

## RELIGION AND ATTITUDES OF POLITICAL PARTIES

In the present **crisis** of humankind, all emphasis seems to be placed on utilitarianism in both science and religion. In religion, which is the main focus of our attention, the growth of the utilitarian spirit is an alarming phenomenon. Utilitarianism seems to mark not only the attitude of political powers that use religion for the sake of social control and transform it to suit their purposes, but also the attitude of many who oppose them.

Religion may be defined broadly as the human quest for, experience of, and response to the holy or sacred. This universal human activity expresses itself in at least three ways: in thought (the intellectual expression), in action (the practical expression), and in fellowship (the communal expression). These complex religious expressions comprise the subject-matter of the academic study of religion.

Specifically, the data of religious study includes literature, stories, myths, histories, doctrines, rituals, ethical prescriptions, and institutional forms of the many and diverse traditions, past and present. Religious studies can enrich the discussion among researchers about the important relationship between religion and human spirituality.

The so called post-totalitarian societies are looking for their own alternatives among the changes and transformations which are following one after another. A completely new situation, in which culture, state and religion are not what they have been. A developing civil society is seemingly liberated from the power of the party-state. Political pluralism, freedom of speech, freedom of creed and other basic features

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of democracy now seem possible. Bulgarian pluralism can be defined as a positive one. "A new religious sensibility" is added to it.

The basic creeds in Bulgarian society almost coincide with the population structure, according to the ethnical groups. The traditional Bulgarian religion is Orthodox Christianity, which was transformed into official religion of the Bulgarian State. On one hand, traditional religion in Bulgaria is the Christian creed, but there is important influence of Islam in general currency among Turkish people, partly among Bulgarian gypsies and in Bulgarian-Muslims communities. However, on the other hand, in 2006 over ninety denominations have been registered in the Department of Ecclesiastical Matters. Religions, sects and new religious movements – signs of a true religious pluralism?

### **THE MAIN POLITICAL ACTORS**

In the immediate post-Communist period, the main political actors in the country were the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) and the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP). The BSP dominated the legislature from 1989 to 1997, and the UDF was in power from 1997 to 2001. The UDF was credited with significant success in privatizing and restructuring most of the state economy as well as attaining an invitation for European Union (EU) membership talks.

In 2001, Bulgaria's former infant-tsar, Simeon II, returned from exile and formed the National Movement for Simeon II (NDSV). Promising quicker integration into Europe, Simeon attracted a large segment of the electorate. In the 2001 elections to Bulgaria's National Assembly, the NDSV won 120 out of the 240 assembly seats; the UDF, 51; and the Coalition for Bulgaria (which includes the BSP), 48. The NDSV formed a coalition with the small Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF). By 2003, however, there were signs that Simeon's popularity was beginning to wane.

The government lost its majority in 2004 when 13 members of the Assembly formed their own faction. Their New Age Party joined the ruling coalition in February, but lack of transparency in the government's handling of privatization of the state-owned tobacco company magnified divisions between the parties.

In the legislative elections of June 2005, the BSP captured most votes but failed to gain an absolute majority. The NDSV came in second place and the MRF third. The new radical nationalist group Attack ran for the first time; it won 8 % of the vote, generally believed to have come from both the right and the left, but no major party would agree to formally cooperate with it.

Drawn-out negotiations between the BSP, the NDSV, and the MRF finally resulted in the formation of a fragile coalition in August which controls 169 assembly seats.

There were serious political differences, especially between the NDSV and the others. Sergei Stanishev of the BSP was chosen as prime minister.

Bulgarians can change their government in a democratic way. The unicameral National Assembly, composed of 240 members, is elected every four years. George Parvanov of the BSP was elected in November 2001 to a five-year term as president. The president serves as head of state and fills other executive duties. The Assembly appoints the prime minister.

Parliamentary elections held in June 2005 resulted in that no party gained a majority. Nearly two months passed before consensus was reached and a government was formed. The delay was considered a setback for Bulgaria's aspiration to join the European Union (EU) in January 2007.

