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MORAL ISSUES IN THE RECENT HISTORY OF THE BULGARIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

By Ivelina Nikolova

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Abstract: Over the past centuries Bulgarian people experienced severe religious and ethnic threats due to which they have developed defense mechanisms and a strong sense of sympathy for persecuted ethnic and social groups. In recent history, this reflex was manifested most clearly in the behavior of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church in defense of the Bulgarian Jews. At the same time two other events, however, reveal its controversial image that caused it a severe damage. In recent years, many Bulgarians are seeking the moral dimensions of these phenomena that influence the spirituality and morality of the younger generations.

Keywords: Church, genocide, communism, schism, education, morality, spirituality.

The history of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC) is marked by many struggles, of which Christians have maintained God’s messages for the past, present, and future of the Church. Especially vivid are the messages made in connection with two important events of her past that have left a lasting impression in the consciousness of the Bulgarians.

1. BOC’s Cause in Saving the Bulgarian Jews

During the period of the Ottoman rule BOC was part of the Diocese of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. After a hard struggle for the creation of an independent Bulgarian Church in 1870 the Bulgarian Exarchate was established. The Ottoman sultan recognized its status, but for almost 70 years, it had been separated from the Ecumenical Patriarchate as schismatic. The schism began on 16 September 1872 and continued until 22 February 1945, when the Bulgarian Exarchate was recognized as autocephalous. During this period, the newly established Bulgarian Exarchate was consistently headed by three prominent hierarchs: Antim (1816-1888), Joseph (1840-1915) and Stefan (1878-1957).
On 10 May 1953 the Bulgarian Orthodox Church was officially proclaimed a Patriarchate and Kiril the Metropolitan of Plovdiv was elected as the Patriarch. This fact did not prevent the then Bulgarian hierarchs (bishops) to support the spiritual life of the country, even in the dramatic political events during the Second World War (1940-1944). BOC then gave one of the most memorable examples in the history of the Orthodox world - the rescue of the Bulgarian Jews from the Nazi German genocide.

The genocide against the Jews in Europe as well as the anti-Semitic propaganda imposed by Nazi Germany threatened Bulgaria, which was experiencing in its own way what was happening on the world stage. The anti-Semitic propaganda was real and threatened the moral principles of the Bulgarian society: it was put under pressure to display hatred, intolerance and aggression against the target of the Nazi policy. This target was the Bulgarian Jews whose right to life was taken without any objective reasons under the impact of the Nazi regime. Even though the Orthodox churches in the Balkans did not openly express their position on this issue we can completely reject their disengagement with the problem associated largely with the state policy of the country to which they belong. Therefore, they are very careful in the position they occupy. On the other hand, the opposition to Nazi Germany was not only a challenge but also a dangerous risk that most countries wish to avoid.

It is a known truth that “All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.” Therefore, the silence of Christians at such a moment is sufficient cause for evil to prosper. On this bloody page of human history a small Orthodox country like Bulgaria raised its voice, not by the powerful opposition to the state, but because of its Christian responsibility and the moral duty of the Bulgarian hierarchs. In this dramatic moment supporting the cause of saving the Bulgarian Jews stood the Holy Synod, led by the most influential figure in BOC – the then Sofia Metropolitan Stefan. The logic around the events related to the rescue of the

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2 During this period their number was around 8,500 people.
Bulgarian Jews can be defined in one word - strong opposition to the inhuman abomination of Nazi Germany. This cause remains in the history of the Church not only as a successful action to save innocent people, but also as an act motivated by high humanitarian motives. The participation of BOC in this process was guided by Christian ideals, free from political or other selfish purposes and cannot be compared with demonstrations of false humanism. The Bulgarian bishops decided to intervene in the political affairs, realizing the many risks; “with selflessness and sacrifice risking everything, even their lives for the holy cause of virtue and love, and by doing this they headed the social processes.” The unique work of the Church at that time was motivated by a firm desire for unprecedented prevention of the perversion that Germany was preparing. This act somehow gave proper place of the Church in the political life in Bulgaria.

Almost incommensurable is the overwhelming act that the Church carried out for the rescue of the Bulgarian Jews in relation to its status and size during this period. “Administratively, it is managed by the Holy Synod, which in the 40s included 10 bishops managing the 10 administrative districts (parishes) of the Orthodox Church. Until 1953 the head of the Synod was the Exarch, and after this year – the Patriarch. By mid-40s the Bulgarian church employed approximately 2500 parish priests who served in about 3700 churches”.

