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MAIN STAGES AND FACTS IN THE HISTORY OF STATE-CHURCH RELATIONS IN BULGARIA

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State-Church relations in Bulgaria are multidimensional phenomena, bearing changes and dynamic transformations in the course of historical processes. The purpose of this paper is to map out the main stages and developments of church-state relations from Bulgaria's acceptance of Christianity to the present.

Christianization and the First Bulgarian State (681 – 1018). For two centuries after its establishment in 681 A.D., the Bulgarian state retained the traditional pagan beliefs of the population. In the 9th century, after several years of diplomatic activity and hesitation between Roman and Byzantine alternatives, the Bulgarian Tzar Boris adopted Christianity from Constantinople and converted his people. On March 4, 870 the Constantinopolitan Council established this new local Church, the Bulgarian Archbishopric, under the supreme canonical jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. The conversion to Christianity was decided for political reasons and had a civilizing purpose: 1) The adoption of a single religion aimed to provide a unifying ideology for the ethnically and religiously diverse population of the Bulgarian

state (comprising Slavs and proto-Bulgarians); 2) Christianity would integrate the young state into the civilized world, turning it from a “barbarian” realm into a partner-state open to cultural assimilation by the Christian world. The Slavonic-Bulgarian language was introduced as the official language of state and Church in 893. This period, known to historians as the First Bulgarian State, ended with the loss of Bulgarian independence to Byzantine domination in 1018.

The historical process of conversion to Christianity of the young Slavic states (9th to 10th centuries) was both a complex process of acculturation of their political and intellectual stratum and a natural process of further fragmentation and “nationalization” of Christianity itself. This was a process of acculturation, transfer of ideas, functions, and institutions bearing universal contents and asserting cultural claims in a new environment of essentially mixed ethnicity and religion. The adoption of Christianity gradually replaced tribal identity and self-consciousness based on kinship ties and substituted in its place an association of different tribes and ethnic groups in a universal cultural product—the institution of the state. Byzantine Christianity (the specific spirit and sacral motivation of which was embedded in Byzantine political theory and institutional practice) was also a universalistic-integrating factor for the states that adopted it, serving as integration with respect to a unifying spiritual and political center.

From a political perspective, for the newly converted states, the adoption of Christianity provided: 1) a transcendent, universal spiritual foundation for political power, and specifically for the power of the head of state; 2) the permanent division of the religious and state spheres under separate persons (the tsar or prince, and the patriarch) and institutions (the political state hierarchy and the ecclesiastic hierarchy); 3) the correlation of these trends and processes with, and their mediation by, an external ideological and institutional center—Byzantium.

The newly converted Slavic states became part of the Byzantine *oekumene*, or the Byzantine commonwealth as Dmitrii Obolensky called it; these states were treated by analogy to the children of the powerful *Pater familias*.¹ “Byzantinism,” as the famous Bulgarian historian Petar Mutafchiev interpreted it, proved to be a combined product of Byzantine imperial interests and the rivalling ambitions of Bulgarian rulers, who wanted to take over the Empire and were hence forced to adopt and translate to their native soil the same political and religious instruments that ensured the imperial domination of Byzantium. Of course, these instruments were foreign to the “*lifestyle and experiences of their own nation.*”²

Petar Mutafchiev was all too critical of the imperial ambitions of Bulgarian statesmen, more critical even than Arnold Toynbee, Dmitrii Obolensky, as many other authors,³ had an ambivalent attitude to these ambitions. He believed they had brought about periods of cultural and military growth, but they were also characterized by him as representing the “illusions” and “misunderstandings” that, relying on nothing but the force of “their own people, believed they could assume the universal and political mission of the *cosmos* that was Byzantium.”⁴ The Bulgarian rulers thereby exhausted the forces of the people for a long time to come. He interpreted the social function of Bogomilism in this perspective, seeing it as a response against a foreign culture and influence, against a religion and a sophisticated theology that gave no answers to the questions that really concerned the mass of the people; according to Mutafchiev, this movement reflected “*the instinct of national self-preservation and uniqueness.*”⁵

¹Dmitrii Obolensky. *The Byzantine Inheritance of Eastern Europe*. (London: Ashgate, 1982), p. 17.

² Petar Mutafchiev. “Kam filosofiyata na balgarskata istoriya [Towards the Philosophy of the Bulgarian History]. In: A. Stoynev, A. Stamatov (eds.). *Filosofiyata na istoriyata v Balgariya (1878-1948)* [*The Philosophy of History in Bulgaria*] (Sofia: Academic Publishing “Prof. Marin Drinov”, 2002), p. 384, pp. 378-384.

