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RELIGIOUS AND POLITICS: THE CASE OF THE BULGARIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

The traditional Bulgarian religion is Orthodox Christianity, which was transformed into official religion of the Bulgarian State. According to a March 2001 study by the country's National Statistical Institute, approximately 83.6 percent of citizens are Orthodox Christians and approximately 12.1 percent are Muslims, while the remainder includes Roman Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Gregorian-Armenian Christians, Uniate Catholics, and others. A total of 30 denominations are registered officially with the Government.

THE "WINDING PASSAGE" OF THE HISTORY

The new Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC) was created ten years before the foundation of the new Bulgarian Principality. On the 28-th of February 1870 the right of the Bulgarians of an autocephalous Church is recognized with a special decree.

The basics for equivalent relations between BOC and the Bulgarian state are instituted in the article N: 39 of the Constitution of Tirnovo - the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC) is independent from the state. In the article N:37 the Christian Religion is fixed as a dominant creed in the Bulgarian State. The Constitution of Tirnovo is formally abolished with the adoption of the so called

Dimitrian Constitution by the Great People's Assembly on the 4-th of December 1947.

With the enactment of the new "socialist" Constitution, the Great People's Assembly passes the Law of Creeds on the 24-th of February 1949, which subjugated the BOC and all other religious communities in the country to the state power.

After the year 1989 a representative of the Holy Synod claims : "The communist government in Bulgaria regarded the existence of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church as a reality, inherited from the previous centuries of Bulgarian history, with which it should conform somehow.

Being an atheistic ideology, communism opposed the Church and aimed to isolate it to the maximum. For that purpose the most brutal measures for influence were utilized. In the preparation and selection of clerks for the religious activities there was a very intensive pressure, the process was constantly impeded. The Church leadership has been forced to compromise in opposing the state government, but it never undermined the basics of the faith. That's why the Church continued to be the support of faith and morality. Unfortunately, this process took place exclusively under the arches of the temples."

The abatement of religious sentiment is a result of deep penetration of secular elements in the meaning of many of the Christian ceremonies. The atheism as an extreme form of secular monopolism has significantly influenced the attitude that Bulgarian society has towards religion. The influence and social prestige of religious institutions is diminishing.

According to Svetoslav Luchnikov (a Member of Parliament and also a distinguished Bulgarian jurist) the fierce atheism of the totalitarian rule forced the BOC to cooperate for its' own "euthanasia".

As a state ideology the atheism in Bulgaria openly proclaimed the necessary eradication of the religion. The clergy of the BOC and ordinary laymen were prosecuted in the second half of the 40-ies and the first half of the 50-ies. The high priests in the country, including the Patriarch were elected formally, because they were, in fact, appointed by the communist rulers, who had all the necessary information with the clergy being under their supervision. It should also be marked that the socialistic Constitution and the Law of Creeds proudly institutes freedom of faith, but this is accompanied by the atheistic propaganda and every-day control of people's behavior.

As a part of it's general unofficial strategy, the atheistic regime utilized the tactics of the corrupting church officials. From the interviews taken from representatives of different clerical circles we can deduce that the leadership of the

Church was forced to compromise in the direction of confrontation with the communist power.

The BOC developed new regulations for its' activities, which were affirmed by the Council of Ministers. With these new regulation and with the dominant totalitarian rule in the country it became possible for the state to interfere in the activities of the Church, although this was a violation of Christian canons.

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

Subsequently a parallel Synod was instituted, the central synodal building was temporarily occupied, and the Synod itself was declared as illegitimate. By becoming leader of the protests father Christopher Subev created his Association for the protection of the religious rights – vigils with lighted candles, parallel Easter ceremonies on the "Democracy" were characteristic of his activity.

By that time strange events were taking place. The "reformers" who overthrew Todor Zhivkov, were demonstrating deep religiosity at the cathedral temple "St. Alexander Nevsky".

