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**CHRISTIAN MISSION IN POST-COMMUNISM:  
MISSIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS AND THE BULGARIAN CONTEXT**

by Viktor Kostov

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“I personally am an atheist, but will always support Eastern Orthodoxy because I am aware that only it can unite the Bulgarians and help them come out of the black hole in which they find themselves at the moment. My personal feelings and beliefs are of no importance when the survival of the state is at stake.” This opinion posting, placed on the Internet under one of my articles critiquing the government for its intervention in ecclesiastical affairs of the Orthodox Church, expresses clearly the dilemma of religion, Christianity and its different forms in the post-communist context of Bulgaria.

**Purpose, Terminology and Scope**

The goal of this presentation is to discuss the categories of freedom of conscience, religion and the church-state relationship from a missiological perspective. In this paper I will present the thesis that in post-communist Bulgaria, the government still attempts to play a defining role in the formation of national ideology and thus attempts to govern religious belief. In such attempts the idea of a canonical territory, or the limitations on free speech called for by any anti-proselytism sentiments, are welcome by the state in its tendency to elevate itself above society and become a totalitarian structure. I will also suggest that there is missiological significance in paying attention to the church-state model, and to issues of freedom of conscience and religion in the post-communist context.

Terminological clarification is needed here. I use the term “Orthodox” in this paper to denote adherents to the Eastern Orthodox tradition. However, many uses of the term do not refer to believers, or church-goers that visit Eastern Orthodox cathedrals and services, but depict a national and ethnic adherence, often with nationalistic overtones.<sup>1</sup> The very term “orthodox” in the larger practice of Christianity is used to denote faithfulness to doctrine and practice. But faithful to what: The Biblical canon or the Tradition of the Church? Faithfulness to the Holy Spirit or the church hierarchy? We are aware that Eastern Orthodoxy is faithful to church Tradition and the “guided reading” of the Scriptures; whereas Evangelicalism stresses the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*. Thus if we want to refer to the practical use of Christian orthodoxy we are prohibited to do so in order to avoid confusion in the use of the term in relation to the Eastern Orthodox Church. Even this terminological disclaimer reveals how difficult the discussion of and with a

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<sup>1</sup> Parush Parushev, ‘Narrative Paradigms of Emergence’ in *Religion in Eastern Europe* XXV (2):1-39, 2005.

church institution can be whose fundamental premise for its self-definition is the assumption that it is the only institution that can represent ultimate truth.<sup>2</sup> The task becomes daunting when we establish that Orthodoxy also has a political claim in which it is not concerned with faith but with its close relationship with the secular government.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore we must be ready to critically deconstruct certain theological presuppositions as we discuss mission, civil and religious freedom, proselytism and freedom of conscience in the post-communist world. One example is the term "Orthodox countries."

### **Canonical Territory, Freedom of Religion and Proselytism**

In order to establish a comprehensible framework for discussion, I will offer some working definitions of terms. "Canonical territory" is present when we have a religion which has claimed as adherents all subjects within a given geographical area controlled by a government. This idea supports the historical presumption that all Bulgarians (or Armenians or Serbs or Russians or Romanians, etc.) are established Orthodox (as in other countries the population is classified by the official authorities as unanimously Catholic, Muslim, Hindu and so on). This presumption adopted by the state and the public does not take into account the real spiritual experiences and convictions of individuals and "missionaries are treated as invaders."<sup>4</sup>

"Freedom of religion" is the right of the person to choose for himself his faith in God, based on the unhindered gathering of information on which to base his belief. "For himself" does not mean that the person creates his own god; on the contrary, religious belief is always formed by, and aimed at community and a faith that is meaningful and proven by experience and history. But the historical and communal aspect of faith is not meant to eradicate individual freedom. The latter is given so that the individual can reach internal conviction independently, so that belief is motivated and thoughtfully weighed, not imposed on the person because of fear or violence.

"Proselytism" has a negative connotation and is generally used by religious and government leaders who control certain canonical territory. The term is meant to denote the activities of representatives from faiths or religions which are not recognized as the dominant one. The activities envisioned include the presentation of "foreign" beliefs to people in the "canonical territory."<sup>5</sup>

It is only logical that in a given "canonical territory" there is the presumption that everyone is born with a certain "faith affiliation." From a theological and Biblical perspective, this argument is untenable, and I would say, preposterous. Faith is not race, ethnicity, gender or even culture; it is the result of personal involvement in the process of searching, understanding and accepting God who is invisible and is Spirit. This search for God may be influenced by the family and social processes of the person's environment. But to limit the spiritual search of man because of political, ethnic, territorial and state interests is tyranny, which at least from a Christian and Biblical perspective, is not justified. This tyranny, at the same time, is powerless in many ways, because God reveals himself to people, despite the efforts of people to reformulate faith in him (Acts 4:31).