Obviously, the spiritual power of the BOC at that time could not be measured by the number of clergy or compared with that of the neighboring Orthodox countries. At the same time, however, they were not affected by its status as a schismatic Church.

Today Bulgaria enjoys the recognition of the Jews and the positive evaluations of many other nations because of the rescue of the Jews, and understands the actions of the Church as an expression of solidarity with the honest people of the world against the destructive forces. The

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5 Гласове в защита на гражданското общество: Протоколи на Светия Синод на Българската православна църква по еврейския въпрос (1940–1944). Състав. Албена Танева, Ваня Гезенко. [Votes in defense of the civil society: Minutes of the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church on the Jewish question (1940 - 1944)] (Sofia: 2002), p. 16. In connection with the rescue of the Bulgarian Jews two spiritual leaders played a crucial role – Sofia Metropolitan Stefan and Plovdiv Metropolitan Kiril.

unprecedented act of BOC engraved itself in the history of Bulgaria as well as in the history of the Orthodox world, and especially in memory of the Jews who recognize its dignity.⁷

BOC is the only Church of the Orthodox world which openly and boldly held official policy in defense of the Jews, and its high ranking on the world historical stage is well deserved - it is the first religious institution nominated for the Nobel Prize in 2013 for the mission related to the rescue of the Bulgarian Jews.

Possible ethical reflections on the topic

For us Bulgarians, the action of the Church in the rescue of the Bulgarian Jews reveals another important feature: The history of the Orthodox Church in Bulgaria reveals that it is tolerant of other ethnic and religious denominations.⁸ The religious intolerance and hatred against those who are different from us are foreign to the Christian consciousness; this is confirmed by the actions of the BOC raising the right to life and faith of every person over their religion, values and ideals.⁹

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⁷ Archim. Pavel Stefanov wrote the following: “At present, minorities enjoy all their rights in Bulgaria in an atmosphere of religious toleration and open-mindedness which characterises the so-called Bulgarian ethnic model. This fact is acknowledged by numerous Jewish delegations which visited the country in the last few years” P. Stefanov, op.cit., p. 9.

⁸ In order to oppose such an opinion many would remember the so-called “Revival Process” in the 1980s, when “with secret decisions of the leadership of the Bulgarian Communist Party for four years over 400,000 Turks have been displaced outside the country's borders” Валери Стоянов. Турско население в България между полюсите на етническата политика. [Turkish population in Bulgaria Between the Poles of Ethnic Politics] (Sofia: 1998); Some Western writers also understand the actions in the communist period as an expression of strong discrimination against the Muslim minority. Paul Mojzes, “Religious Human Rights in Post-communist Balkan Countries,” in Johan D. van der Vyver and John Witte (eds), Religious Human Rights in Global Perspective: Legal Perspectives (The Hague, Nijhoff, 1996), p. 281. On this subject, see also Михаил Груев, Алексей Кальонски. Мюсюлманските общности и комунистическия режим: политики, реакции и последици. [Muslim Communities and the Communist Regime: Policies, Reactions and Consequences]. (Sofia: 2008); Тодор Балкански. Възродителни движения и възродителни процеси. [Revival Movements and the Revival Processes] (Veliko Tarnovo: 2008): Стоян Михайлов. Възрожденският процес в България. [Revival Process in Bulgaria], Sofia., M-8-M, (1992), p. 84. In 2011, at a meeting with representatives of the Orthodox Churches on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the enthronement of the Bulgarian Patriarch Maxim, President Georgi Parvanov specifically noted that the “historic contribution of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church is a major factor in the spiritual prosperity of our medieval country and for its saving role as a national unifier in the years of slavery. He added that the Orthodox Church has managed to preserve its credibility even during the revival process”. [President Georgi Parvanov Met Representatives of the Local Orthodox Churches], http://bg-patriarshia.bg/news.php?id=47854.

⁹ Today such a perception should be a part and of the policy in Bulgaria. Describing this situation in today's Bulgaria V. Kostov reads as follows: „Freedom of religion and conscience is a complex category
The actions with the rescue of the Bulgarian Jews wrote the bright page in the history of Orthodoxy in the Balkans. Much valuable was the reflection in the search for meaningful reference points in the work of the Church, based on specific Christian ethical performances. They were explored not only as an example of religious tolerance, but as a struggle for independence, freedom and justice in the protection of human rights of different ethnicities and religions, as an act of Christian consciousness, and last but not least - a lesson of godliness.