Meanwhile the Department of Creeds declared the election of patriarch Maxim to be invalid and expected that "The Holy Synod should prepare and conduct the election of the patriarch of BOC, while strictly abiding the Statute." Only a month later, members of the Parliament from the Bulgarian Socialist Party appealed to the Constitutional Court.

On the 25-th May 1992 the illegitimacy of the election of patriarch Maxim was affirmed by the Act N: 92 of the Department of Creeds. A temporary Council of the Holy Synod was approved until a general Church Cconvocation was organized.

On the 1st of July 1996 in Sofia a general Church convocation was summoned by a group of metropolitans headed by the metropolitan of Nevrokop – Pymen. On the 4th of July the Convocation approved a new Statute and elected Pimen as a Bulgarian patriarch. However, the Council of Ministers did not confirm the new Statute and patriarch. Meanwhile it registers the new leadership of the BOC with Maxim at the head of it.

The High Court of Attestation considered the crisis in the Church on the 18th of October 2000 and ascertained that there was no evidence that the Council of Ministers had made a second decision on the problem, and according to the

judgements of the court, neither appeal for affirmation had been approved – neither Maxim's, nor Pymen's. With the information that they had: "The High Court of Attestation finds **two religious communities exists in the Republic of Bulgaria that are called "Bulgarian Orthodox Church"...**

As result of a request by Maxim from the 30th of September to the 1st of October 1998 a Panorthodox Convocation was held to consider and solve the problems of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. The Convocation gives absolution to all that have participated in the religious debate. It affirms the unity of the canonical Church and its hierarchy under the leadership of Maxim. And it also enacted that all the temples, holy refuges and the different real estates... would now pass under the jurisdiction of the canonical church.

The decisions of the Convocation doesn't produce and could not produce any legal obligation, having in mind the self-governing Bulgarian Church. Because of the decision of such convocation, no matter how high above the jurisdiction it stands, it cannot be regarded as canons of the 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 State and the Church were trying to resolve in different ways the so-called post-totalitarian crisis – spiritual and material. The reasons were similar. The situation in the Bulgarian Orthodox Church cannot be analyzed adequately through quantitative methods but through qualitative ones. Observation with participation, contemplation and deep interviews are more appropriate in this case.

The crisis is periodically reflected in the media, and every side in the conflict is presented. They were reflected in the local and national newspapers. There is a third general point of view in the both cases - the support of the journalists. In reflecting the event, not only on a local, but also on a national level the media is prejudiced.

Concrete confirmations for the existence of a deep crisis in the BOC are two incidents in the churches of Blagoevgrad and Varna.

There is an unhidden reproach against the inaction of the clergy in solving the problem of the existence of two Synods and two Churches.

The Ustina (a little vilige in the Rhodopes mountins) case shows the decisiveness of its' believers (Christian and Muslim) to protect their priest (of the

Alternative synod) which is replaced by a representative of the so-called legitimate Synod.

Or the service of the representative of the alternative synod, which was performed out in the open, on the site of the demolished mausoleum.

This is a consequence of the atheistic policy of the regime, which through 45 years forbids and rejects the Christianity in Bulgaria, but offers another religion – the communist ideology.

A lot of instances can be adduced, of the reviving of traditions, that in new conditions have a purely cultural meaning and function as forms 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. Religion unites the individuals into a community and prescribes the fundamental rules of their every-day lives.

Religious practices and even the most intimate religious acts have a social meaning and a social context. Religious activity helps in becoming conscious of one's community, to express symbolically the social order and to gain an objective sensation about society.

Rituals and ceremonies allow for collective sentiment to be experienced and a sense of social unity to be expressed. Thus, religion stands in support of social solidarity. When people gather on solemn occasions – reverent, they achieve a deep sense of themselves and of the legitimacy of their social organization.

Attempts are being made in the Bulgarian society by means of a peculiar bricolage 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.

In the search of a meaning in the present, there seems to be an imperative want for "enchantment" of a world, that has been "disenchanted" for so long.

