation “Bulgarian citizens of non-Bulgarian ancestry” with regard to the Turks and other minorities living in the country. Consequently the traditional Turko-Arab names of the Pomaks, Muslim Roma and Turks were

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<sup>1</sup> “‘Secular Orthodoxy’ versus ‘Religious Islam’ in Postcommunist Bulgaria” by Daniela Kalkandjieva was published in *Religion, State & Society*, Vol. 36, N. 4, December 2008, pp.423-34. I am grateful to Philip Walters, the editor of *RSS*, for his comments and suggestions on an earlier version of my response.

forcefully changed to Bulgarian ones in the 1970s and 1980s. Particularly brutal was the assimilation of the Turkish-speaking population in 1984-85.

The over one million strong Muslim community in Bulgaria includes different ethnic groups: Turks, Roma, Pomaks (Bulgarian-speaking Muslims), and Tatars. Although the title of Kalkandjieva's article promised to deal with Islam in Bulgaria, for unspecified reasons, she deals mostly with Pomaks and their identity transformations; she mentions Turks only fleetingly, and entirely neglects the other two groups. The claim that in the eastern Rhodope Mountains 'ethnic Turks', who comprise 61 per cent of the local population, did not regard Pomaks as proper Muslims' which had consequently "facilitated the Pomaks' return to Orthodoxy because they found their common ethnicity with the Orthodox Bulgarian majority in the region more important than the diverse religious affiliation" (p. 425) offers an overly simplified explanation of the complex, multifaceted and painful dynamics of postcommunist identity construction among the Pomaks. To be sure, these identity transformations have also included an important third dimension, the construction of a separate Pomak ethnic identity on the basis of Islam rather than a simply fluctuation between constructions of 'Bulgarianness' and 'Turkishness'.<sup>2</sup> Kalkandjieva's assertion also contradicts an earlier (and similarly problematic) claim in her article that Pomaks generally are "equally distanced from both Orthodox Bulgarians and Muslim Turks" (p. 424).

Kalkandjieva finds (on the basis of press articles, which she says have regularly reported the penetration of radical Islamist propaganda in the central Rhodope region) that those Pomaks "who have been secularized during the period of state atheism are now inclined to adopt Orthodoxy while the rest are more vulnerable to the influence of Arab Islam in its more radical forms" (p.425). This is a misleading analysis, obviously based on the perceived opposition between 'secular' Orthodoxy and 'religious' Islam which I questioned earlier, not to mention the use of the problematic concept of an "Arab Islam", a concept exploited indiscriminately in the media reports, mostly as a synonym for Islamic radicalism. Moreover, while emissaries from various Arab countries have targeted predominantly the Pomak population, this does not necessarily mean that they have gained more than a limited influence among specific groups of this population.<sup>3</sup>

A methodological problem occurs when authors rely excessively on press accounts, and the journalistic quotations remain largely unverified by additional research methods. This is certainly problematic, given the fact that newspaper coverage in Bulgaria relating specifically to religion frequently suffers from deficiencies ranging from bias to misinterpretation to misinformation. The media in this country (as well as in much of the post-communist Southeast Europe) have often fostered negative attitudes and intolerance to the religious 'others' and particularly to religious minorities by selective and tendentious reporting.<sup>4</sup> This tendency can be linked to the prevailing ignorance in religion-related matters among media reporters, since education about religion is a gap which still needs to be addressed in the school and university curricula. The search for a cheap sensationalism and attempts at manipulating the public opinion,

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<sup>2</sup> See Todorova, M. (1997) 'Identity (trans)formation among Pomaks in Bulgaria', in L. Kürti and J. Langman (eds.), *Beyond Borders: Remaking Cultural Identities in the New East and Central Europe* (Boulder, CO, Westview Press), pp.63-82. For an excellent ethnographic study of Pomaks' identity transformations post-1989 see *Muslim Lives in Eastern Europe: Gender, Ethnicity, & the Transformation of Islam in Postsocialist Bulgaria* by Kristen Ghodsee. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Ghodsee for example has shown how specific economic and social shifts have profoundly affected the lives of a Pomak community in a small mountainous town in southern Bulgaria and prompted the spread of new, locally defined commitments to what the author has called "orthodox" Islam (Ghodsee, op. cit.)