³J. Howard-Johnson. “A Short Piece of Narrative History: War and Diplomacy in the Balkans, winter 921/2 – spring 924.” In: Elizabeth Jeffreys (ed.). *Byzantine Style, Religion and Civilization* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 340-360.

⁴ Mutafchiev, *op.cit.*, p. 382, pp. 378-384.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 383.

It is well known that Petar Mutafchiev was also critical of the Bulgarian religious elite and leaders of that time. They were hermits, he wrote, who distanced themselves from, and basically denied, worldly problems and challenges, and failed to contribute in any way to the solution of those problems, although the people, the masses, expected it of them. In this historian's view, the spirit of negation started from the statesmen, and continued with the Bogomils, the hesychasts, the holy people, and the monks engaged in spiritual labor, who nowise helped reduce the sufferings of people: "in the deserts, he contemplated God, not the suffering man."⁶; "We were not only a nation of Bogomils, but also a nation of hermits."⁷; "Finally, our lands seemed to prove too narrow to contain all its sons who were fleeing from life and from their duty to life, so they had to scatter themselves in foreign lands as well."⁸ This is what Mustafchiev bitterly concluded in his famous essay "Priest Bogomil and Saint Ivan Rilsky." According to him, this spirit of negation among religious people also added a stroke to the demoralizing role of Byzantinism.

In contrast with this Bulgarocentric notion of the relations between empire and periphery, D. Obolensky surmounted this opposition by placing in the focus of attention a different historical unit: the Byzantine commonwealth. The relationships between the Empire and the countries of Eastern Europe, specifically those in the Balkans, are presented by that author in terms of more balanced and neutral categories such as interaction, exchange, diffusion, and acculturation.

After the liberation from Byzantium and the establishment of the *Second Bulgarian State* (1186 – 1391), the Bulgarian Church likewise regained its independence from Constantinople as a result of active political and diplomatic "shuttling" between Rome and Constantinople. Along

⁶ Petar Mutafchiev. "Pop Bogomil i Sveti Ivan Rilski" [Priest Bogomil and Saint Ivan Rilski]. In: Z.Petrov (ed.). *Izbrani Balgarski eseta* [Selected Bulgarian Essays] (Varna: G.Bakalov, 1981), p.157, pp. 144-162.

⁷ Ibid., p. 159.

⁸ Ibid.

with the restoration of the literary and canonical traditions of the Bulgarian Church and culture, this period was marked by the flourishing of various heretical movements—the Bogomil movement, the Paulician sect—and of Hesychast mysticism, etc., all of them popular responses to the poverty and social ruins resulting from wars, and a reaction to Byzantine domination.

Bulgaria under the Turkish yoke (1391-1876). During the Ottoman domination over the Balkans, the religious ties of the Balkan countries to an external center gradually lost their religious-cultural characteristics and became reduced to relations of institutional, ethnic, economic domination, and dependence. The interaction ceased to have the characteristics of transplantation and creation of culture and civilization, and turned into a religious prototype of the Ottoman political-administrative domination. The Bulgarian Church lost its autocephalous status and became subordinate to the Orthodox Patriarch of Istanbul, who appointed Greek bishops throughout the territories populated by Bulgarians. Orthodoxy gradually became a vehicle of Greek cultural domination, which particularly influenced the educated and well-to-do urban circles of the Bulgarian population. Although it was an important historical factor for cultural and national preservation in Bulgaria, Orthodoxy was not connected with the founding myth of nationality. Moreover, during the Turkish domination, religion tended to acquire an overtone of Greek domination, becoming associated with Greek interests promoted by the Patriarchate of Constantinople. The national identity of the rural masses was supported by the cultural activity of the monasteries, through religious literature, comprising apocrypha, hagiography, etc. This synthesis of ideas developed further and eventually activated the liberation movement and the establishment of the independent Bulgarian national state. Orthodoxy was permanently bound to the ethnic survival of the people as community, while Islam became connected with the image of the conquering ethnos. These archetypes were

consolidated and reproduced in the time of the formation of the Balkan nation-states in the 19th century. The analysis of Maria Todorova distinguishes the importance of two legacies here:

Of the political legacies which have shaped Southeastern Europe as a whole (the period of Greek antiquity, Hellenism, Roman rule, etc.), two can be singled out as crucial up until the 19th century. One is the Byzantine millennium with its profound political, institutional, legal, religious and general cultural impact. The other is the half millennium of Ottoman rule that gave the peninsula its name and established the longest period of political unity it had ever experienced. Not only did part of Southeastern Europe acquire a new name during this period, it has been chiefly the Ottoman elements or the ones perceived as such which have formed the current stereotype of the Balkans. In the narrow sense of the word, then, one can argue that the Balkans are, in fact, the Ottoman legacy.⁹