The struggle for national liberation and for an independent church have found the Bulgarian society of that time deeply "unreligious", according to (P. R. Slaveykov). The contemporary Bulgarian society being in a transition from totalitarianism to democracy, has been formed by the atheism. This aims to forcibly interrupt the religious continuity between generations, as well as to annihilate the religious tradition on all levels. Research data indicates that the new generation of Bulgarians, which grew up through the years of communism is basically irreligious.

Religious and ethnical identity of the students in the SW University "Neofit Rilsky"

In 2004, a team of specialists from the department of Sociology of the Faculty of Law and History of the Southwest University conducted a sociological survey which main subject was: *Religious and ethnical identity of the students in the SW university "Neofit Rilsky"*.

The team was formed by students and professors from the department, which gave additional possibilities for obtaining information and conducting *observation with participation*.

The conducted empirical sociological survey is based on a representative extractions, including the 863 students from the SW University "Neofit Rilsky".

The analysis of the results shows that the Christian Orthodox Creed dominates – 83, 2 % of the participants. The Catholic creed is second with 3,3 % and Sunni Islam is third with 2,8 %. The Protestant version of Christianity is represented by 1,4 % of the participants in the survey. 1,7 % define themselves as representatives of creeds, different of Christianity, Judaism and Islam.

All this means that representatives of creeds, other that Orthodox Christianity are in fact in a state of isolation from their religious environment and are dependent in a great degree on the tolerance of the Orthodox Christians. At the same time they affirm, that good relations between the different religious communities are possible, which implies the positive conclusion that the majority of Christian students in the SW University are tolerant towards representatives of other creeds.

It is noticeable that only 5,5 % define themselves as non-religious (atheist). To the question concerning their degree of religiosity, 19 % define themselves as non-religious, and 3,3 % as atheists.

The attitude of the participants toward their religiosity is such that 69,1 % define themselves as religious. The combinations of such indications with the specific practices of the different creeds show that there is a deep relation between religious mentality and the way of life of people. Some 4,4 % define themselves as deeply religious, 19% are nonreligious and 3,3 % are definite atheists.

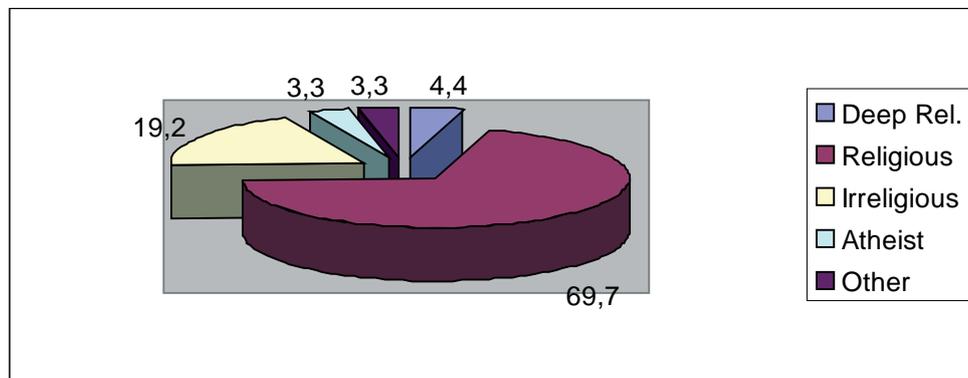
Concerning age, 65 % of the participants indicate that they have adopted their creed as children. This shows a religious education of adequate dimensions and significant role in prime socializations. This indicator can be considered seriously having in mind the religious vacuum, in which previous generations have lived (including the generation of the parents of the participants).

Another important indicator is the influence which religion has on people's daily round. Among the participants, 45,5 % admit that their creed has influenced their everyday live, 35,5 % weren't able to give a definite answer (but that doesn't mean they deny a possible influence) and some 18,2 declare that religion isn't an important factor in their life.