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<sup>2</sup> Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 250.

<sup>3</sup> Nikolas Gvosdev, *An Examination of Church-State Relations in the Byzantine and Russian Empires with an Emphasis on Ideology and Models of Interaction* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2001). See also Lee Trepanier, 'Nationalism and Religion in Russian Civil Society: An Inquiry into the 1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience,' In *Civil Society and the Search for Justice in Russia*, edited by N. G. a. C. Marsh (New York: Lexington Books, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Tim Grass, 'Orthodoxy and the Doctrine of the Church' in Ian M. Randall (ed), *Baptists and the Orthodox Church: On the Way to Understanding* (Prague, Czech Republic: International Baptist Theological Seminary, 2003), pp. 5-14, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Faith is a matter of internal conviction, according to the gospel, which does not belong to control by the state (Caesar) (John 6; Matthew 22:21).

Man is not born with his religion, but builds his convictions on the basis of the culture that has formed him as a child and youth; then in later years he may choose to contest the worldview imposed upon him during earlier years. Similar stance, but starting from another point of view, is the position of secular humanism, which protects basic individual human rights.

### **Human Rights and Religious Liberty**

Freedom of conscience and religion began to be more clearly defined as socio-political categories during the Enlightenment period which places them historically as a development of Western thought. Freedom of religion is only one subcategory of the attempt at universal human justice, known as "universal human rights." These rights are established in international treaties and documents of the human global community since its emergence in an organized form in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Such is the case with the 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights by the United Nations. Article 18 defines the right to freedom of faith, its expression and the right to change one's faith. Although the UDHR is a pretentious document, and it cannot be otherwise since the claim of the proponents of the document is to establish some form of a "universal human justice," it still remains a fundamental reference point for understanding and claiming the fundamental right of a free belief in God.

Human rights are also viewed as a biblical category, emerging in the act of creation and the dignity of man (and woman) created in God's image.<sup>6</sup> Although the idea of human dignity is found in the Bible the term "human rights" is not found in the scriptures.<sup>7</sup> Humanists and atheists, especially regarding freedom of religion, have their own claim on religious liberty. Franklin Gamwell for example insists that all religion must be excluded from public and political life because it is "irrational."<sup>8</sup> Hamburger's research reveals that Thomas Jefferson's, the founding father of the American constitution, motivation for insisting on a "wall of separation of church and state" was rather to protect his own disagreement with clerical establishment than to protect religion.<sup>9</sup> Therefore freedom of religion must be considered with an accompanying term "freedom of conscience." The meaning of such a differentiation is that one is also free to not believe in God, according to their choice of conviction. The humanist interpretation of "freedom of conscience and religion" is in fact the protection of freedom *from* religion. Freedom of conscience is the ability to hold any conviction; freedom of religion is the ability to hold and express one's faith in God.

Freedom of religion and conscience is a complex category because it contains in itself theological, legal, political, social and cultural subcategories. The Bulgarian Constitutional Court issued an interpretive decision addressing the complexity of religious freedom as a legal category in the early 1990s. Religious liberty is complex because it consists of the internal right of freedom of conscience, to choose whom to worship, and several rights to externally express that internal faith.<sup>10</sup> These are the freedoms of speech and expression, receiving and gathering information, of

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<sup>6</sup> Max L. Stackhouse, *Creeds, Society, and Human Rights* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984).

<sup>7</sup> Eugene Heideman, "The Missiological Significance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights," *Missiology: An International Review*, 2000 XXVIII: 163-76.

<sup>8</sup> Franklin I. Gamwell, *The Meaning of Religious Freedom: Modern Politics and the Democratic Revolution* (New York: State University of New York, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> Philip Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State* (Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> Решение № 5 от 11 юни 1992 г. по конституционно дело № 11 от 1992 г., (Обн., ДВ, бр. 49 от 16.06.1992 г.) [Constitutional Court Decision No. 5 of 11 June 1992 on Constitutional Court Case No. 11 of 1992, Published in *State Gazette*, Issue 49 of 16 June 1992].

association (forming of a religious entity) and gathering indoors and outdoors without or with government permission. Thus when we speak of the freedom of conscience and religion we must be able to grasp the framework of church-state relations.