The Third Bulgarian State (1876 – 1944). This period is characterized by the separation of the Church from the State (as part of the European process of secularization after the French revolution), legally stipulated in the Turnovo Constitution, which parallel to this, declared Orthodox Christianity to be “the dominant religion” in Bulgaria (article 37). The link between Orthodoxy and national identity gradually lost hold on society with the gradual stratification of rich and poor, village and town dwellers, pro- and anti-Russian political supporters, etc. The attempts in modern times, particularly between the First and Second World Wars, to seek new dimensions for a unique and important national mission did not prove successful and were not widely accepted in cultural and political circles, nor in Bulgarian mass consciousness; in other words, they failed to revive and modernize the energy of the medieval mythological archetype.

The Orthodox Churches acquired a particular role and function in the context of the modern nation state. After the Greek revolution of 1820, the Greek Orthodox Church became a national church, closely linked to the needs and projects of the nation state; it was subordinated to the state in administrative terms and obtained autocephalous status. Nikos Kokosalakis called

⁹ MariaTodorova. “Balkanite mezhdou klisheto i evropeiskoto badeshte” [The Balkans Between Cliché and the European Future]. *Filosofski Alternativi* [Philosophical Alternatives], № 6, p.13, pp. 5-16.

this process the “secularization” of the Church, which became subordinated and connected to the political mechanisms of the secular state.¹⁰ All Orthodox Churches in the Balkans underwent similar developments. The Serbian Orthodox Church became autocephalous in 1879. After World War I, when Serbia became part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, the Serbian Orthodox Church placed under its ecclesiastical authority the Orthodox population of Montenegro as well. Of all these countries, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church achieved its autocephalous status with the greatest difficulty, and latest in history. This came about in 1945, when Bulgaria was already part of the Socialist camp. The Romanian Orthodox Church achieved independence in 1885. After World War I, it became more stable due to the incorporation of Transylvania, with its Orthodox population, in the Romanian kingdom; it thus became the second largest Orthodox Church after the Russian one.

When in the 19th century the independence of the Slavic churches and states were restored, both the Orthodox and the Slav idea were already tied with national state and political doctrines, and had even started proving their ideological and diplomatic inapplicability under the conditions of division and nationalization of the Orthodox community. New forms of a national and state ideology were imposed under the new conditions after the French revolution. The generic concept of citizen, in which ethnic and religious differences coexist and are mutually complementary, the supremacy of the civic and political rights and the co-existence of the individuals over their religious differences, was achieved already in the philosophy of the Enlightenment and in the practice of the French revolution. Liberal democracies attributed to that universal ideological program a state-political, legal, and economic form. It is quite a different

¹⁰Nikos Kokosalakis. “Church and State in the Orthodox Context with Special Reference to Greece.” In: D.Nesti, P.Antes, P. de Marco (eds.). *European Identity and Religious Diversities in the Contemporary Changes*. (Firenze: Angelo Pontecorboli Editore, 1995), 241-242, pp. 233-257.

matter that some of these countries betray traditional political-diplomatic and ideological tendencies to view the Balkan countries as a whole, as geopolitical landmark or front line.

Orthodoxy under "Socialism" (1944-1989). The main form of popular religion in the pre-socialist agrarian Bulgaria was rural Christian religiosity, with its strong admixture of pagan beliefs. Industrialization, urbanization, the nationalization of peasant property under the "socialist" regime abolished the social conditions that had supported this form of religiosity. The Orthodox Church was subordinated to the state and the hold of religion on mass consciousness decreased; moreover, religion was specifically targeted by atheistic ideology and the political practice of the Communist party. The democratic processes begun in 1989 took place in a society that had small "islands" of religiosity concentrated mainly among the older generation of rural dwellers. The young generation as a whole was brought up in the spirit of rationalism and pragmatism permeating a science-oriented educational system. Unlike countries like Poland and Hungary, where religion and the Catholic Church had inspired spiritual ferment for the reformist political tendencies, in Bulgaria, religion only reacted to such tendencies.

The fight in support of atheism assumed at least two basic forms: 1) removing the Church institution from the public stage and weakening its influence upon religious people, and 2) the formation of atheistic, anti-religious attitudes among those people.

The importance that the Communist Party attached to this fight stemmed from its ideological self-identification as a carrier and supporter of enlightenment values, including the spirit of rationality, progress, science, and modernization in all social spheres. But the "material" the Party had at its disposal, with which to achieve this "enlightened kingdom," was rather far removed from these values. Hence, the task was set to form, educate, "atheize" this human material in the course of several decades.

