

UNEASY TOLERANCE: INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS IN BULGARIA AFTER THE FALL OF COMMUNISM

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I. Statistical Data and Historical Background

Religious self-identification:¹

Bulgarian Orthodox: 6 552 751 (82.64%)
Muslims: 966 978 (12.2%), of which 85 733 Shiites (7.7% of all Muslims)
Undeclared: 283 309 (3.57%)
Catholics: 43 811 (0.55%) (plus 18 000 Eastern-rite Catholics)
Protestants: 42 308 (0.53%)
Unknown: 24 807 (0.31%)
Other: 14 937 (0.19%), of which 1 363 (0.02%) Jews
Total: 7 928 901

Ethnic minorities:

Roma: 370 908 (4.7%) – Estimates: 700 000 – 800 000 (8.8-10.1%)
Turks: 746 664 (9.4%) – Estimates: 600 000 – 700 000 (7.6-8.8%)
Pomaks: Not listed in census results – Estimates 200 000 – 270 000 (2.5-3.4%)
Tatars: 4 515

The first Bulgarian medieval state was established in 681 by Prince Asparuh, and the mass conversion of Bulgarians to Christianity took place two centuries later, in 864, under Prince Boris I. In the beginning, the Bulgarian church was an autonomous archbishopric under the jurisdiction of the Constantinopolitan Patriarchate. By way of its Christianization, the Bulgarian kingdom became part of the so-called “Byzantine commonwealth”,² which was

¹ The statistical data are based mainly on the 2001 census (Source: National Statistical Institute, http://www.nsi.bg/Census_e/Census_e.htm), with small additions based on other sources. However, there is a difference between ethnic self-identification (on which the census data are based) and ethnic identification by others. The Turkish minority thus is estimated to be smaller than the census results indicate, as a number of Muslim Roma and Pomaks have identified themselves as ethnic Turks in the census. The Roma, on the other hand, are estimated to be about 700 000-800 000.

² This phrase was coined by the historian Dimitri Obolensky, the author of *The Byzantine Commonwealth: Eastern Europe 500-1453*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971.

dominated by the Eastern Christian, or Byzantine, ritual and canonical model of Christianity and the attendant church-state relations.³

The Ottoman conquest of the Balkan peninsula in the XIV-XV century put an end to the Bulgarian medieval kingdom and its autonomous church, subordinating completely the latter to the Constantinopolitan Patriarchate. The Ottomans established the so-called *millet* system, wherein the *millets* were self-governing units, based on the confessional affiliation of the various populations and administered by the respective religious hierarchy. This specific style of societal organization privileged religious belonging over ethnic or national identities. Consequently, the struggle for the establishment of independent nation-states everywhere in the Balkans throughout the XIX century involved as an indispensable component the establishment/restoration of autonomous national churches. The Bulgarian Church was reinstated in the form of an autonomous Exarchate in 1870; however the latter was renounced as schismatic by the Patriarch of Constantinople, because of the non-canonical way in which the autonomy was achieved (the Church was declared autonomous by a decree of the Turkish sultan).

In 1878 Bulgarian people gained independence from the Ottomans and proclaimed their own nation-state, however, the schism of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church was abolished only in 1945, while the Bulgarian Patriarchate was restored in 1952. Why was this accomplished only with the coming of the communists to power? The goal of the communist regime was, of course, not to bolster the prestige of the Church; this important act aimed to cut off the influence of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and to promote closer ties with the Russian Orthodox Church, which was an additional way of bringing the two nations closer together.⁴

The communists abolished religious education, confiscated church property and launched attacks on the clergy, thereby overtaking completely the management of the

³ While the dominant principle of Church-State relations in the Christian West has been expressed by the idea of the “two spheres”, or the separation of ecclesiastical and secular authorities (“Render the things of Caesar unto Caesar and the things of God unto God.”), the construction of these relations in the Christian East has been dominated by the vision of a “symphony” (Eusebius of Caesarea, IV c.) between the power of the secular government and the spiritual authority of the Church. In Byzantium the emperor was formally seen as an “external apostle” of the Church (as Eusebius of Caesarea has called Constantine the Great), who was able to intervene powerfully in the activities and policies of the latter. Sometimes these two theories are called “papocaesarism” vs. “caesaropapism”; however these designations are disputable. Only extreme cases, such as the replacement by Peter the Great in the early XVIII c. of the Russian Patriarchate with a Holy Synod, headed by a lay procurator appointed by the tsar, represent clear examples of caesaropapism in Eastern Christianity.