The constitution forbids political groups that act against national integrity, call for ethnic or religious hostility, or create secret military structures. The June 2005 elections included 22 parties (as opposed to 51 in 2001), but were actually dominated by the right-centrist NDSV, the left-wing BSP (which has moved away from its Communist past), and the centrist Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF). Muslims in Bulgaria, mostly of Turkish origin, are almost exclusively represented by the MRF. Several parties in the 2005 elections represented the Roma (Gypsy) minority.

The Constitution forbids the formation of political parties along religious lines. But is this actually happening?

## **THE SCHISM**

After the collapse of the communist rule and in the times of reappraisal of values, the BOC found itself in a situation of a deep, acute and unprecedented crisis. Some of the representatives of the orthodox clergy bitterly criticized the Bulgarian patriarch and the Holy Synod and accused them of collaborationism with the former totalitarian government. A confrontation erupted which, according to a part of the clergy, led to a cleavage in the BOC.

In 1994 and later many interviews with representatives of different religious movements referring to the crisis in the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. This is a reflection of the reality in communist regime. The Bulgarian church is separated between several antagonist fractions. The reason for dividing the church is that some people accused others of being engaged with the intelligence structures during the communist regime. The election of Patriarch Maxim is a consequence of communism and that is why the Bulgarian people have different opinions of who should be at the head of Bulgarian Church.

The schism, which opened in 1992, continued despite attempts by the Saxe-Coburg Government to heal the rift. The Government has stayed formally neutral. The split has hindered both efforts to pass new legislation on church-state relations. Tensions between the groups sometimes have run high. All that leads to the disturbance of spirits, not only inside the clergy, but also among the entire Bulgarian society.

The schism that has disrupted the Bulgarian Orthodox Church since 1992 resulted from an ill-advised state intervention to replace Patriarch Maxim and the Holy Synod by a Provisional Synod under Metropolitan Pimen of Nevrokop. The Union of Free Democrats (UDF) government argued that Maxim's 1971 election under the Communists was invalid. A nucleus of priests was impatient with Maxim's delays in convening a Sabor (Council) to address church reform and supported the Provisional Synod.

To further complicate matters, the UDF had the support of Orthodox bishops who had been just as compromised by Communism as Maxim. The 90-year-old Pimen, widely regarded as unprincipled, originally had been appointed a metropolitan in 1952 as a protégé of the ruthless Interior Minister Alexander Yugov, against the wishes of the Holy Synod.

The majority of believers deplore the uncanonical nature of the schism and supports Maxim, who is recognized as legitimate by other patriarchates. However, the undignified scuffles over key church properties, including the Synod headquarters and the candle factory which still provides most of the church's income, discredited both sides. The Bulgarian Socialist Party (Communist) government, which succeeded the UDF at the end of 1992, reinstated Maxim and now poses as a defender of Orthodoxy. Most of the bishops have repented and have been reinstated by Maxim.

However, in July 1996 Pimen convened a Sabor which elected him patriarch. He is acknowledged only by the dubious Patriarch Filaret and his self-established Ukrainian Orthodox Kyiv Patriarchate.

Maxim has threatened to anathematize Pimen, irrevocably severing him from the church, if he does not retract his claim. The Holy Synod has blacklisted churches supporting Pimen and many lay people, terrified of excommunication, have stopped attending them. Meanwhile, January 1997 mass protests of disastrous Socialist economic policies included participation by supporters of both patriarchs, though Pimen's rebel Synod proved more outspoken. A former Orthodox theology professor claims that until 1990 half of Sofia Theological Academy students were working for the security services.

He argues that the schism was initiated and is being kept going by people whose aim is to destabilize the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and to provoke conflict between it and the UDF. This makes it possible to forget the Communist Party's crimes against Orthodoxy and to create a false impression that those Orthodox who support Maxim

oppose democracy. The Communists seem to be the main beneficiaries. Maxim has consolidated relationships with supportive neighboring Orthodox churches - the Greek, Serbian, and Russian Orthodox, in particular. At the same time, an anti-Catholic, anti-Western, anti-Muslim, and anti-ecumenical contagion has rapidly spread within the Bulgarian Orthodox Church.