Two opposite trends characterized the situation of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and religion during the “Socialist” period: 1) its status in the community of Orthodox churches grew stronger after 1945, with the lifting of the schism upon the Church (declared by the Istanbul Council in 1872), accompanied with active participation in international ecclesiastic forums, but 2) it was socially and culturally marginalized within Bulgarian society, and its influence strongly decreased over mass consciousness, over ideology and politics of the country.

The process of secularization, begun after the Liberation of Bulgaria in 1878, now took a specific, intensive turn, supported by the coercive force of the state. Church property was nationalized, its monopoly of civil rituals (marriage, funeral, baptism) and its influence on the educational system were interrupted for decades.¹¹ The new Constitution (article 53), adopted in 1947 under the government of Georgi Dimitrov, and the Law on Religion, passed in 1949, proclaimed the right of religious freedom and equality of religions. Orthodoxy was declared the “traditional religion” of the Bulgarian people.

Scholars distinguish two periods in the Communist government’s line on Church matters until the 1960s: the periods of 1944-1947 and 1947-1960,¹² characterized by ambivalence and inconsistency, as well as by the copying of the Soviet practice. The Party waged an uncompromising ideological struggle against religion, which was treated as an enemy of the regime. The momentum of revolution and fighting the enemy was stronger until 1947. According to historians of religion, the Party made a show of revolutionary zeal in these years; lumpen elements in society were active, and extremist measures were taken against religion and the

¹¹ Daniela Kalkandzhieva. *Balgarskata pravoslavna tsarkva i “narodnata demokratiya” (1944 – 1953)* [The Bulgarian Orthodox Church and “People’s Democracy”] (Silistra: Demos, 2002), pp. 76-120.

¹²Vladimir Mygev. “Balgarskata pravoslavna tsarkva v politikata na upravlyavashite v Bulgariya (1944-1960)” [The Bulgarian Orthodox Church and Government Policy in Bulgaria (1944-1960)]. In: *Religiya i tsarkva v Bulgariya* [Religion and Church in Bulgaria] (Sofia: Gutenberg, 1999), p. 273, pp. 271-280.

Church.¹³ The periods 1944-1945 and 1948-1949 also witnessed the strongest waves of repression against the clergy.¹⁴

Regarding the period 1951-1952, the Party documents of the time indicate a softening of anti-religious extremes (the Plenum of the CC of BCP on April 23, 1951 and Decree 112 of the Council of Ministers from March 19, 1952 required the Committee for Issues of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church to take measures against possible illegal acts aimed against religious organizations). In the period 1948-1953, the Soviet experience was closely studied by the Bulgarian authorities: for this purpose, on several occasions, delegations were sent to Moscow by the Bulgarian Committee for Religious Confessions. Overall, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church proved tolerant and inclined to the idea of collaborating with the government. In the spring of 1947, Exarch Stephan entreated all clergymen to support the government campaigns and the Two-Year Economic Plan. The Church also supported the policy of the Fatherland Front, the country's foreign policy, and the Bulgarian-Soviet friendship.¹⁵

After Stalin's death in 1953, the policy of the ruling Party towards the Church and religion continued to grow milder: the state subsidy was increased, the international connections of the Church were stabilized, and tax concessions on Church property were introduced in 1954. The policies in question did not yield the expected results during the first decade of the socialist regime, and in a number of Party documents, dissatisfaction was expressed at the fact that religious prejudices had not been dispelled yet, especially as concerned religious rituals. Requirements were set that anti-religious propaganda should be intensified, and this attitude was

¹³ Ibid., p.275.

¹⁴ Kalkandzhieva, *op.cit.*, p.231.

¹⁵ Mygev, p. 275; Kalkandzhieva, pp. 37-73.

particularly strong after the events in Hungary and Poland in the autumn of 1956; thus, Communist party control was tightened over religious publications.

In the Khrushchev era, in tune with the growing aggression of the Soviet Communist Party against religion and the Church, similar trends occurred in our country, as historians have shown: on December 26, 1957, Politburo made a special decision “On Intensifying and Improving Atheist Propaganda in the Country,” which copied a recent decision of the CPSUB on the same subject. There began a brief period of renewed repression and atheist propaganda, which soon abated, as it became clear that this was an artificially provoked propaganda campaign¹⁶.