⁴ This issue is discussed in detail in: Daniela Kalkandjieva, *The Bulgarian Orthodox Church and the 'People's Democracy' 1948-1953*. Silistra: DEMOS Foundations, 2002 (in Bulgarian).

Church. The latter was gradually marginalized⁵ and turned into an obedient tool of the new regime.

After the collapse of the communist regime the Bulgarian Orthodox Church gained an opportunity to recover from its spiritual and institutional stagnation. In 1991 the ecclesiastical academy was restored to its initial statute of a Theological Faculty within Sofia University, and since the academic year 2001/02 it has offered a four-year bachelor studies program, as well as a two-year masters program. A second theological faculty at Veliko Turnovo University has been established, and theology has been also introduced as a discipline at Shumen and Plovdiv Universities. However, the Church met the postcommunist challenges extremely weakened by its communist legacy, ranging from being infested with communist pawns, to strict control preventing anybody with higher-than-average grades to enroll in the ecclesiastical academy, to having a crippled and corrupted church leadership which continued to perpetuate itself after collapse of the old regime. The Church was torn apart by heated debates over the past compromises of its hierarchy. In 1992 the Bulgarian Orthodox Church went through one of the most tragic experiences in its history. It was divided into two, not without the active interference of the state authorities, which registered and thus legitimated an alternative Holy Synod. Consequently, many attempts for healing the rift remained without result. The Church failed to address constructively the complex, disastrous and far-reaching consequences of its internal split. Another serious challenge confronting the Bulgarian Orthodox Church during the last fifteen years has been the new experience of a political, cultural and religious pluralism, for which the Church was largely unprepared and had neither an adequate theological, nor an effective sociological methodology.

2. Other Religious Communities

Despite the fact that Eastern Christianity has been the predominant religion of most Bulgarians throughout the centuries, the religious history of Bulgaria is not just the history of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, but also comprises the histories of the Muslim, the Jewish and other Christian communities who have lived side by side for centuries. It should not go

⁵ Believers could not be members of the Communist Party, which in itself barred them from pursuing prosperous careers. Those attending church were under surveillance of the special security agencies and persistence often meant a job loss. No wonder that believers gradually came to be seen as second-class citizens.

unnoticed that other religious communities, too, suffered repression at the hands of the communists.

The Muslim community is the second largest in Bulgaria. The communist policies toward Muslim minorities in the country were highly voluntaristic and underwent considerable alterations between 1945 and 1989. Perceiving Islam as a serious obstacle to the integration of Turks and other Muslims into Bulgarian society, the Communist party attempted to create a “socialist Turkish minority”.⁶ It suppressed religious identification and encouraged the development of a secular elite among the ethnic Turkish citizens through the improvement of their educational and cultural conditions. As a result of the restrictions and the oppression of the communist regime and under the influence of Kemalist Turkey, the primary identity focus for the country’s Turkish minority changed from religion to ethnicity. In the 1970s and 1980s the traditional names of the Muslims were forcibly changed into Bulgarian ones, and severe measures against religious practice and the public use of the Turkish language were introduced. More than 350 000 Bulgarian Turks left the country for Turkey (of whom about 100 000 later returned). Despite the communist government’s efforts to undermine the religious affiliation of the Muslim and Turkish population through anti-Islamic propaganda, confiscation of the property of charitable foundations (waqfs), the reduction of the number of functioning mosques, and the persecution of religious leaders, Turks and other Muslims persisted in performing their traditional rites based on Islam. Even surveys conducted under communism in the 1970s and early 1980s confirmed that religiosity among Turkish population was twice as high as that among the Bulgarians. In 1985 only 25 per cent of the ethnic Bulgarians declared that they were religious, in contrast to 55 per cent of the Turks.⁷ In the context of the new processes, which started with the end of communism, the presence of Muslims has become more visible and pronounced. They gained new opportunities for religious and cultural revitalization, on the one hand, and for political mobilization, on the other. Civil society organizations and associations oriented towards the problems of the Muslims mushroomed throughout the country. Three Muslim schools and an

⁶ About the Muslim population in Bulgaria, see Alexander Popovic, “The Turks of Bulgaria (1878-1985).” *Central Asia Survey*. Vol. 5, No. 2, 1986, pp. 1-32; Ali Eminov, *Turkish and Other Muslim Minorities in Bulgaria*. London (Hurst) 1997; Wolfgang Höpken, “From Religious Identity to Ethnic Mobilisation: The Turks of Bulgaria before, under and since Communism.” In: Hugh Poulton and Suha Taji-Faruki (eds.), *Muslim Identity and the Balkan State*. London (Hurst) 1997, pp. 54-82; Yulian Konstantinov, “Strategies for Sustaining a Vulnerable Identity: The Case of the Bulgarian Pomaks.” In: Hugh Poulton and Suha Taji-Faruki (eds.), *Muslim Identity and the Balkan State*. London (Hurst) 1997, pp. 33-53.