The religion law, adopted last December and which came into force on 1 January, was criticized in a June 2003 Council of Europe report by Rick Lawson of the University of Leiden, the Netherlands, and Malcolm Evans of Bristol University in Great Britain. In particular, their report expressed concern about privileges granted to the Bulgarian Orthodox Church; that the Religious Affairs Directorate can exert pressure on the courts that register religious communities; and that the directorate can punish religious leaders.

Under the Constitutional Court procedure, seven of the court's twelve members are required to proclaim a law unconstitutional. The last court member, Judge George Markov, who is believed to have voted against the religion law, refused to break off his holiday to attend.

In their challenge to the law, the 50 deputies of the opposition Union of Democratic Forces (UDF), which sympathizes with the Alternative Orthodox Synod, were concerned about law's granting of official status to the Bulgarian Orthodox Patriarchate in Article 11, as well as the provision which grants the Patriarchate automatic registration, while all other faiths must register in a Sofia court or local courts.

The crisis is periodically reflected in the media, and every side in the conflict is presented.

Being in a transition from totalitarianism to democracy, the contemporary Bulgarian society is soaked up with atheism. Research data indicates that the new generation of Bulgarians, which grew up through the years of communism, is basically irreligious.

After the collapse of the communist community and the dissolution of the totalitarian government Bulgaria has fallen into deep crisis. The spiritual vacuum, anomia and uncertainty have created a situation of searching for a meaning. The interweaving of political and canonical means yielded a mirror crisis in the religious sphere. The reasons are similar. They can be traced through qualitative methods, rather than with quantitative ones. Observation with participation, contemplation and deep interviews are more appropriate in this case.

Most of the Bulgarians don't regard religion as a source for moral support. The majority of the population does not believe religion can really help in their private lives.

The reviving of traditions in new conditions has a purely cultural meaning and function as a form of solidarity. For example, the ritual of sanctifications is performed often when a new building, a school or an office is being consecrated. By its' origins and meaning this is a religious ritual, but it assumes a worldly function. In fact it symbolizes a kind of social solidarity and a collective sentiment.

Things like morality, faith or knowing the Bible seem like secondary problems. Many among the young are more susceptible to ideas of occultism and exorcism than to those coming from the Churches or the Word of God.

## THE SURVEY

The survey was conducted in 2006 by a team of the Department of "Sociology" from the South-West University "Neofit Rilsky" and the Institute of Sociology of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and the questions included concern our interests. Their essence outlines the parameters of the general research effort on a representative level. Below are the answers (Chart N1), related to reading of the Bible. They have been deduced out of an extract of some 3000 young people (high-school students) and parents who have been inquired.

<i>What kind of literature do you read?</i>	<i>Answers</i>	
	<i>Number of participants</i>	<i>Relative quota</i>
Fiction	761	32,9%
Scientific literature	529	22,9%
Magazines and newspapers	823	35,6%
The Bible	56	2,4%
The Koran	22	1,0%
Other	43	1,9%
"I don't read"	77	3,3%
General	2311	100,0%

**Chart N1: Structure of the preferred types of literature.**

The answers of the question: What kind of literature do you read? shows that out of a number of 3000 students and their parents, only 2.4 % have actually read the Bible. The fact that only 56 of the participants (or 2, 4 %) have read the Bible is strongly indicative. It is also indicative that the most preferred type of literature among the young is "Magazines and newspapers" which outlines their major intellectual directions and those of their parents, which is even more disturbing. Naturally, the mere act of reading the Bible can never be a guarantee for true religious devotion.

The opportunity to freely read the Scripture which came with democracy does not necessarily indicate a sincere religious motivation and orientation.

The results are certainly impressive that with the purpose of obtaining additional in-depth information the next step was to organize discussions with *focus groups*. Concerning the recent sociological surveys, which are parts of the following Bulgarian Bible Society (BBS) priority projects?

Six discussions of this kind were organized. The focus groups were composed of representatives from different strata of Bulgarian society. The discussions were held in different places, were deliberately selected – the capital, a big city and a town – the cities of Sofia, Plovdiv and Blagoevgrad, respectively.

A group of believers who actively practice a certain religion was composed. The other groups were focused respectively on irreligious people, students from secular and theological faculties, manifest atheists, and experts. All of the participants were between 20 and 70 years of age.