The new Statutes of the Bulgarian Communist Party, adopted at the 7th Party Congress in June 1958, required from every Party member the task “of fighting resolutely against religious prejudices,” a requirement that had been missing in the previous three versions of the Party statutes.¹⁷

People, especially Party members, came to fear that professing one’s faith might lead to fall in social status. This feeling remained strong even in the 1970s and 1980s, as evident from sociological surveys in several large Bulgarian urban regions, Smolyan, Pazardzhik and Stara Zagora; the survey findings show that between 36 percent and 51 percent of religious people were ashamed of their religiousness and tried to hide it.¹⁸ One reason for this was that the various forms of atheistic propaganda and agitation treated it as a remnant of the past, a mark of backwardness and lack of education.

¹⁶ Mygev, 279.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Krastjo Krastev. *Religiya, mirogled, tsennosti* [Religion, Worldview, Values]. (Sofia: Partizdat, 1978), p.181.

Undoubtedly, the Party-State and “scientific” atheism have played an important role in mass secularization, but the importance of this role should not be exaggerated. The accelerated process of industrialization, mass migration to cities, and the concentration of large working masses were a powerful “ontological” basis of atheism imposed from above. The age-old traditions, mode of life, the patriarchal communities, all these elements, which had been the main milieu for reproduction of popular religiousness, were destroyed. The urbanized and industrialized society needed and created a “new” man—rationalistic, pragmatic, atheistic.

In fact, a number of other authors believe that the rationalistic and atheistic attitudes typical for societies in Western Europe after the age of Enlightenment were precisely a result of the rise of science and industry,¹⁹ and the conclusion many of these scholars draw is that the Western world has long ceased to be “Christian.”²⁰ Of course, the difference in “Communist” countries is that these rationalistic, atheistic “Marxist” attitudes are formed there, among other mechanisms, through coercion exercised by the state and Party, even though Marx’s notion of Communism and atheism as a new worldview completely differed from such a policy.²¹ Marx believed that atheism would be unnecessary, for in the future Communist society, as he understood it, religion would be exhausted as a result of the perfect social-economic order.²²

But behind these general trends, authors find different concrete practices at work in each of the “Communist” countries. For example, the conclusion of the French scholar P. Michel (regarding Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary) is that the religious sphere in these countries began to autonomously produce a social and political area that served as an opposite pole to that

¹⁹ Patrick Masterson. *Atheism and Alienation. A Study of the Philosophical Sources of Contemporary Atheism.* (Dublin/London: Gill and Macmillan, 1971), pp.7, 80; Folscheid, Dominique. *L’esprit de l’athéisme et son destin.* (Paris: Editions Universitaire, 1991), pp. 7, 13, 303.

²⁰ Erich Fromm. *Byagstvo ot svoboda* [Escape from Freedom]. (Sofia: Zaharii Stoyanov, 2005).

²¹ Masterson, pp. 88,90,91.

²² Denis Janz. *World Christianity and Marxism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

of the State; religion reconstructed the social fabric, and became an authority that redefined the political;²³ however, this does not apply to the same degree to the USSR and Bulgaria.

Likewise, there is a wide consensus among scholars of religion that the domination of the state over the religious sphere, the “ontological primacy” of the state over religion and the Church was characteristic for Western Europe and the US during the entire 20th century regardless of the form of government—democracy, totalitarianism, welfare state, etc.²⁴ Arnold Toynbee considered that in the 20th century the same processes of modernization of society and religion had taken place both in the West and in the East, but were carried out in different political and ideological forms.

Democratic changes (1989 -present). The transition from totalitarian to pluralistic system of economy, politics, ideology which followed the "velvet" revolution at the end of 1989 created the possibilities and the needs to explore the cultural space of different political and philosophical doctrines, religious culture and other cultural products which were suppressed under the dominance of Marxist ideology. While providing the freedom to worship in church, to observe religious rituals, etc., the democratic process, with its economic changes, also brought about unemployment, growing stress, uncertainty, and instability for many people.

Since 2002, there is an operative Religious Denominations Act in the Republic of Bulgaria,²⁵ which takes into account the basic European standards and international legal tools, but which has periodically been criticized on separate points by some parties and human rights

²³ Patrick Michel. » L'égitimation et régulation étatique de la religion dans les systèmes de type soviétique: L'exemple du catholicisme en Pologne, Tchécoslovaquie et Hongrie." *Social Compass*, 37(1), 1990, p.118, pp.117-125.

²⁴Jacque Zylberberg. “La régulation étatique de la religion: monisme et pluralisme.” *Social Compass*, 37(1), 1990, p. 93, pp.87-96.