Outside the country importance was attributed to another important fact – in the dramatic events the Church protected not only people of different ethnicity, but also people professing Judaism. This was also a precedent in the Christian history, which, however, instead of being silent, gave the moral force of the BOC to announce to the world that it does not support the anti-Semitic policy, because it understands, that the hatred towards humans is the worst crime against God and therefore Nazi anti-Semitism is anti-Christian. BOC distanced itself from Christian anti-Semites who did not attach importance to the fact that Jesus Christ was also a Jew. For these reasons, the Church took the opposite position—defending the Bulgarian Jews, it protected the truth about the human being to that of his/her religious beliefs, which was always understood as the truth about being in God’s image. The act of the Church for the rescue of the Bulgarian Jews is assessed positively by at least two more positions: the first is deeply religious, because it is based on the relationship between the two religions—Judaism and Christianity. The second we might call “humane” and highly moral, but not because it rises the person's personality above his or her ethnic or religious beliefs, but because it protects human dignity irrespective of her or his religious or ethnic affiliation. This position cut across secular humanism and religion, because it is based on the universal human and religious values applied by our ancestors—Bulgarians, Jews, and all others who defend the human right to life. And while the events around the Holocaust are basically anti-Semitic and are linked directly with the Jewish nation (and not only), such logic diametrically change the direction of reflection and centers it in the direction of the dignity of the Jews, and in the direction of the dignity of the Church itself in that fateful

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”. 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. See Viktor Kostov, “Christian Mission in Post-communism: Musicological Implications and the Bulgarian Context.” OPREE, XXIX, 2 (May 2009), p. 28.
moment. Christian humanism always defends the dignity of others, without expecting compensation, but at the same time cannot hide the moral force of its position. Thus the question ‘who are the Jews’ turns into the question whether we did the right thing, we the Christians. And the work of the Church clearly reveals its advantages in this process. For these reasons, the events concerning the rescue of the Bulgarian Jews were woven into an ethical context, actually present in the moral consciousness of the Bulgarian Christians, but rooted in the depths of Christian ethics. Although over the years the Church has been an active defender of the Bulgarian Jews, without answer remains the question why it and the Bulgarian Orthodox theology keep silent about the genocide globally and did not express an adequate theoretical assessment of world events concerning the Holocaust. We could look for one of the reasons in the various relations of the neighboring Orthodox Churches to this topic according to which the Church constructs carefully its own silent position. More frightening is the interpretation of this silence in the context of another explanation related to the rescue of the Bulgarian Jews—as an expression not so much of the religious tolerance by the Church as having a high expression of civic and national consciousness. If, however, we interpret the actions of the Church primarily as a defense of the Bulgarian nation, we risk incorrectly interpreting its overall presence in the historical scene in Bulgaria and in other dramatic events.10

The Bulgarian Church has never been a nationalist Church in the negative sense of that term and never defended the interests of the nation above those of faith. Such statements cannot undermine the dignity and authority of the Orthodox Church, but they are not based on historical truths.

Nationalism itself divides rather than unites, especially in the cases of the intervention of a nation in defense of another, behind which selfish motives and inhumane ideals are often hidden. World history is full of such examples, but the most bitter experience the Bulgarians encounter in their own history, especially vividly revealed in the three attempts of our neighbors: first – the political and economic rule by the Ottoman Empire, second – the Greek oppression