The most frequent kind of answer suggests that in general, irreligious people admit there is no God. Atheists may also believe in the inexistence of God or they merely claim that there is nothing “up there”. Irreligious persons, on the other hand, are undetermined. They do not have a definite attitude towards the divine, while atheists have a clearly negative, even an aggressive one. Participants regard religious persons as trustworthy, they share that their soul is relaxed when they communicate with believers and they do not expect any harm from them.

Nevertheless, it is also obvious that when an essential discussion on the matter takes place, the confrontation between believers and irreligious people is inevitable. The situation depends greatly on whether the irreligious person realizes clearly, in what exactly he does *not* believe.

Many participants who declare themselves irreligious, turned out to be genuine, but isolated believers. A person should not be definitely classified as “Irreligious” before a dedicated conversation was held with him. Only in a topical discussion can a person reveal its true religious orientation.

People who declare themselves irreligious think that the modern way of life is predominantly materialistic and deprived of any kind of spirituality. They point this out as the main reason why they cannot find any time for religion and faith. Many among the irreligious show interest in religions and teachings outside Christianity. Some consider the contents of the Bible incomprehensible. Even though they possess a Bible at home, they hardly ever open the book.

Atheism, being an extreme form of secular monopolism, has significantly influenced the attitude of Bulgarian society towards religion. The influence and social prestige of religious institutions is diminishing.

The effect of modern mass culture, in all of its forms, serves as an addition to the traditionally neglectful attitude of Bulgarians towards faith. The invading secularism of the West mingles itself with the atheistic heritage of the Communist era. The direct consequence of this interaction is an even deeper alienation from the values of Christianity and the Bible. This process deeply concerns the new generation and that's the reason surveys are focused mostly on young people and their reactions to the Holy Scripture and the questions of the faith. Popular culture, pseudo-folkloric music and all the new tendencies of modern day life have a dominant role in a young person's view of life.

The general problem is to find a sense of social existence and to peaceful co-existence between different groups in Bulgarian society. The state and the Church are try different approaches to resolve the so-called post-totalitarian crisis – spiritual and material.

In a present, marked by a *search of a meaning*, there seems to be an imperative want for "enchantment" of a world, which has been "disenchanted" for so long. By means of a peculiar bricolage, attempts are being made in the Bulgarian society to create a modern sacred, in order to give an answer to the question: *how is it be possible that what is, no longer to be what is.*

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### **Summary**

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#### **RELIGION AND ATTITUDES OF POLITICAL PARTIES**

It presents no problem for a well-established, stable social world to go from the past, through the present and towards the future. However, what if the crises are consecutive and never ending? A necessity of security and support, a need of firm grounds for the worldly and social universe of the people, appears in that case. Religion could help to legitimate the purposes and actions of a society, to strengthen the determination of its people. In fact, it symbolizes a kind of social solidarity and a collective sentiment. The whole of the religious answers constitutes the sacred universe of traditional societies, but it could be included in the creation of a modern sacred, given that "sacred" does not mean only "religious". Essential part of this presentation is based on sociological surveys, conducted using qualitative methods, rather than quantitative ones.

**Key words:** religions, secularization, sacred, profane, society, values, cleavage, Church, Political Parties.

## **Резиме**

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### **РЕЛИГИЈА И СТАВОВИ ПОЛИТИЧКИХ ПАРТИЈА**

За друштва која су добро утемељена и која су стабилна, кретање од прошлости преко садашњости до будућности не представља никакав проблем. Међутим, шта се догађа ако су кризе учестале и бескрајне. У том случају, појављује се потреба за сигурношћу и подршком, неопходност да буду створени чврсти темељи светски и социјални универзум људи. Религија може помоћи у легитимизацији тих циљева и настојања друштва, у јачању одлучности његових припадника. Заправо, она представља симбол солидарности друштва и заједничког осећања. Многи одговори које пружа религија чине свети универзум традиционалних друштава, али они могу бити укључени и у стварање модерне светости, под условом да та „светост“ не значи искључиво „религиозност“. Кључни делови овог рада су утемељени на социолошким истраживањима, изведеним пре свега уз коришћење квантитативних метода, а не квалитативних.

**Кључне речи:** религије, секуларизација, свето, профано, друштво, вредности, раскол, црква, политичке партије.