²⁵ Religious Denominations Act. Translated from Bulgarian by K.Miller. In: W.C. Durham, Jr. and S. Ferrari (eds.). *Laws on Religion and the State in Post-Communist Europe*. (Leuven: PEETERS, 2004), pp. 77-92 (Original Bulgarian version published in State Gazette Issue № 120 of December 29, 2002).

organizations and by the structures of the European Commission, which implies that this law should evolve and be perfected in the future.²⁶

The new democratic constitution, adopted on July 13, 1991, recognized the equality under law of all citizens, without “any constraints on the rights and privileges, based on race, nationality, ethnos, sex, origin, religion, education, personal or social status, or property status, convictions, political affiliations (art. 6, paragraph 2).” The new Religious Denominations Act passed by the Parliament on December 20, 2002, provided a legal framework for this article of the Constitution. The democratic evolution to the new Act was slow and difficult as in other post-communist countries.²⁷

The Act asserts the right of every person to freedom of conscience and faith, as well as equality under the law, regardless of religious affiliation and convictions and supports mutual understanding, tolerance and respect on issues regarding the freedom of conscience and faith (Preamble). The articles 4 and 6 state that confessions are free and equal under the law, separate from the state; discrimination based on faith is inadmissible, as also the intervention of the state in the internal organization of religious communities and institutions. Art. 6 enumerates the particular rights encompassed in the right of religious freedom: creating and maintaining religious communities and institutions; establishing and maintaining places of worship or religious assembly; creating and maintaining appropriate charitable or humanitarian institutions; writing, publishing and dissemination of religious publications; giving and receiving religious instruction in a language freely chosen by the person; creating and maintaining appropriate

²⁶ Nonka Bogomilova. *Religion, Law and Politics in the Balkans in the End of 20th and the Beginning of 21st Century*. (Sofia: Iztok-Zapad, 2005), pp. 216-225.

²⁷ Peter Petkov. "The Law on Religion in Bulgaria in the Light of European Integration." In: J.Sutton, Wil van den Bercken (eds.). *Orthodox Christianity and Contemporary Europe* (Leuven, Paris, Dudley: PEETERS, 2003), 486-489, pp. 485-501.

institutions for teaching (in the judgment of the communities and institutions) in abiding by legal requirements; and parents and legal guardians have the right to provide religious education for their children according to the parents' personal convictions.

Compared with the Law on Religious Confessions of 1949, the new Act emphasizes much more strongly the religious rights and liberties of citizens and the equality under law of the separate confessions. According to the Act, there are no classifications and division, no advantages or restrictions on the basis of the legal status of the religious denominations. Another positive feature, in conformity with European standards, is the fact that in the Act, acquiring legal status by a religious community is not indicated as an obligatory condition for carrying out religious activity. Many unregistered religious communities perform activities in Bulgaria now: Orthodox, Protestant, Islamic, Buddhist, of religious syncretism of ecological and spiritual movements. Some of them are registered under the law for non-profit legal bodies. But the religious communities that have acquired such status, referred to in the Act as "religious institutions," enjoy a wider range of freedoms: "to own property" (art.21), "to produce and sell goods" (art.22), "to own and maintain cemeteries" (art.24), to take profit from the "distribution of the state subsidy" (art 28), "may establish medical, social and educational institutions" (art. 30), etc.

To conclude: "Bulgaria has made significant progress protecting and promoting religious freedom with the implementation of the 1991 Constitution. Although the Constitution recognizes its traditional link to the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, the government has improved its relationship with other religious groups by improving the registration process."²⁸

²⁸ Religious Freedom in Bulgaria 2009. <http://www.religionandpolicy.org> (Assessed on May 20, 2012)

According to data from the statistical census,²⁹ the confessional belonging of the Bulgarian citizens (total number 5 758 301) is as follows: Eastern Orthodox–4 374 135; Muslims–577 139; Catholics–48 945; Protestants–64 476; other religions–9023; no religion– 272 264; not indicated– 409 898, etc.

The results are quite different in the analysis of religiousness.

The sociological survey carried out four years after the beginning of the changes registered that religion and the Church were important for about 36 percent of the respondents. Women and elderly persons attached greater importance to religion than males and persons in the active age groups. The latter groups search for active, pragmatic solutions to the uncertainty and instability attending social challenges. The majority of the respondents, irrespective of sex, age, and education, does not indicate religion as being an important condition for prosperity in life.³⁰ Research on the “Ethnic-cultural situation in Bulgaria” (unpublished), carried out by a team of sociologists, ethnographers, demographers, etc., in 1992, gives a more detailed picture of religiosity in the changing Bulgaria. The data show that hardly 10 percent of the Christians in Bulgaria identify themselves as “deeply religious,” every fourth person does not attend church services, and 21 percent of the deeply religious persons do not pray. The sociological surveys carried out eight years after the beginning of the changes showed that 15.5% of the respondents believed definitely in God or Allah, 47 percent believed “to some degree,” 10 percent believed but not in God, 8.9 percent identified as atheists, and 18.7 percent were not interested in religion.³¹ In general, these findings reflect a process of fermentation, individuation, and of a more open and non-traditional attitude to the Orthodox rituals, dogmas, and beliefs. As in

²⁹NSI, Census 2011. National Statistical Institute, <http://www.nsi.bg/census2011> (Assessed on October 12, 2011)

³⁰NOEMA. *Nabludatel na obshtestvenoto mnenie* [Monitor of Public Opinion].(Sofia, 1993).