### Church and State

The model of church to state relationship is also critically important for the assessment of the level of freedom the church is granted to worship and do mission. Johannes Verkyul accurately notes that regardless of the political regime, the mission of the church to preach the good news of Christ cannot be reconsidered or redefined.<sup>11</sup> An example along those lines is presented by the apostles. They teach honor to the king and respect to all authority yet resolutely disobey official orders not to preach in the name of Jesus (Acts 4, 5). However, the missiological analysis of the actual political order in which the church operates may help reshape and reinvigorate the actual missionary vision of the church.

David Bosch presents five different models on church-state relations which significantly differ in how the church engages in mission:

1. Constantinian model – which “presupposes a close alliance between a particular religious organization and the state;
2. The Pietist model – religious organization and powers that be are fully separated;
3. Reformist model – mission is more than soul-winning and church-planting; includes social and moral uplift and seeks structural changes;
4. Liberationist model – rejects both Constantinianism and Reformist confrontation with the forces of evil, revolutionist mentality;
5. The Anabaptist model – the church is a prophetic community, separated from any government favor, and by its very existence, even under oppressive political regimes, testifies of the Kingdom of God.<sup>12</sup>

These models reflect theological convictions and historical social context in which the church operates. However, they do not offer a clear-cut formula since they overlap. In more suppressive political regimes the church remains a prophetic insertion in a corrupt and dark society. In more favorable-toward-the-church’s-influence societies one may see Bosch’s concern with the church identifying itself too closely with the state and thus losing its prophetic ministry. Bosch’s main conclusion is that the church must preserve its witness in a way that it provides the uniting factor of values that any society needs to survive. Yet he is wary of too close a relationship between church and state where the government can influence the church’s definition of mission. Christendom (Constantinianism), where canonical territory is a part of the church’s domain, is a defunct context for the missionary church.<sup>13</sup>

Walter Pilgrim studies the NT models of church and state relations. His conclusions lead him to establish a threefold general “formula” of church and state. In the life and ministry of Jesus he sees “critical distancing;” in the letters of the apostles the pattern is “subordination” of the church to the state; and in the book of Revelation Pilgrim extracts the model of “resistance.” Certain adjustments must be made to Pilgrim’s conclusions: for example, the term “subordination” does

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<sup>11</sup> Johannes Verkyul, “The Biblical Notion of Kingdom: Test of Validity for Theory of Religion” in *The Good News of the Kingdom: Mission Theology for the Third Millennium*, edited by C. V. Engen, D. S. Gilliland and P. Pierson. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), p. 72.

<sup>12</sup> David J. Bosch, “God’s Reign and the Rulers of This World: Missiological Reflections on Church-State Relationships” in *The Good News of the Kingdom: Mission Theology for the Third Millennium*, edited by C. V. Engen, D. S. Gilliland and P. Pierson. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

not depict well the respectful attitude to which Christians are called to in Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2:13-17. Acts 4 and 5 are examples that in regards to the question to whom the Christian's conscience and its free speech expression belong, the answer is, as long as preaching is concerned, that Caesar has no right over that area. Thus the term "subordination" which expresses full obedience in all matters neglects the area of free conscience and speech which are preserved as the untouchable domain of believers.

Pilgrim's study however is exhaustive enough to trust one of his main conclusions: the NT does not provide any definitive model of church and state relations. The church must evaluate its own political context and define its stance toward the government based on the principles provided in the NT.

Bosch's and Pilgrim's views are complemented by Carter's and Fergusson's conclusions which focus on contemporary developments. The former insists that Christendom in the West is in a state of decay and the church must prepare for redefining its place in society:

[Christendom] is the concept of Western civilization as having a religious arm (the church) and a secular arm (civil government), both of which are united in their adherence to the Christian faith, which is seen as the so-called soul of Europe or the West... Within this Christian civilization, the state and the church have different roles to play, but, since membership in both is coterminous, both can be seen as aspects of one unified reality – Christendom.<sup>14</sup>

The idea of a "Christian society" or a "Christian state" in the West is further challenged by Fergusson: "The complex interweaving of systems that constitute a modern western society has ended the earlier alignment of ecclesiastical and political rule."<sup>15</sup> Yoder poses the poignant question and responds to it: "Why then should there be anything wrong with Christianity's becoming an official ideology?... In the experience of the Christian community... the only way in which the faith can become the official ideology of a power elite in a given society is if Jesus Christ ceases to be completely Lord."<sup>16</sup>

This up to date Western development cannot be ignored when we look into Eastern nations, especially when we are tempted to term them "Orthodox nations." Any formulaic mission strategy tends to be incomplete or reductionist; a truly strategic missional thinking is rather a faithful sensitivity to the Holy Spirit and the mandates of Scripture.<sup>17</sup> This is also true when we think of a missiologically viable church and state formula.