⁷ Wolfgang Höpken, “From Religious Identity...”, p. 69.

Islamic higher education institute provide for the educational needs of the community, while more than 1 000 mosques and prayer houses organize its religious life. A political party representing the Muslim population (the Movement for Rights and Freedoms) appeared, and it has been represented in every parliament since 1990. The political leaders of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms have been very careful to preclude any identification with Islamist or pan-Turkist ideas. They use an essentially secular and moderate language in their programs and statements. The Movement has been open to all Bulgarian citizens, in spite of the fact that it has drawn support primarily from Turks and other Muslims.

The Muslim community in Bulgaria is highly diversified both ethnically (it includes Turks, Pomaks, Roma and Tatars) and religiously (the Turkish Muslims are divided into Sunnis and Shiites). The Shiites are known in the country as Aliani, or Kazilbash (“red head”) after their traditional headgear with 12 stripes representing the 12 imams. Most of the Kazilbash settled in the northeast part of the country between the XV-XVII c. and were associated with various Sufi orders active in the Balkans during the Ottoman time. The Kazilbash have been considered “heterodox”, even heretical, by the majority Sunnis. Because of periodic persecutions they have tended to conceal their identity and to often represent themselves as Sunnis. According to the 1992 census, there are 85 733 Shiites in Bulgaria (7.7% of the Muslim population).

The other three ethnic groups in the Muslim community are the Pomaks, the Roma and the Tatars. **The Pomaks** are Bulgarian speaking Muslims, also called Muslims of Bulgarian ethnic origin. They are a predominantly rural population, mainly living in “Pomak enclaves” in the Rhodope mountains. After the fall of communism, when their identity was dramatically challenged by the new realities, the Pomaks have split into three subgroups. Some of them have emphasized their Bulgarian ethnic affiliation and converted to Christianity; another part has claimed a Turkish ethnic identity,⁸ and a third group has made attempts to construct a new ethnic identity on the basis of Islam. The data on the religious affiliations of **the Roma** are highly uncertain, as this population tends to change its religious self-identification, and is generally divided into a Muslim and various Christian subgroups. **The Tatars** numbered 4 515 in 1992 (down from the around 100 000 strong Tatar community in the 1870s). They live in northeast Bulgaria in areas which are populated

⁸ During the 1992 census about 35 000 Pomaks in the district of Blagoevgrad identified themselves as ethnic Turks, which led to nation-wide protest and the subsequent nullification of the census results on ethnic identity, mother tongue and religious belief for this district.

predominantly with ethnic Turks and tend to assimilate into this population linguistically, socially and culturally, or to emigrate to Turkey.

The Catholic community was severely persecuted by the communist regime, because Catholicism was considered the religion of fascism and a vector of foreign influence. Catholic priests were charged with anti-socialist activities and support to the opposition parties. In the early 1950s the property of the Catholic parishes was confiscated, all schools, clubs and colleges were closed, and the Catholic Church was deprived of its legal status. In 1990 relations with the Vatican were re-established and in 2002 the Pope visited Bulgaria. Today, about 44 000 Roman Catholics and 18 000 Eastern-rite Catholics live in the country. The two Catholic communities have good co-operative relations.

Various **Protestant groups** date back from the mid-XIX century, when missionaries from the US introduced Methodism in northern Bulgaria and Congregationalism to the south. In 1875 the Protestants formed the Bulgarian Evangelical Philanthropic Society, which was later transformed into the Union of Evangelical Churches in Bulgaria. Under communism the property of the Protestant churches was confiscated and many pastors and ordinary believers were forcefully relocated throughout the country or moved underground. After 1989 the old, “traditional” for the country Protestant churches were rehabilitated, many new churches were registered, and a number of Protestant NGOs carrying out educational and religious activities appeared. In 1999, a Higher Evangelical Theological Institute was established through the unification of four different Evangelical schools, which appeared in Bulgaria in the early 1990s.