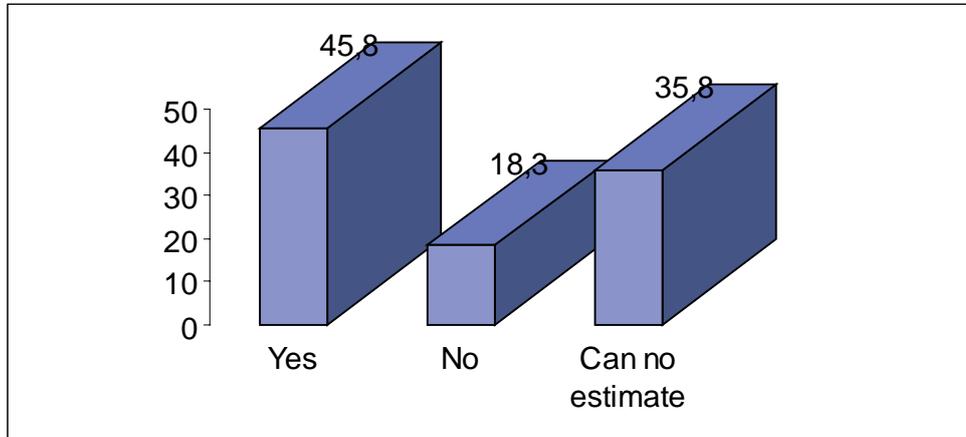
Among student who define themselves as profoundly religious, 75,5 % admit that they pray (and this is a progressive figure in comparison with the average percent of praying people). In the group of moderately religious people we have an even higher figure, 77,5 admit that they pray.

Women pray more often than men – 68,4 % against 50,9 % (compared to a general percent of 63 % that pray regularly). Women who do not pray represent 17,9%, while men – 36,9 % (compared to a general 24 % of people who do not pray).

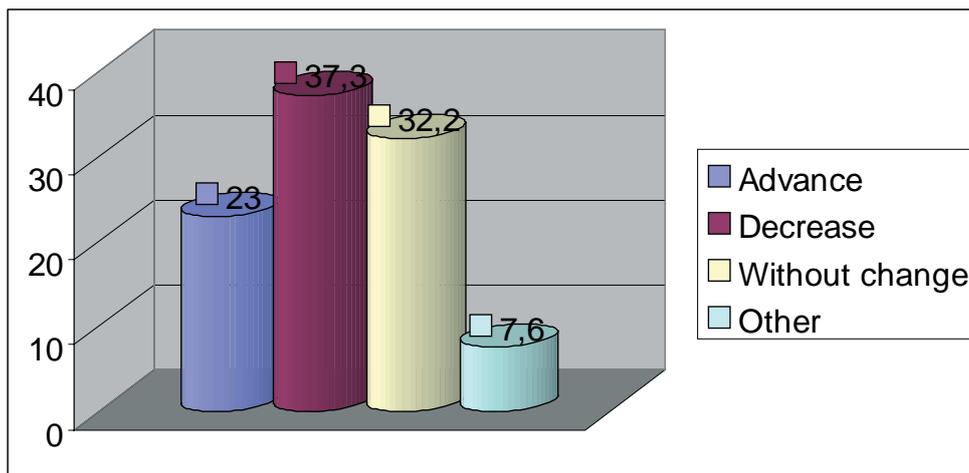
The positive and tolerant attitude of the students from the SW University towards different religious groups makes a good impression. 77,7 % of them (78,8 % of those who have answered the inquiry) believe that good relations between different religious groups are possible. 14,3 % of them could give a straight answer and only 6,6 % consider this impossible. The analysis and meaning of these indications show that there is a definite and strong religious aspect in the cultural life of the Southwest University.