### **Is Post-communist Bulgaria an "Orthodox Country?"**

We may take notice of the revival of the concept "Orthodox peoples" and Orthodox countries and the terminology in the post-communist milieu but, in fact, there is a big disparity between public use of words and reality. In "Orthodox" countries, there is no clear distinction between Orthodox theology as doctrine and practice and the term "Orthodox" as a national identity and as a political stimulant of government self-confidence. This statement refers to the Bulgarian context as well. Samuel Huntington by no accident affords himself generalizing statements and categorizations, lumping together the East – both Islam and Orthodoxy – into the same category,

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<sup>14</sup> Craig A. Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), p. 78.

<sup>15</sup> David Fergusson, *Church, State, and Civil Society* (Cambridge: University Press, 2004), p. 192.

<sup>16</sup> John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 85.

<sup>17</sup> Wilbert Shenk, "Three Studies of Mission Strategy: Transforming Mission" in *Anabaptism and Mission*, edited by W. R. Shenk and P. E. Penner (Prague, Czech Republic: IBTS and Neufeld Verlag, 2007), p. 23.

identifying the entire society with a single religion.<sup>18</sup> Huntington's wide sweep naturally omits the details—namely that despite the prevailing “political vision of Orthodoxy” in the so-called “Orthodox” countries (former communist) there are other cultural currents. Among them are the tendency of post-communist societies to seek association with the markets and the values of the West.

The next important limitation to the term “Orthodox state” or “Orthodox nation” is that the rubber-stamp use of terminology leads to serious conceptual and mental confusion. What is an “Orthodox country?” Are Orthodox priests in such a nation government officials at the same time, as in the era of *Rum Millet*?<sup>19</sup> Or are they officials appointed by the Council of Ministers and the local government? Does the public administration by law serve only people who have declared loyalty to the Orthodox religion? Or is it that only people who have declared their loyalty to the Orthodox Church, (and what does “loyalty” mean anyway—only baptized members or regular visitors of liturgies?), may be elected to state-leadership positions? In this last case, Orthodoxy should be termed to be the official state religion. But since Orthodoxy is only “the traditional” religion, such a formulation would violate the constitution and the principle of pluralism in a democratic society (Art. 11, Para. 2). Finally, can we draw a sign of equality between “Orthodox Church” and “nation”; or between “state” and “society”?

Bulgaria's adoption of the European Convention for the Protection of Fundamental Human Rights and Freedoms which lists in Article 9 the right to believe, express one's belief and change one's beliefs, speaks to the opposite. In this secular document one can discover not only the right of the human being to believe in God and tell others about it, but also to convert and change one's religious or atheist convictions. The accession of Bulgaria into the EU in 2007 put even more starkly before the government and society the need to evaluate its attitudes toward human rights and in particular the freedom of religion and conscience.

The constitutional claim that the “traditional religion in Bulgaria is Eastern Orthodoxy” (Art. 13, Para. 3), also produces difficult-to-distinguish categories in the hard to find balance between pluralism and “national unity.”<sup>20</sup> This claim has its limitations placed by the constitutional prohibition against the imposition of a state ideology (and “religion” by analogy) (Art. 11, Para. 2). However, given the low level of religious education of the population in the post-communist situation, and the obvious appetite of former communists to take advantage of the dominant role of Orthodoxy in the minds of people as a political and national uniting factor, the fine distinction between “traditional” and “mandatory and official” religion becomes even more nebulous. The constitutionally mandated separation between state and religious institutions (Art. 13 para.2) and the ban on the use of religion for political (government) objectives are also violated by the authorities without any inhibitions.<sup>21</sup> We may conclude that “proselytism” and “canonical territory” are categories which in their constrictive meaning come into sharp conflict with the freedom of conscience and religion, as these are established at the highest level in the legal framework of Bulgaria.

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<sup>18</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

<sup>19</sup> Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 98.

<sup>20</sup> The Russian Orthodox Church expressed its struggle with the concept in a special document: Laurie Johnston, “Religious Liberty in Comparative Perspective: The Catholic Church's Theological Odyssey and the Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church” in *Religion in Eastern Europe* XXVI, 2006, (4):15-31.

<sup>21</sup> “Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and Others against Bulgaria, The” in *European Court of Human Rights Web Site: European Court of Human Rights Court Decisions*, 2009.

However, assertions that Bulgaria is an Orthodox country have their undeniable basis. We will not delve into common historical facts about the christening of the Bulgarian people, and the role of the Orthodox Church as a quasi-governmental and national institution which maintained the Bulgarian spirit throughout the centuries. The following table shows that law-making in the modern history of Bulgaria is marked by the pursuit of establishing a single, corporate conscience, in which freedom of the individual is of secondary importance.