³¹ Zhelio Vladimirov, Ivan. Katzarsky, Momchil Badzhakov, Todor Todorov. *Balgaria v kragovete na anomiyata* [Bulgaria in the Circle of Anomie]. (Sofia: SOPHILOS, 1998), p. 58.

Western Europe, only a small percentage of people practice the kind of religiosity that includes doctrinal knowledge, strict observation of Christian moral rules and ritual practices as a lifestyle.

Bulgaria is known for its good and peaceful ethnic-religious model, established here during the democratic changes. Those conclusions were confirmed by the surveys, realized in 1999-2000,³² in 2001,³³ and in 2009³⁴: the ethnic situation in Bulgaria is relatively calm; the ethnic and religious differences do not occupy the top ranks as possible causes for conflict between the corresponding groups—only 34 percent of the respondents indicate such reasons; and at the same time, the majority of Bulgarians do not favor rights that institutionalize ethnic interests (and especially those of the Roma) at the cultural and national level. “A more alarming fact has been perhaps the accumulation of prejudice with regard to the *Gypsies*.”³⁵ In the sociological studies dating from the beginning of the new century, it was clearly established that these stereotypes have been preserved and enhanced in Bulgarian society.

The difficulties of the economic transformations in Bulgaria are adding energy to anti-“sect” feelings too. The intensive start of some new religions in Bulgaria was stimulated both by the situation of anomie and desacralization of the past and by the lack of doctrines and ideas sacralizing the present. The Bulgarians lost the supporting reference points both of their social

³² Zheljo Vladimirov, Ivan Katzarsky, Todor Todorov, Momchil Badzhakov. *Bulgaria sled 1997: tekushta situatsiya i tendentsii na razvitiie* [Bulgaria after 1997: Current Situation and Development Tendencies]. (Sofia: Sofiiski Novini Edition, 2000), pp. 89-92.

³³ Svetla Stoyanova, “Vliyanieto na religioznata prinadlezhnost varhu sotsialnite distantsii na balgari kam drugi etnosi” [The Influence of Religious Identity on the Social Distances of Bulgarians toward Other Ethnicities]. In: M. Serafimova, J. Kyosev, V. Dulov, D. Peicheva, M. Marinov, I. Yakova, A. Tsvetkov (eds.). *Religiya i politika* [Religion and Politics]. (Blagoevgrad: BON, 2005), p.94, pp.87-94.

³⁴ Albena Nakova. “Balgarskiyat etnicheski model prez prizmata na vzaimnite etnosotsialni predstavi na balgari, turtsi i rom”i [The Bulgarian Ethnic Model through the Prism of Mutual Ethno-social Images of Bulgarians, Turks and Romas]. In: Maxim Myzov (ed.). *Balgarskiyat etnicheski model – politicheska mitologema ili problemna realnost?* [The Bulgarian Ethnic Model – Political Mythology or Reality?]. (Sofia: Avangard Prima, 2011), p. 197, pp. 182-197.

³⁵ Petar Mitev. “Relations of Compatibility and Incompatibility in the Everyday Life of Christians and Muslims in Bulgaria”. In: Antonina Zhelyazkova (ed.). *Relations of Compatibility and Incompatibility between Christians and Muslims in Bulgaria*. (Sofia: ICMSIR, 1994), p.52, pp.179-230.

and personal biographies. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church, which has been for many years encapsulated and alienated from actual social problems, could not offer new spiritual roots. This situation of anomie after the “velvet” revolution was favorable for some New Religious Movements. Their ideas about resacralization of present, about the imminence of God’s Kingdom, about God’s elect, attracted schoolboys, students, workers, and intellectuals.