The Jewish community consists mainly of Sephardic Jews, and also comprises a small number of Ashkenazi Jews. During WWII the Jews living in Bulgaria (about 50 000) were saved from deportation to the death camps with the active interference of the leadership of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. Considered by the communists a national rather than a religious group, about 90 percent of the Bulgarian Jews left the country for Israel after WWII. Today, about 1 300 Jews live in the country.

Apart from these traditional for the country religious minorities, after the fall of communism a number of **new religious movements** (NRMs) arrived from Western Europe and North America. Both the Orthodox Church and the society at large reacted with anxiety and fear to the emerging religious pluralism. The common perception, fostered powerfully by most of the representations in the media, and evident in designations like “destructive cults”

and “dangerous sects,” was highly negative. NRMs were seen as a threat to the national identity, because they were said to promote the interests of foreign missions and organizations; they were considered harmful by the Church, because they allegedly eroded its newly gained position in society by robbing it from what it saw to be its legitimate flock; they were also deemed to be destructive to family life, as they often fueled conflict between younger converts and their parents.

A 1993 sociological investigation into the prevailing social views on NRMs in Bulgaria showed that 68 percent of those interviewed held that the activity of alternative religions in the country should be forbidden, while half of all those interviewed were convinced that new religions had no place in a democratic society.⁹ The investigation revealed clearly the prevailing intolerance and lack of understanding among the general Bulgarian public about the nature of the processes of democratization. People were not ready to accept the legitimacy of alternative religious formations or to coexist peacefully with them.

In fact, a considerable decline in the size and significance of NRMs seems already to be an emerging trend everywhere in Eastern Europe. The influx of NRMs and the rapid rise in their membership in the first years after the fall of communism has ceased. According to data quoted by Hadzhiiska,¹⁰ in 1993 about one percent of the Bulgarian population, that is about 85 000 people, had been registered as members of alternative religious movements. The approximate number of adherents of NRMs which I counted on the basis of data given by Petkov¹¹ for the different religious communities (in a book of interviews with their leaders) showed that their membership had dropped to about one tenth of what it had been just five years earlier. I relate this decline to the fact that Bulgarian society is highly secularised¹² and

⁹ These data support the observation of Eileen Barker that in Eastern Europe “for a sizeable proportion of the population, pluralism, in the sense of a peaceful co-existence of alternative religions, has been, and for many remains, an alien concept”. Eileen Barker. “But ‘Who’s going to win?’ National and Minority Religions In Postcommunist Society.” In: Nembach, Ulrich, Heinrich Rusterholz & Paul Zulehner (eds.). *Informationes Theologiae Europae. Internationales ökumenisches Jahrbuch für Theologie*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1998, pp. 11-39, here p. 20.

¹⁰ Neli Hadzhiiska. “Za nyakoi problemi, svarzani s novite religiozni dvizhenia v Bulgariya” [On Some Problems Connected with the New Religious Movements in Bulgaria]. In: *Filosofski alternativni*. No. 3, 1995, pp. 139-53, here p. 145

¹¹ Todor Petkov. *Putevoditel za dukhovnite obshnosti v Bulgaria* [Guidebook about the spiritual communities in Bulgaria]. Sofia: Litavra, 1998.

¹² The observation that Bulgarian society is one of the most secular (see for instance David Martin. *Forbidden Revolution. Pentecostalism in Latin America, Catholicism in Eastern Europe*. Macon: Mercer University Press, 1996, p. 9, and Sabrina Ramet. *Social Currents in Eastern Europe. The Sources and Consequences of the Great Transformation*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1995, p. 157) is confirmed by the data quoted in Neli Hadzhiiska, *Za nyakoi...*, here pp. 145-46. The latter points out that in 1990 only 4 percent of those interviewed answered in the affirmative the question whether they believed in God. I remain sceptical as to whether the data supplied by Hadzhiiska on a subsequent huge growth of those claiming to be “believers” (25 percent in 1991 and 63

to the relative stabilization of the religious market in the country. Various new religions have found their niches of socialization and have more or less predictable modes of function.