10 Here we can mention for example the massacre of 52 generations of Boyar by Boris Knyaz opposing the conversion of the Bulgarians; persecution against the Bogomils; the forced conversion of the Bulgarian Muslims in the Rhodope Mountains, as well as the persecution of the Christian confessions during the totalitarian regime.
imposed on the Bulgarians by the Patriarchate of Constantinople,\textsuperscript{11} and third—the attempt of Bulgaria to become the “most loyal satellite” of Soviet Union which began with the invasion of the “Red Army” in 1944\textsuperscript{12}. Therefore, the attempts to interpret the interference of the Church in the rescue of the Bulgarian Jews through the prism of the nationalism are ridiculous. The cause of the Church is not so much the protection of the Bulgarian nation as the protection of faith and the freedom of everyone to profess their faith. BOC is a spiritual leader and as a religious institution it is called upon to maintain an ethnic and religious tolerance. Even in this case, the interpretation of this action as a manifestation primarily of a religious tolerance is poor, because the Church is not only tolerant of the right to life of people of different faith and its free confession by them, but defends their honor and dignity in dangerous situations. Therefore, the burden of this act with national motives not only that it does not rest on the truth, but it would, in its own way, support the idea of the anti-Semitic theory of the superiority of the Aryan race, which in itself is nationalist. Such interpretations of the act of the Church in the rescue of the Bulgarian Jews undermine its honor and dignity even as its divine and human organization. On the contrary, the unprecedented example of BOC gives us a reason for personal pride, but also gives us the first reason for deep reflection that will not end soon because it remains a matter of wide interest. This example leads us to return to our lost values, especially today when we are picking the bitter fruits of the repression of the communist regime against innocent Christians. The personal Golgotha of the many innocent Christians killed by the communist authorities is a reason to remember a wisdom that says that we have to know our personal history in order not to experience it again. In practice, however, none of the then brave Bulgarian hierarchs, who led a successful policy in the rescue of the Bulgarian Jews, has ever admitted that not long afterwards, a similar fate befell the Bulgarian Christians. This period is yet to reveal the Church as the most

\textsuperscript{11} After the 18th century, when there was an attempt by the Greek clergy to conquer Bulgaria. Later the transformations that occurred in the Bulgarian schools of the early 19th century, according to the evaluation of many, were intended also to Hellenize Bulgarians. Иванка Янкова. Огнища на духовна пробуда. Изгревът на светлината по българските земи. н.р. н.д., [Outbreaks of Spiritual Awakening. Rise of the Light in the Bulgarian Lands]. н.р. н.д., pp. 11, 12.

\textsuperscript{12} The reasons as well as the consequences of saving Bulgaria by the Russian soldiers can be described as a desire for the conversion of Bulgaria into a “formal Soviet republic under the direct administration of Communist Russia”. Пламен Цветков. Най-верният сателит. В: Съпротивата срещу комунистическия режим в България 1944-1989 г. Сборник материали от национална научна конференция НБУ 23-24 март 2011 г., [The Most Loyal Satellite.: The Resistance Against the Communist Regime in Bulgaria 1944-1989, A collection of materials of the National Conference, NBU 23-24 March 2011], p. 58, 59. This reasoning is supported by Western theologians; see more in Paul Mojzes, “Religious Human Rights in Post-communist Balkan Countries,” p. 280.
impotent institution that not only failed to protect Christians, but for long time did not have the strength to break free from the deadly grip of a deeply false and fanatical ideology. As a result, its voice instead of sounding like a powerful shield against the deicide will sink in silence under the inevitable pressure of the temptation for betraying of its own faith.

2. BOC in Communist Bulgaria. Memory and Realities

The communist period, which was so difficult for BOC, can be divided (conditionally) in three major sub-periods: the first period - from 1944 to 1953, during which the first exile of Christians took place. The second period (1953-1960) is called “liberal” due to the more balanced impact on the Church, compared with the third—in the early 1970s, when the actual repressive policy against BOC began. One of the main tasks of the communist regime in the early 1970s is characterized by aggressive use of administrative measures to limit the power and status of the Orthodox Church as well as to push religion out of public life. The most important task of government was to deal with the intellectuals and the Church, which had hundreds of educated clergy and staff.  

This new test in the life of the Orthodox Church brought changes associated with openly repressive policies that resulted in many innocent victims. Dozens of parish priests were murdered by the communists and hundreds were sent to labor camps or suffered the outrage and humiliation by the then People's Court. As a means of taking the law in its own hands with opponents of the communist regime, this court sentenced “a total of 152 Orthodox clerics, including 13 to death, and another 13—to life imprisonment.”  

The communist authorities closely monitored the internal life of the Orthodox Church and all of its external manifestation. The State Security during this period had a special department dealing with religious denominations and when needed had the power to take repressive measures against them. Subsequently, the State Security established “their agency in the church hierarchy, as well as assign its agents tasks related to the overall propaganda of the Communist regime.”  

The Church understood that it cannot cope with the authorities, and therefore changed its strategy. Not abandoning the truth and its traditions, it found forms to survive and keep believers...