In this sense, yes, we do have an Orthodox state. The legislature (one of the forms of state power) seems to have always strived to steer the conscience of the people toward the field of Orthodox doctrine as a state-sponsored, religio-political ideology. After WWII the centrality of Orthodoxy as a faith promoted by the state was superseded legally by atheistic communism. But where is the liberating transcendence of personal relationship with God in these forms of political “ethno-religion?”

**TABLE 1**  
**FREEDOM OF BELIEF AND CONSCIENCE**  
**IN THE MODERN BULGARIAN LEGISLATIVE HISTORY**

1878 Constitutional Monarchy	1949 Communism	1971 Communism	1991 Post- communist period	2002 Post-communist period
Turnovo Constitution	Denominations Act	Constitution	Constitution	Law on Religious Confessions
Art. 37: “The <b>ruling faith</b> in the Bulgarian Principality is the Orthodox-Christianity of Eastern confession.”	Art. 3: “The Bulgarian Orthodox Church is the <b>traditional religious confession</b> of the Bulgarian people, and as such, in its form, content and spirit, could be a people’s democratic church.”	Art. 1(2): “The <b>leading role</b> in society and the government (state) belongs to the Bulgarian communist party.”	Art. 13 (3): “Eastern Orthodox Christianity shall be considered the <b>traditional religion</b> in the Republic of Bulgaria.”	Art. 10 (1): “The traditional religion in the Republic of Bulgaria is the Eastern Orthodoxy. It plays a <b>historic role in Bulgarian statehood</b> and has actual meaning in the state’s life.”

### Mechanism of Totalitarianism

The idea of the national state represents a form of government which stems from the ancient tradition to add spiritual meaning to the use of secular power. It is also a platform for interlacing the Enlightenment humanistic ideals and the nationalism of emerging nations, especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. Some may see a benevolent force behind the attempt of the nation-state to unify different groups.<sup>22</sup> Craig Carter’s view is less attracted to the possibilities offered by the nation-state formation: “The nation-state demands the absolute sacrifice from us. Just as Jesus demands that we make ourselves ready to die for him, the nation-state also demands that we make ourselves ready to die for it.”<sup>23</sup> Lesslie Newbigin’s treatment is significant with its simplicity: “The nation-state has taken the place of God as the source to which we look for

<sup>22</sup> Joan Lockwood O’Donovan, “A Timely Conversation with The Desire of the Nations on Civil Society, Nation and State” in *A Royal Priesthood?: The Use of the Bible Ethically and Politically A Dialogue with Oliver O’Donovan*, edited by C. Bartolomew, J. Chaplin, R. Song and A. Wolters. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).

<sup>23</sup> Carter, p. 104.

happiness, health and welfare.”<sup>24</sup> It is unarguable however that the nation-state has revealed a modern capacity for attempt at total social and ideological control. Earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Franklin Littell reinforced this view — he saw the role of the totalitarian state in using individual appeal to transfer loyalty of members of the Christian community to loyalty of the political community which shares a “political faith.” Littell quotes a fragment of the Nazi program on “religious liberty:” “We demand the freedom of all religious confessions in the state, in so far as they do not imperil its stability or offend against the ethical and moral senses of the German race.”<sup>25</sup> Religion can support a totalitarian state ideology if pushed enough toward identification with nationalistic values.

Totalitarianism without the use or the threat of state force is impossible. Thus the mechanism of totalitarianism necessarily involves the process of turning the state from a governing civil authority into an idolatrous, transcendent entity. All tyrannical government regimes, including those most emblematic of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, National Socialism and communism, exhibit an attraction toward the state system as an ideological tool. The foundation of communism and totalitarianism is a state-imposed ideology and an idolatrous atheistic system of worship.

Idolatry is the worst sin of all, because it moves God to the periphery of our lives and puts something else in his place. It gives to something else the glory that should be God’s alone... The modern world is no less given over to idolatry than the ancient one; it is just that its cruder forms were more prevalent then.<sup>26</sup>

A totalitarian state creates a totalitarian society, the result of which is totalitarian thinking. The method for creating a totalitarian society contains two main components: (1) violence against opponents of those of different convictions and (2) manipulation of the masses through propaganda. Thus, through the inculcation of fear totalitarian leaders create conditions for self-censorship and the reformulation of truth. By propaganda tyrants replace terminology and mental categories for people and tailor their views according to their own desired ideology. David Bosch even thinks that the development of technology makes all modern states totalitarian to a great extent.<sup>27</sup>

Naturally, the abuse of truth on a large scale leads to the rewriting of history. These are the favorite methods of the “favorite” tyrants and leaders of totalitarian ideologies and states: Lenin argued that a lie repeated many times becomes truth and Hitler realized the need to create a matrix, a new virtual reality, in the minds of the people through propaganda of his own vision of the “truth.”<sup>28</sup> This matrix has a strict hierarchy of the quality of the human person: Arians are a higher race, the Jews are not human beings and therefore subject to destruction, and Slavs are sub-human categories and must be ruled and when necessary — destroyed. The Communists have their “class enemy,” “the capitalist” and “the Kulak” for the formation of their own ideology of hate.

