

WHICH ORTHODOXY, WHOSE ISLAM: JOURNALISTIC ACCOUNTS VERSUS SCHOLARLY ANALYSIS

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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.¹ 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

¹ “‘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'.² 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.³

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.⁴ 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,

² 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.

³ 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.)

⁴ 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).

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'"⁵ 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.⁶ 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.

⁵ E-mail communication, 31 August, 2009.

⁶ 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.