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14 Момчил Методиев. Текстове за комунизма в България [Texts about Communism in Bulgaria], pp. 7-8.
and, as far as possible, to continue its educational activities which were gradually limited while social activities were taken away. Its sermons long remained devoid of social issues and problems related to the civic life of the people. The charitable activities and all civic events that were to help people in this period had ceased. Significant impact over the years injured religious education and church publishing. In the early 1950s the state imposed strict control over the curriculum of both personnel schools of BOC – the Ecclesiastical Seminary and the Theological Academy—many of whose teachers and professors were fired. The publication of religious literature was limited to 1600 pages per year and was subject to strict censorship. In 1956, by order of the Committee for Church Affairs, all church libraries were “cleansed” of “reactionary books”. All these data from the statistics during this period reveal the evil face behind the mask of communism that has always pursued the activities of Christ's church and rebelled against it. It has always wished to destroy the spiritual Church, or to deprive it of inner life. The basis of the overall activity of the Communist Party in Bulgaria strived to destroy the spiritual church, because its position and internal organization contradicts the communist ideology. For this reason, the Church and the Communist Party could not exist together and work on one “spiritual field”. The ideas of communism basically contain something degenerate, ripped from the heart of Christianity—the idea of community and sharing, which they deliberately perverted with the power of terror. Essentially, the communist policy was conducted as an overt struggle for the human soul, which is completely different from the struggle of the Church for human salvation in eternity. Following the example of Jesus Christ, the Church has always been ready to “give to Caesar what is Caesar's” (Luke 20:25); the totalitarian repression, however, robbed by force what is God’s. The violence over the Orthodox leaders during this dark period is very reminiscent of the threats to the apostles Peter and John in Jerusalem: “they should not speak at all neither teach in the name of Jesus” (Acts. 4:18). At a later period, however, different are only the people and the methods by which this is achieved. At the same time we ask ourselves what do the words of Apostle Paul mean: “For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God” (Rom. 13:1).

Should Bulgarian Christian leaders bow down dutifully to the destructive repression because it has been permitted by God, or should one resist? Is bowing before the force of evil and its power not a treason against God: “To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will; therefore if you worship before me, it
shall all be yours” (Luke 4: 6, 7)? The wisdom in the words of Apostle Paul is revealed in the priorities and in the obedience to them. First we should obey God and then the power of this world. This is the answer of the apostles Peter and John: “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge” (Acts. 4:19). This was the answer of the Savior to the tempter, “It is written, you shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall thou serve” (Luke 4: 8). Unequivocal was the answer of all innocent Christian leaders who died under the blows of the communist rule—first obedience to God, then to the people. The goal of all communist actions was marginalizing the influence of the Christian religion, even without formally prohibiting, for example, the existence of different religious denominations. The forced secularization of Bulgarian society limited the impact of the Christian religion, formulated on the basis of the principle of separation of the church from the state. “This separation is by its nature not a single act but a long process that began immediately after 9 September 1944 and ended with the adoption of the Law on Religious Denominations (24 February 1949). This law is directed against all religious institutions in Bulgaria, but it most strongly affects BOC”\textsuperscript{16} and its educational activities.

What are the consequences of the totalitarian regime of the Church today? The broader answer of this question is within the context of the overall presence of the communist regime in the Balkans in general, the consequences of which are almost identical to the consequences in Bulgaria.\textsuperscript{17} The consequences for many Bulgarians are many and of a different nature; they cover both internal and external life of the Church and it is not possible to be listed in the next few pages. “From a statistical perspective, the most visible consequence of the communist period is the strong reduction in the number of parish clergy - the total number of regular priests decreased from 2500 in the mid-1940s to less than 1000 in 1985. There is also a significant, though not as dramatic, drop in the number of monks.”\textsuperscript{18} P. Mojzes wrote that,

The Communist experience has left ambiguous results. On the one hand, there is the universal experience of all religious communities of having been persecuted, restricted,
traumatized, and thwarted in their normal progression, and none of them want to go back to that period… On the other hand, there are the many people, in particular among those officials who have remained in place after the Communist period, who are suspicious of religion and have no appreciation for it except as perhaps in their desire for a cynical abuse of religious sentiments of the masses.19

The lack of stable clergy is associated with the lack of enlightenment of the Bulgarians as well. Today the majority of Bulgarians “has identified themselves as Orthodox Christians” (nearly 80% of the population according to the last census in 2011), yet the majority of them do not have the foggiest knowledge of the central Christian dogma, even less about the specifics of Orthodoxy.