It would not be difficult to imagine modern Bulgarian media mini-ideologists of the “totality” of state, nation and religion, call on “the Orthodox” Bulgarian people to be cleansed of impurities, sects and other harmful elements.<sup>29</sup> Post-communist Bulgarian media overflows with

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<sup>24</sup> Newbiggin, cited in Carter, 2006, p. 104.

<sup>25</sup> Franklin H. Littell, *The Free Church* (Boston, MS: Starr King Press, 1957), p. 92.

<sup>26</sup> Barry Webb, *The Message of Isaiah: On Eagle’s Wings*. Edited by J. A. Motyer and J. R. Stott, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Leicester, England: InterVarsity, 1996), p.180.

<sup>27</sup> Bosch, 1999.

<sup>28</sup> Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* n.d. [cited April 1 2009]. Available from [http://www.hitler.org/writings/Mein\\_Kampf/mkv1ch06.html](http://www.hitler.org/writings/Mein_Kampf/mkv1ch06.html).

<sup>29</sup> Германова, Младена, и Десислава Панайотова. 2008. Секти зарибяват с магии и хипноза. *Телеграф*. [Germanova, Mladena and Desislava, Panayotova. 2008. Sects Lure with Magic and Hypnosis. *Telegraph*.], p. 13.

reports of this sort without paying attention to the fact that the fight against “sectarianism” is actually a struggle for dominance of the total and totalitarianism.<sup>30</sup> Part of the propaganda is that “sects” (different religions), which are seen as breaking away from the “whole,” the “total,” are called...“totalitarian.”

It is not accidental that the Communists, National Socialists, fascist and radical Islamic fundamentalists rely on propaganda to create public awareness and an atmosphere in which tyranny and totalitarianism are presented as necessary. One of the most notorious totalitarian leaders of all time illustrates this in his reflections on propaganda, which he thinks should not be directed at intellectuals, but at the masses:

The function of propaganda does not lie in the scientific training of the individual, but in calling the masses' attention to certain facts, processes, necessities, etc., whose significance is thus for the first time placed within their field of vision. The whole art consists in doing this so skillfully that everyone will be convinced that the fact is real, the process necessary, the necessity correct, etc.<sup>31</sup>

Freedom of conscience and faith are excluded as a value in this model of the battle for the mind and soul of the people.

Charles G. Robertson, observing from a close historical proximity the emergence of the 20<sup>th</sup> century totalitarian states, gives three of its important features: (1) the state is seen as a transcendent entity and the unity it promotes confers on itself an “absolute value’, intrinsic and inherent in itself, with which empirical facts are to harmonize. “The state, in fact, is a moral absolute of eternal value; arising from the nature of things... As Mussolini put it: “The state is the synthesis of all the material and non-material values of the race.”<sup>32</sup> The end of the state is the achievement of this synthesis of values.<sup>33</sup> The second consequence, Robertson points out, is that (2) the totalitarian state demands, and is empowered by, a specific approach to government: “unqualified allegiance of the citizens to the state makes it a Totalitarian State.”<sup>34</sup> The definition that emerges in the text is that “the State is, therefore, a unifying corporative organism of differentiated functional capacities organized under the supreme, unifying and equalizing control of the Leader (Duce, Führer), who speaks the mind of the state and is its consummate expression.”<sup>35</sup> Thirdly, the writer sees a common trend among all totalitarian states at his time (Russia, Turkey, Germany and Italy)— they all came about as the result of a revolution bringing change from a past humiliating national experience.

In totalitarianism the state achieves an overwhelming presence in society to the point of identification with it.<sup>36</sup> The state permeates the whole society, and controls all activities. The public recognizes the state as a major source of security, progress and protection, giving it respect and a transcendent admiration, bordering on idolatry.

To sum up briefly: tyrannical totalitarianism acts through the inculcation of fear, hatred and violence and through manipulation. (Fear is imaginary and usually strongly enhanced by propaganda – popular phraseology used by the Bulgarian media to denote non-Orthodox groups

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<sup>30</sup> Антонова, Тая. 2007. България мишена на секта: Евангелисти зарибяват нашеници по радиото. *Телеграф*. [Antonova, Tanya. 2007. Bulgaria is the Target of a Sect: Evangelicals Lure Our People over the Radio. *Telegraph*], p. 10.