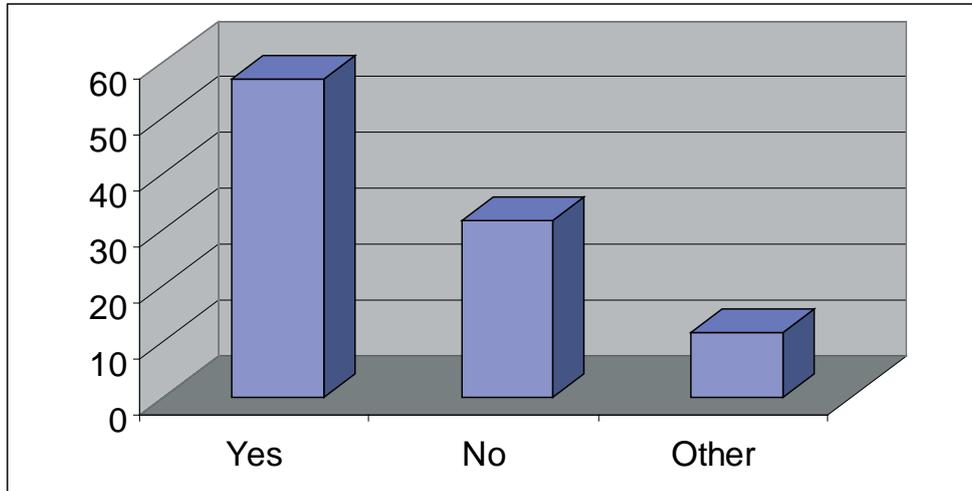
Type of religiosity



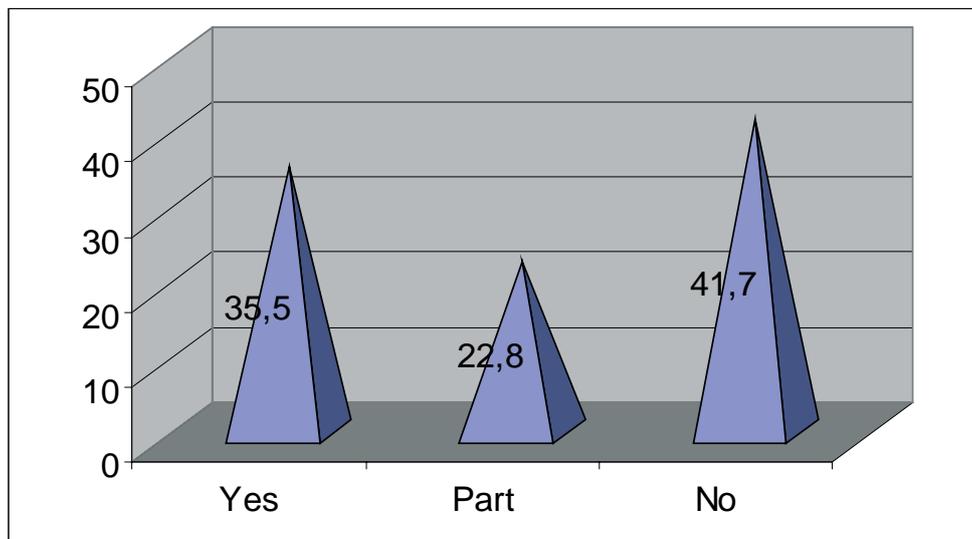
Does religion help you in your life?



Does influence of religions change in society?



Shut the Bulgarian State interfere in solving of religious disputes?



*Does Religions influence the way of communication?
Between different religious groups?*

There is an interesting fact that in a society that is often regarded as “non-religious”, “secular”, “pagan” and religious interaction among young people is common. It exists particularly among young people who do not have a clear memory of the so-called totalitarian past. They answer without fear to questions

concerning the intervention of religion in their lives and admit that it has an increasing role in the private and public life of Bulgarian citizens through the past years.

THE MODERN SACRED

The focused interview which was formed for the purpose strengthened that conclusion with their spirit and natural and sincere attitude towards the other groups, as with their confirmation of the statistical results of the inquiry.

According to the majority of participants, the region where the University is situated is charged with prejudices and this affects its life. The Bulgarian ethnic model seems to function without concessions. This premise would create problems if some people decide to openly practice and demonstrate their specific religious rites without considering the opinion of representatives of other religious groups.

The student's answers indicate indifference towards the ideas of a Christian-orthodox temple being built nearby the university or the existence of special rooms for prayer for the different religions within the university.