<sup>4</sup> For example, the 2009 International Religious Freedom Report on Bulgaria points to the "discrimination, harassment, and a general public intolerance, particularly in the media, of some religious groups" ([http://www.novinite.com/view\\_news.php?id=109313](http://www.novinite.com/view_news.php?id=109313)).

particularly when the focus is 'Islam' and 'Muslims', is a particularly worrying trend in journalistic reporting (admittedly, the scare-crow of 'Islamic radicalization' is the easiest way to draw attention and sell more newspapers, not in Bulgaria alone). It therefore hardly represents a trustworthy source to be used as a basis for an academic study, unless this study is an analysis of such newspaper coverage. Another misperception is the assertion that "Muslim NGOs in Bulgaria are generally founded by graduates of such universities [Islamic universities in the Arab world]" (pp. 426-27). The Islamic NGOs operating in Bulgaria have highly diverse origins, orientations and goals. Even though there have been a few NGOs founded by graduates of 'Arab universities', this means neither that this is the prevailing model, nor that such graduates' major aim is the alleged spread of some radical Islam. More importantly, as Kristen Ghodsee points out, "under the current Bulgarian law it is almost impossible to establish the source of funding for the category of 'foundation for private benefit'"<sup>5</sup> which obviously makes information about 'Arab funding' very difficult to verify. When discussing the view of the minister of education that those Muslim girls who insist on wearing headscarves should continue their education in one of the several Muslim female colleges in the country (as a matter of fact, there are no separate Muslim female colleges in Bulgaria; all three Muslim spiritual schools are co-ed), Kalkandjieva wrote: "One could expect an increase in religious fundamentalism in Bulgaria after such girls return home" (p. 427). This troubling prediction is not based on any real facts and serves nothing better than fostering irrational fears of Islam; as a matter of fact, when I visited the Islamic school in Shumen in March 2009, not a single of the female students there wore a headscarf.

In concluding her article Kalkandjieva says that "the dangerous possibility evidently exists that religious tensions or conflicts might be transformed into political ones" (p. 429). The real danger, at least for me, is the meddling of political interests in religion-related issues and the instrumentalization of religion for short-sighted political goals. Obviously, this increases immensely the responsibility of scholars dealing with religion, as well as the significance of both their topics and methods of research.

Another point, which is of much wider significance and affects us all, needs to be made about various impediments to the introduction of genuine academic study of religion in Eastern European countries. I have already written about this.<sup>6</sup> Some Eastern European authors who are writing about religion in their societies, while not hesitating to claim the (often correct) privilege of a first-hand insider's knowledge, not rarely lack basic conceptual and methodological training and skills. This is quite understandable, given that the academic study of religion is a brand-new disciplinary field for most scholars in postcommunist Eastern Europe. Yet the publication of under-researched writings in western academic journals easily transforms such texts into reference materials for 'outside' scholars to quote and to use as basis for their own arguments. This is how half-truths can start circulating as realities, if left unopposed. In my 2006 article I briefly pointed to a compelling dilemma. Should Eastern European scholars of religion just borrow and apply western approaches, whether directly importing them or utilizing them in a more creative way, or rather seek to develop specific postcommunist approaches to the academic study of religion? Maybe it is time for us in Eastern Europe to start addressing this question; yet, to my mind, we need first to master the already existing methodologies when writing about religion-related issues in our societies.

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<sup>5</sup> E-mail communication, 31 August, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Ina Merdjanova. "The academic study of religion in Bulgaria: an impossible dream?", *Bulletin of the Council of Societies for the Study of Religion*, 35, 4, November 2006, pp. 80-82.