<sup>31</sup> Adolf Hitler ...Ch. 6.

<sup>32</sup> Sir Charles Grant Robertson, *Religion and the Totalitarian State: The Social Service Lecture, 1937*. London: The Epworth Press, 1937), p. 18.

<sup>33</sup> Benito Mussolini, “The Fascist State versus the Individual” in *Man and Society: Freedom and Liberty*, edited by J. P. Resch and J. K. Huckaby. (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co, 1975).

<sup>34</sup> Robertson,...1937, p. 18.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

include “the sects will steal the souls of the young,” “totalitarian sects,” “lie in waiting around the street corner,” “luring,” etc.) Once the people lose their sense of reality and dignity under this influence, the masses who have adopted these values as good for society, identify themselves with tyranny and agree with its methods. Upon agreeing with tyranny they begin to implement it in favor of the tyrannical regime.

In these circumstances, the human conscience is put on trial: to totally subjugate to the popular social and governmental demand to conform or to risk and hold on to freedom and be declared a “sect” which is separate from the whole. And, naturally, to suffer the consequences for having “unconventional” beliefs. Thus the totalitarian mechanism is largely an attitude, and is not solely imposed by state coercion. Of course, the principles of the tyrannical mechanism offered here should serve as a starting point for reflections on the Bulgarian post-communist context.

### **The Church as a Deterrent**

The grim picture is relieved by our awareness of the church as a prophetic and free community in the larger society, which could be tyrannical or free, in a political sense. Robertson describes the church as a society of free people with a transcendent relationship to God, who form a community based on their beliefs and faith.<sup>37</sup> This definition contains the transcendent aspects of faith, which immediately transforms the religious community into a group largely independent from public ideology. In this sense, tyrannical or free, the society within which the church exists only in part forms the worldview of the people in the church. People therefore are not only persons carrying the marks of surrounding circumstances: political, social, economic, etc. Just the opposite, the main feature of their conscience is their faith in God, who is a transcendent Spirit that is unfathomable and uncontrolled by the limited perceptions of the five senses and the four dimensions of the visible world: height, length, width and time.

Martinus Kuitert, Dutch theologian, agrees with Robertson—the church has a social element in itself that makes it a political category, but only somewhat.<sup>38</sup> In essence society cannot dictate to the church the latter’s nature and formation. The world lacks the categories of faith, but the church has spiritual autonomy from the secular power.

According to Robertson there are several principles that distinguish the church from any ordinary public organization: (1) the equality of all in dignity and value before God, (2) the ultimate goal of the church is outside of the visible world, (3) the church has a “spiritual autonomy” independence, without which it “ceases to be the church,” (4) government has no authority to grant any spiritual power or authority to the church - “it can only recognize, but not confer, the inherent rights of the Christian Church to spiritual autonomy,” (5) the sphere of the church and that of the state are different: the former extends into the field of “individual conscience and the relation of the human soul to God” and the latter “is the maintenance of the political order of its members and their obligations to obey the laws and officers within the sphere of the state’s civil jurisdiction,” and (6) rejects any identification between state and society, at least, because society includes the Christian community.<sup>39</sup>

Here is the fundamental misunderstanding between the world of the secular and the faith. Agnostics and atheists think that believers worship some unreal god and are delusional. This leads to a condescending attitude towards religion and religious people. But for people who believe, the

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<sup>37</sup> Robertson, 1937.

<sup>38</sup> H. Martinus Kuitert, *Everything Is Politics but Politics Is Not Everything: A Theological Perspective on Faith and Politics* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986).

<sup>39</sup> Robertson, p. 22-24.

situation is the reverse — unbelievers have no receptors for spiritual truths and experiences that are only achievable in the world of faith (1 Cor. 2). Thus the secular faction sees in religion only a group of people who because of inadequacy cannot be full members of society. Believers see it in exactly the opposite fashion — they are aware that not fewer, but more resources are available to them to be full citizens, precisely because they have the fear of God who gives wisdom and self-control, qualities absent among the godless.