At the same time, however, the existence of the internal drive of the Christian life cannot be denied. Many Bulgarians today want to be well informed and seek ways to be Christianized. These are active Christians who do not even stop to criticize sometimes certain decisions of the senior clergy. Public opinion today is the corrective of the actions of many clerics. The activation of the Bulgarians could lead to increased responsibility of the representatives of the religious institutions in Bulgaria, but at the same time is an indicator for their personal and social responsibility. Among the laity one day we could find the new people with their new ways to think and experience the situation in Bulgaria and to feel it with a new heart in order to try to change it. This may be the first step towards real and un-blinded public presence of the Christian religion in Bulgaria on the world stage.

3. The Schism in BOC—Lessons and Reflections

After the fall of the totalitarian regime in Bulgaria (1989), the Orthodox Church was involved by the society in the overall political balancing and evaluation of the past. No one, however, would have guessed that only a few years from the end of that event the Church will face a new trial. Many remember the not so long ago 1992 when BOC experienced another drama in its personal history—the so-called “Schism”. It was the result of the insufficiently clear desire for change in the Orthodox Church in line with the new socio-political conditions. In practice, however, it was an organized attempt to divide the Church—to fall silent completely. Much of the Bulgarian clergy and Christians had no clear strategies for change and instead of seeking spiritual orientations for the present and future of the Church, made an attempt to adapt

to the new political situation. In their desire to restore the role of Church as the spiritual leader, there was a hidden dislike towards the still remaining church government represented by the then Patriarch Maxim. Initiators of the attack were joined by those clergy, who have not achieved much in their ecclesiastical career and decided to attack the Holy Synod, who they suspected of collusion with the political authorities. Under the veil of the “reforms of the Church” these people shook the institution, divided the priesthood and the believers and are engaged diligently in the scrutiny of its financial and material matters. Initially they were successful, but soon the truth came out and the so-called “schism” collapsed, and the schismatics begged the Bulgarian Patriarch Maxim for forgiveness and restoration to their original positions. As a result, there was a deep division between the clerics, which deepened in a number of compromises. The state also intervened through the registration of the “alternative Synod of Pimen in occupations of dioceses and regaining in duties of metropolitans.”20 After long-lasting discontent, the Ecumenical Council (1998) announced the reconciliation between the two synods, and Patriarch Maxim absolved the intentions of the schismatics.

The overall experience of these events is diverse. Today, many continue to believe that the Bulgarian Orthodox Church does need a reform. Even if this might be true to a certain extent, the way the reforms were attempted raised resentment and serious doubts. This schism was an attempt for a revolution in the Church, which had dubious motives, but with a clear result--it stopped the process of renewal in the Church. We do not know how many of us realized that the schism actually increased deeply the danger of BOC to be placed in a difficult position in the Orthodox world, because the reconstruction of the Orthodox Church in Bulgaria did not take into consideration its place in terms of its Pan-Orthodox nature.

The schism has ended but the spiritual wounds of BOC have still not healed; there are still some mutual suspicions and unknown facts. Because of everything that happened in the past twenty years, the Church today is timid and unsure of its mission, left behind by other Orthodox Churches, which experienced in their own way the repression of communism.

On the other hand, the schism was necessary in order to find the forgotten truth that the Church is not an institution run solely by people, which like the Bulgarian political parties, people can easily dispense justice or become hostages of their own or of foreign interests, to be

20 Ibid.
manipulated and to manipulate. The church continues to be guided directly by God, and that means that we have to be ready to meet new challenges. The test associated with the schism in BOC is a test for the person who should be able to compromise with everything except for one thing - with her or his faith in God.

4. New Challenges for BOC Today

The challenges of the recent history of BOC remain in the minds of Bulgarians’ lasting memories that will not be deleted soon. Many who believe that Bulgarian society is yet to reveal the lessons of the past expressed such assessment. More important, however, remains the usefulness of the past processes for the present. What are the new challenges facing BOC today?

Today Bulgaria is seized by the political and economic crisis; religious and spiritual values are also in a period of transition and transformation. This time of “spiritual stagnation is painful for the Bulgarian church, for the clergy and the faithful.”