They had presented the occasion of the sanctification of a laboratory in one of the departments in the University, where there were many professors, students and journalists. The sanctification was conducted by representatives of the official active synod in Bulgaria, headed by the official Bulgarian patriarch - Maxim.

The occasion was the sanctification of a laboratory in the Law-Historical faculty, South-Western University "Neophit Rilsky" - Blagoevgrad. At this ritual were presented many professors, students, journalists and also members of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church.

The sanctification was conducted by representatives of the official active synod in Bulgaria – The Holy Synod, headed by the official Bulgarian patriarch - Maxim. They took advantage of the people gathered there as if they wanted to show their legitimate supremacy over "the others". The guests thought of this as if it was a kind of a show and obviously did not put any sacred meaning, which was demonstrated in various ways. The most significant of them, in my opinion, was the fact that no one made the sign of the cross.

The students told that the guests thought of this as if it was a kind of a show and obviously did not put any sacred meaning, which was demonstrated in various ways. The most significant of them was the fact that no one made the sign of the cross. Those who were present considered that it was enough for the priest to conduct the ritual without doing anything else. Every one of respondents

believes “in his own way”. According to one of the participants “people believe in something that they alone have created but also go to church because they are dependent on the tradition. Even more, some think that in the present, the act of believing is associated with different notions compared with the way it was in the past.

The students think that there could not be a society without religion; it has its place in the social process. But at the same time, the attitude towards this problem is strictly personal and should not be postulated as a universal law. The role of religion is evolving but it still is that deep, invulnerable and eternal layer which will always exist in the life of a society.

By affirming that there are many paths to the temple, the students agreed that **“The University also could be regarded as a home for the sacred”**.

Anything could be transformed into a sacred object and could acquire high prestige in peoples’ opinion. Regardless of the logic of profanization and secularization of the modern world, there seems to be a process of reversion to the sacred – to the modern sacred. In their efforts to note at the same time the loss of influence that the institutional religions suffer, and the dispersions of the religious symbols in the modern societies, a lot of researchers use the term “sacred”. Sacred things with their immunity offer the ultimate meaning of everyday life, because within the limits of the profane it is impossible to find such meaning.

The notions of the young generation can be classified in several categories: according to their opinions on the way of life, values, religious identity and observance of traditions. We see unexpected connections and views. There are some respondents who fully accept, or totally reject traditions, religious affiliation, the testimony of collective memory, which has served as a collective code for many generations. We discover new mixed types, in which the bond of the sacred, in Durkheim’s terms, expands. Of course a distinction is a very rough one. It only points to the fact that people and human groups are different, that there is polarity among them. **Every person, every society are mixture of Atala and Citroen, but also of Don Quihote and Sancho Panza.**

It is characteristic for the Bulgarian society the reversion to traditional system of religious ceremonies and holidays. This fulfills people’s need for collective co-experience, spiritual and social integration. The democratic shift in 1989 increases the formal prestige of religion. After these events the interest in the traditional belief is growing along with the feeling of freedom of choice and the “allowance”. In the situation of the spiritual vacuum, anomie and uncertainty the Bulgarian Orthodox Church is separated between two antagonist fractions and had fallen into deep crisis.

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. In a condition, that "sacred" doesn't mean only "religious", religion could help to legitimate the purposes and actions of the society, to strengthen the determination of the people, to help build up the sense of identity. History would be extremely boring if it didn't bear "surprises" incessantly. The symbolic phrase "God is dead" unexpectedly turn out to be accompanied by a certain "invisible" religiosity, which penetrates throughout the so-called secular societies.

Summary

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The Bulgarian society suffers the consequences of the domination of the falsely accepted notion about ideology. The ideology was one the reasons for the pathology of the passed century, a taking shape civil society seemingly free of the power of the party-state. In the new situation the culture, state and religion are not the same as they have been.

After the collapse of the communist rule and in the times of reappraisal of values, the Bulgarian Ortodox Church found itself in a situation of deep, acute and unprecedented crisis. The proces has many aspects – moral, political, canonical – which should always be differentiated.

Key words: religions, secularization, sacred, profane, society, values.

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