Only Christianity (Non-Roman and non-E. Orthodox) respects religious liberty. What gives rise to anxiety is that, apart from this one form of the Christian consciousness [non-Roman] no other religion, no other society, no other ideology, is prepared to grant to religious liberty its proper position as a supreme and sacrosanct principle. All religions and ideologies tend at one moment or another to attach importance to unity, to conformity, to the total claims of a civilization or of a historical religion, or simply to the practical liberty of a man to earn his daily bread.<sup>40</sup>

Namely the practice of the Christian hope for life that continues after the end of the earthly one, as well as the fear of God, which is “the beginning of all wisdom,” gives the church the ability to be a prophetic corrective against the tyranny of self-obsessed leaders, ideologists of violence and manipulation, and government totalitarian structures. The correction does not happen, however, by the participation of the church as such in government, but rather by it holding a position of a different type in society. The church is a society which is a counterpoint to the lies, greed, envy, hatred, passions and intrigues that make up all other societies. The task of the Church is to assess the secular government and by using its non-revolutionary but powerful spiritual weapons — of preaching and prayer — to keep the fire of truth and freedom burning even in the most tyrannical societies.

Therefore the church, which identifies blindly with political power in order to preserve itself as an institution, ceases to be a corrective and a conveyor of freedom. Without applying any checks against the aspiration for political power it has all the capacity to become an ally of tyranny and turn into a totalitarian institution itself.

### **Bringing Together Christian Mission and Freedom of Religion**

Thus we reach the summary that the institutional church, bound by policy and not by the essence and spirit of the gospel is more conducive to state ideology and policy, is not a free community and a corrective to violence and tyranny. In this role, such a church, regardless of whether it is Orthodox, Catholic or Protestant, easily becomes the controller of the “canonical territory” in order to maintain its influence and nature of a quasi-religious political institution. On the other hand, regardless of its denomination, a church which accepts biblical teachings on ecclesial matters despite its denominational baggage can be transformed into a community that encourages personal freedom through personal faith in God. Such a church can also play the role of a public corrective exactly because of this faith and its inherent freedom: “The Christian notion of religious liberty by no means includes any element of indifferentism, relativism or syncretism. Christians consider God’s revelation as the absolute and unique truth, but demand religious liberty for all, including erring men, in spite of that absoluteness.”<sup>41</sup>

Freedom of conscience and religion is embedded in Christ’s great missionary commissioning of the apostles and disciples to preach to all nations. Put differently, the preaching

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<sup>40</sup> Giovanni Miegge, *Religious Liberty* (New York: Association Press, 1957), p. 27.

<sup>41</sup> Angel Francisco Carillo de Albornoz, *The Basis for Religious Liberty* (New York: Association Press, 1963.), p. 147.

of the “good news” with “all authority” does not contain coercion, but respect toward the choice of the other, without fear about the preacher’s reputation and success.

Then Jesus came to them and talked to them, saying: All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore, teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things I have commanded you: and lo, I am with you through all the days to the end of the century. [Amen] (Matthew 28:18-20).

Thus the missionary effort is meant to challenge respectfully but firmly the very existence of the category “canonical territory” as a bulwark of some “default” territorial spirituality.<sup>42</sup> With this view in mind, “proselytism” is not a negative term. The sharing of ideas and beliefs becomes an opportunity to expand one’s worldview or a way to battle mental strongholds imposed on the people by fear and authoritarianism. And here precisely is the cross-point between missionary work, the preaching of the Bible as God’s word, on the one hand, and the guarantees to respect freedom of conscience, religion and expression, on the other, enshrined in secular and humanistic documents and laws.

Each missionary-minded church then has two main characteristics: respecting the freedom of the recipient, but also protecting its right to preach the faith. This position is contrary to that of the “religious institution” which bulwarks its canonical territory: not respecting the rights of its followers to receive information about other treatments of Christianity as it considers them immature to form their own opinion; and hence to not lose them as church adherents it opposes free speech, freedom of conscience and the legal system which protects individual rights.

In this sense, “the good news” should remain “good” and not be imposed by force or government coercion.<sup>43</sup> In Christ we see a personal identity which does not hesitate in the fulfillment of divine purposes. Christ was convincing not by imposing his will on others, but rather by imposing his will upon himself: to obey the specific mission and will of God. Such obedience is possible because Christian hope envisions the full realization of God’s kingdom in the unfolding of human history, in which Christ will not be the Injured Servant, but rather the ruler who will exercise his visible reign over human civilization.

Due to an absence of such hope for the future, any religious and ideological doctrine, which does not put its trust in the authentic Christ, sooner or later will resort to the power of government coercion, or totalitarianism, in order to realize its kingdom in the minds of people in the structures of society. Christian faith has a duty to stay away from any attempt to use public authorities to establish the principles of God’s kingdom by compulsion. At the same time we should not live under the illusion that the struggle for salvation and absolute truth, hence the battle for freedom, will cease and perfect peace will somehow be established, before the final consumption of the modern world as we know it.

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<sup>42</sup> Cf. Yoder, 1984, p. 54.

<sup>43</sup> Yoder, 1984, p. 55.