Many Bulgarians more and more often ask if today Bulgaria is still an Orthodox country? Contradictory opinions are expressed. According to Nonka Bogomilova, “in modern times to unite the national idea with Orthodoxy were not particularly active or successful.” In his study „Christian Mission in Post-communism: Musicological Implications and the Bulgarian Context” V. Kostov asked this question, but, ultimately, gave an unequivocal answer, “However, assertions that Bulgaria is an Orthodox country have their undeniable basis.”

Ina Merdjanova wrote about the religious self-identification of Bulgarian people the following: Bulgarian Orthodox: 6,552,751 (82.64%); Muslims: 966,978 (12.2%), of which 85,733 Shiites (7.7% of all Muslims); Undeclared: 283,309 (3.57%); Catholics: 43,811 (0.55%) (Plus 18,000 Eastern-rite Catholics); Protestants: 42,308 (0.53%); Unknown: 24,807 (0.31%); Others: 14,937 (0.19%), of which 1,363 (0.02%) Jews; Total: 7,928,901.

Regardless of the theoretical and numerical implications of this issue, the worst are the motives of some who try to deny the unquestionable authority of BOC today and deliberately

21 Д. Киров, К.Нушев. Социалната мисия на Българската православна църква. [Social Mission of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church], p. 10.
mock it, especially in relation with the social role of the Church today. The Bulgarian theological ethicist D. Kirov determined such attitudes as “a product of extreme dualistic attitudes and stereotypes of spiritualist stereotypes of thinking.”

The Bulgarian Church is also relatively stable, at least with regard to its status. It currently has 13 active eparchies, 13 bishops, regular members of the Holy Synod of BOC led during the most difficult years of the recent history of the Church by the late Patriarch Maxim. The death of Patriarch Maxim in November 2012 brought with it yet another challenge—the choice of a new Patriarch of BOC. Three months later, in February the patriarchal election church council was held, 42 years after the last election of a Bulgarian Patriarch.

The election of a patriarch was held with unprecedented transparency with three candidates, Metropolitan Galaktion of Stara Zagora, Metropolitan Gabriel of Lovech and Metropolitan Neophyte of Ruse. The first round, however, ended with no real winner. In the second round Metropolitan Gabriel of Lovech and Metropolitan Neophyte of Ruse participated. The latter won the election with 90 votes to 47 for Metropolitan Gabriel. Many describe the present patriarch Neophyte as a highly erudite clergyman and theologian, a very good administrator and a person willing to restrained compromise, with apparent diplomacy and tact. Patriarch Neophyte is the third Patriarch after the patriarchs Kiril and Maxim elected after the restoration of the patriarchal dignity of BOC.

Patriarch Neophyte, however, was inaugurated during an uneasy period in the history of the Church, which after difficult survival during the centuries of Ottoman rule and decades of atheism in the recent years witnessed the weakening of its own influence among Bulgarians “The spiritual crisis, devaluation of the universal Christian values and the moral decline” undermine its credibility to the Bulgarian citizens. More frightening, however, is the conscious intervention in the process of people with vague ideas about the past of BOC, but with clear motives—to lower the prestige of the Church. Similar emotions artificially plant difference in opinions among Bulgarians today, especially concerning the relations between Church and State.

25 Д. Киров, К. Нушев. Социалната мисия на Българската православна църква. [Social mission of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church], p. 174.
26 Sofia eparchy; Varna and Veliki Preslav eparchy; Veliko Tarnovo eparchy; Vidin eparchy; Vratsa eparchy; Silistra eparchy; Lovetch eparchy; Nevrokopska eparchy; Pleven eparchy; Plovdiv eparchy; Ruse eparchy; Sliven eparchy; Stara Zagora eparchy; Bulgarian Eastern Orthodox Diocese of the USA, Canada and Australia; Bulgarian Orthodox Diocese of Western and Central Europe.
27 Д. Киров, К. Нушев. Социалната мисия на Българската православна църква. [Social mission of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church], p. 11.
during the totalitarian regime. At the same time we must admit that it is difficult to understand in details the past of BOC in the communist period and is not easily to judge its behavior.

Outside the country this topic is also widely discussed in the context of the presence of the communist regime in the Balkans, as well as the damage in the so-called “Post-communist period”. In recent years several studies were devoted to it, even in the West. In this case we could call research of Paul Mojzes Religious Liberty in Eastern Europe and the USSR: Before and After the Great Transformation,28 where the author wrote about the Post-Communist period, which “it still continues at this time, since it is not at all clear what ‘Post-Communism’ actually means.”29 Almost twenty years after such evaluation Bulgaria continues to live in a severe post-communist period from which we have not yet found the right exit.