Another fact which in Bulgaria lends additional energy to "anti-sect" emotions is related to the foreign leadership of most new, non-traditional religions. The foreign missionaries are usually viewed as an anti-national, anti-patriotic phenomenon. In a similar way, B. Stojković characterizes the attitude of the Serbian society towards the “sects” as “stigmatization” and “moral panic.”³⁶ This perception is a sign of hidden nationalistic feelings; such feelings are reflected to some degree in the new Law on Religion, which limits and complicates the legal activities of New Religious Movements (art.7 and 8). As a result of the critics of the Law, the European Commission monitoring on the religious freedom and rights was reestablished in Bulgaria in June 2003. As a matter of fact, “it is not uncommon for media outlets to disseminate negative and derogatory stories about non traditional religious groups.”³⁷

Although in constitutional and legal terms the freedom of religious belief and religious communities has been declared in post-communist countries, in fact in most of them, the religions of the minorities and the New Religious Movements are in a disadvantaged position. A

³⁶ Branimir Stojković. “Stigmatization of Religious Sects, Moral Panic and Media”. In: D. Đorđević (ed.). *On Religion in the Balkans*. (Niš and Sofia: YSSR, “Ivah Hadjyiski” Institute, 2013), pp. 147-158.

³⁷ Religious Freedom in Bulgaria 2009. <http://www.religionandpolicy.org>

more complicated procedure for registration and performing activities has been established for them than for the traditional confessions.³⁸

From 1992 to 2002, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church was in a state of painful and lasting schism. This division and opposition was a reflection of and influenced by the political opposition between the two main Bulgarian political parties in the beginning of the democratic changes, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (former Communists) and the Union of Democratic Forces. The Bulgarian Patriarch Maxim was elected head of the Holy Synod in the socialist period and continued to hold this position. The alternative synod claimed it was innocent of the ecclesiastic errors of the communist past, especially of connections with the Communist Party. In coming to power after the democratic changes of the early 1990s, the party Union of Democratic Forces proclaimed that the Holy Synod of the BOC had been a collaborator of the communist regime. Three of the bishops belonging to the circle of associates of the Patriarch Maxim founded a new, “authentic” synod, which received legal status under the administration of the UDF. After the UDF fell from power in 1993 and the former communist party, the BSP, came to power in its turn, state support was transferred to the Synod headed by the Patriarch Maxim.

The Church schism, lasted more than 10 years, has largely reduced the authority of and public confidence in the Church. The institutional schism has divided the bishops of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church into two hostile alternative synods, both claiming legitimacy, and vying for Church property, holding alternative celebrations of religious holidays, etc.

³⁸ W.C.Durham, Jr., N.P.Peterson and E. A. Sewell. “Introduction: A Comparative Analysis of Religious Associations Laws in Post-Communist Europe”. In: W.Cole Durham, Jr., Silvio Ferrari (eds.). *Laws on Religion and the State in Post-Communist Europe*. (Leuven: PEETERS, 2004) pp. VII – XLIII.

Analysts believe the schism had political, economic and religious causes.³⁹ The political causes involved the political interests of the parties coming to power in turn and successively supporting either side of the divided Church. The economic interests involved ownership of the property of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. Neither the efforts inside the Church nor the pressure of public opinion produced a definitive solution to church division. The new Law on Religion, critically accepted by the UDF and the non-Orthodox religions, attempts to solve the problem by giving support to the Synod headed by Patriarch Maxim. The process of politicization and schism alienated the Church from the need and problems of the believers. Sociological surveys registered low rates of confidence in the Bulgarian Orthodox Church one year after the schism: about 20 percent of the interviewed persons indicated complete trust in the Church; 26 percent trust to some extent; 17 percent were rather mistrustful; and 36 percent did not trust it at all.⁴⁰

The ultimate result of the schism, to which the ruling party NMSS coercively put an end, first through the Religious Denominations Act in 2002 and then by the intervention of court and police in 2004, was the loss of authority and trust in the BOC. The fragile relation of the Eastern Orthodoxy to the national identity was eliminated.

Conclusion

In Bulgaria, the line of cleavage in society since the start of democratic changes was not ethnic-based but political, hence religious differences (especially between Orthodoxy and Islam)

³⁹ Jenice Broun. "The Schism in the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, Part 2: Under the Socialist Government, 1993 – 97". *Religion, State, Society*, 28(3), 2000, pp. 283-289.

⁴⁰ NOEMA. *Nabludatel na obshtestvenoto mnenie* [Monitor of Public Opinion].(Sofia, 1993)

but never became a basis for mutual aggression and contention. The prevalence of political strife over religious-ethnic differences was evident in the political divisions within the Orthodox community itself: the formation and opposition between the two synods of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church reflected and resulted from the political-party division within society at large.

The newest history of Bulgaria confirms the domination of the state over the religious sphere, the “ontological primacy” of the state over religion and the Church as a main feature of State-Church relations in Bulgaria. The Byzantine “legacy” of State-Church symphony bears both repetition and transformation.