3. Interreligious and Inter-ethnic Relations.

Negative tolerance

In contrast to the generally intolerant attitudes toward the NRMs, which came to the country after the fall of communism, sociological surveys have revealed a considerably high level of religious tolerance among and toward the so-called “traditional religions.” Normally, Christians and Muslims live peacefully side by side. The well-known practice of heterodox Dervish orders in worshipping saints and shrines drew Muslims and Christians closer together. In the past, Muslims and Christians often shared the offering to a common saint, as well as a number of symbiotic practices. Even today Muslims and Christians share a few pilgrimage sites (for example Demir Baba Tekke in northeast Bulgaria).

A nuanced understanding of tolerance, however, differentiates between negative and positive tolerance (also called by some authors passive and active tolerance). Generally, “negative tolerance” is a position of pragmatic non-interference and putting up with difference, while “positive tolerance” means not just enduring and bearing with religiously others, but embracing an active attitude of respect and appreciation for the value of difference. For example, a test for positive tolerance is whether the particular religious community is ready to protect other religions’ freedom as one’s own.

I want to argue that manifestations of negative tolerance seem to prevail in Bulgaria. The established Christian-Muslim relations, for example, fit neatly into the model of “komshiluk” (from the Turkish word “komshiya”, meaning “neighbour”), according to which people of different ethnic or religious groups live peacefully and even co-operatively in close proximity, yet the groups preserve their structural and cultural differences and their boundaries remain well-sustained and generally unbridgeable.¹³

percent in 1992) reflect the real state of affairs.

¹³ The practice of “komshiluk” in the Balkan countries dates back to the Ottoman time and practically can be found in all settings with mixed population. Tone Bringa, for example, has observed it during her anthropological study in a Muslim-Croat Bosnian village just before the recent war in Bosnia. According to Bringa, while following clear obligations of reciprocity and mutual help on a number of occasions, the two ethno-religious groups strictly preserved their distinctions. An important way of sustaining their boundaries was by prohibiting intermarriage between members of the two groups. Tone Bringa. *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way: Identity and Community in a Central Bosnian Village*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.

Intracommunal Power Struggles

In recent Bulgarian history there have not been conflicts, generated and/or related to interreligious controversies. Yet, after 1989, there have been a number of heated intra-religious disputes, related to internal power struggles and contests over who gets to speak on behalf of each particular community and to control its property. The Muslim community went through a serious split, very similar to the one experienced in the Orthodox Church. The severe contest over the post of the Chief Mufti has led to the establishment of rival Muslim councils, selecting rival chief muftis, and subsequent lawsuits, accompanied by mutual accusations and bitter fights in the media.

On the whole, religious communities remain relatively closed and focused on their own problems, which are by no means negligible in the postcommunist context. Therefore the positive resolving of their intra-communal tensions and problems is of primary importance for their sustainable development. However, the continued introversion carries the risk of the reinforcement of a specific fortress mentality, inherited from the communist time. Obviously, interreligious dialogue in this situation is of particular exigency, because such a dialogue will bring new experience and perspectives, which could help for the resolving of communities' internal controversies.

Barriers to Interreligious Dialogue

An important barrier to interreligious dialogue remains the inequality in terms of social power and influence (majority versus minority religions), and the construction of a national identity around the religious identification of the majority population—Orthodoxy. This construction provides a clear example of a powerful interplay between religion and politics, and of the appropriation of the religious discourse by the project of nation(alism).

Another serious obstacle is the generally rather poor level of religious education in Bulgarian society. People seem to be ignorant not only of the religious teaching and practice of the others, but of their own religious tradition as well. In this situation, the potentially inflammatory role of the media in fuelling negative attitudes and intolerance by selective and tendentious reporting is not to be neglected. Prevailing religious ignorance, coupled with manipulative, sensationalist and oftentimes also religiously un(der)educated media can in the long run prove to be a formula for interreligious tensions and even conflicts.

Conclusion

On the whole, since 1989 Bulgaria has made significant progress in the (closely related) areas of inter-ethnic and interreligious relations. It has reversed communist assimilation campaigns, introduced mother tongue education for minority children, as well as religious education. Moreover, it has adopted a number of important legislative documents, such as the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, a comprehensive government program for the integration of the Roma minority (the "Framework Program"), and a Law on Protection against Discrimination. In December 2002, the government passed a new law on religion, which replaced the old one from 1949.

However, changes in policy and legislature have not always been followed through and put into practice. Interreligious tolerance, on the other hand, while present in society, has remained uneasy and along the lines of what I called above "negative tolerance." This all proves once again how difficult the creation of a culture of tolerance (or what Robert Bellah would call tolerant "habits of the heart") is, even after considerable structural changes have been carried through.