Undoubtedly, the line of dispute in BOC negatively affected the Bulgarian Christians. However, this does not stop many to continue to seek it and appreciate it as a spiritual leader of the people. According to Bulgarian theological ethicist, D. Kirov, today the Church should try to renew the dialogue with the neighboring Orthodox Churches, and then “to support the dialogue, the cooperation and tolerance between the various Christian confessions and religious communities”.30

In its “Strategy for spiritual enlightenment, the catechism and culture of BOC” (2012) the Church marks as one of its most important priorities in the following areas: apostolicity, catechism, systematic theological spiritual education, training of the theological staff of BOC, publishing direction, educational direction, charitable and compassionate direction,31 and others.32 As regards to the latter, D. Kirov believes that “among the current tasks of BOC is the serious renewal of the missionary and spiritual ministry among the people.”33 At present, the church has two secondary religious schools - Orthodox seminaries in Sofia and in Plovdiv. The

30 This recommendation is perceived in the overall context of the activities of Varna and Veliko Tarnovo Diocese, but in general it could be extended to the activities of the Church as a whole. Д. Киров, К. Нушев. Социалната мисия на Българската православна църква. [Social mission of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church], p. 133.
31 In their essay, the authors D. Kirov and K. Nushev specify particular forms of social activity of the Church in its various dioceses. Ibid, 125-144.
33 Д. Киров, К. Нушев. Социалната мисия на Българската православна църква. [Social mission of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church], p. 108.
Main university of BOC is the newly opened Theological Academy "St. St. Cyril and Methodius" in Plovdiv. The Theological Faculty of Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” in Sofia has been working for more than 90 years. It is followed by the Orthodox Theological Faculty of the University of Veliko Tarnovo “St. St. Cyril and Methodius”, Department of Theology at the University of Shumen "Ep. Constantine of Preslav,” and the Theology Department at Plovdiv University “Paisii Hilendarski”. One of the new challenges of the Church is not only associated with the successful training of future priests and theologians, but with their successful implementation in the respective career. In this regard, the efforts of the Church in the last 15 years have focused on the introduction of a compulsory subject Religion in the comprehensive schools. By this time they are not crowned with much success. Throughout the country, based on unofficial information, in the last two years Religion is taught in approximately 250 educational institutions (kindergartens and schools) and the training course has been taken by approximately 10 000 children. Not only the representatives of the Church, but also the ordinary Christians admit that one of the biggest challenges is related to the definition of the status of the subject Religion and its natural introduction in the comprehensive school. This problem has been settled in various ways in the other Balkan Orthodox countries. „The Churches in post-communist countries need the support of the state and legislature and are dependent on the state as regards two other important issues: the restoration of ecclesiastic property rights and the introduction of religious teaching in school. The teaching of religion in school has been introduced in some countries (Poland, Romania, Croatia), although it has met with mixed reactions and reservation on the part of public opinion. In other countries (the Ukraine, Belarus, Slovenia), in harmony with the prevalent attitudes, a general discipline “religious studies” or “religion” has been introduced as an optional discipline; the situation in Bulgaria is similar”.34

The efforts so far are not minor, but their realization to the maximum extent remains a constant task.

Instead of a Conclusion

For eleven centuries BOC has been a very strong factor in the history of the Bulgarian people. In all sectors of life it attended creatively as a desired and loved institution whose actions

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were perceived strongly by adults and youths. During the period 1944–1989, it was strongly suppressed, but survived because God reinforced it against the intentions of the communist authorities. People understand that God's universal plan cannot be overruled by evil people, so their hope for spiritual change broke out again in 1990, when the churches in the country were filled with believers who for fifty years have painfully concealed their faith. However, today the Bulgarians exhausted by the socialism are strongly influenced by the vices of the western cultural world where results are not as destructive as they are in Bulgaria. Because the Bulgarian nation had its own specific identity—faith and culture that have been developing for centuries, in recent years, it has no immunity to the destructive foreign influences, resisting them only slightly or even being victimized by them. In this context, it is not clear how long the Bulgarians will be true to their own traditional heritage to be able to withstand the flow of powerful globalization. However, I believe that BOC will continue to retain its presence among the people as a spiritual teacher.

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