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The Religious Situation in Contemporary Bulgaria, and in Serbia and Montenegro: Differences and Similarities¹

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1. Latent Functions: Religion as an Emblem of the Community

When religion functions as an emblem of separate communities, such as the nation, the ethnic group, an empire, a civilization, the concept of "neighbour" is usually limited within the boundaries of these small or large communities; the so-called latent functions of religion come into action here (B. Wilson), which turn religion into a tool of community identity and self-affirmation.

Actually, every action of the group or individual, carried out in the name of the faith, but with means that contradict the pathos and ethos of the holy books, tends to deeply erode the spirit and public image of religion. In fact such an action, viewed from a perspective internal to religion, cannot be considered religiously motivated at all.

In such situations religion is usually reduced to "belonging," to a vivid emblem that signifies the community in its opposition to ethnic, linguistic, psychological otherness, at the expense of "believing," of the faith and its corresponding moral behavior (G. Davie). Thus the religious universality is subordinated to partial group values, instead of transcending and enhancing these values.

Processes and trends in Eastern Orthodoxy in the Balkans in our times are directly connected with the difficult and painful "opening" of this region to global changes, to the "West", and to "Europe." In this complex process, marked at times by dramatic shocks for values, by anomie, etc., Eastern Orthodoxy has become a spiritual and institutional haven and channel for valuation and protection of the local identity, of the local ethnos and state, and of the regional civilization and cultural zone. The power and specifics of these trends have varied in the separate Balkan countries: in some of them the Orthodox Church has acted in

¹ The paper is a part of the Project supported by the Open Society Institute - with the contribution of the International Policy Fellowships of OSI – Budapest /www.policy.hu/todorova/

collaboration with the political elite (Serbia), in others it has been critical of the pro-European values of that elite (Greece), in others still it has responded to and reflected the party and political division in society (Bulgaria).

The causes for reanimation of the “community emblem” role of Eastern Orthodoxy in the last two decades are the following:

The processes of globalization and social transformation which had to be carried out here in a comparatively brief period of time led to many unfavorable results for the mass of the local populations, such as impoverishment and unemployment; most important, these processes imposed changes in the values system with regard to relationships between individual and society, freedom and security, ideology and pragmatism, personal consumption and gain, etc. These changes, which in the Western mentality and culture have been promoted by Protestantism, in most Balkan countries had to be achieved in short periods of time and without the helpful mediation of a powerful value-defining ideology that would have made them seem familiar and organic for the regional cultures. Without such mediation the new democratic values were more or less perceived as something imported, as a Western phenomenon imposed from the outside, at times even by force. Due to the fact that the political elites of some of the Eastern Orthodox countries (with the exception of Serbia), gradually accepted a pro-Western and pro-European orientation, the Eastern Orthodox Churches remained the only institutional subject serving as a medium for the fears and discontents produced by social changes. The West-centered mythology found an opposition in East-centered mythology, incubated in Eastern Orthodoxy as an institution and doctrine.

This new and strong social role that the difficulties of global changes have assigned to the Orthodox Churches would eventually wither in the course of a democratic pro-European evolution of Balkan societies. Even the powerful Polish Catholic Church passed through a period of hesitation with regard to the European orientation of Poland, anticipating the narrowing of the social niche and weakening of the social status of the Church in a democratic society.

The democratization of state and Church relations in the contemporary Balkan countries can not be analyzed and understood without referring to the historical background of the processes and especially to the interaction between the religion and the historical myths, related to the national identities. In one of these countries, Serbia, the Eastern Orthodox Church has been a powerful generator of and channel for the intensification of the

national identity, in collaboration with the political elite. In another country, Bulgaria, the Eastern Orthodox Church has been occupied with politically produced internal ecclesiastic problems and divisions and has remained aside from these trends and roles.

2. Cultural-historical Background of the Contemporary Picture

The countries analyzed in this study experienced complicated post-communist transformations from the beginning of the last decade of the past century. After the end of this period the studied countries should have solved some very important and complicated problems in the religious sphere: democratization of the legal regulation and acceptance of the Western-European standards; creation of the social-political atmosphere of tolerance, liberties, pluralism in the religious sphere; adaptation to the changes and trends, imposed by the globalization .

2.1. Problems of “Nationalization” of the Myth of God’s Elect in Serbia and Bulgaria

The conversion to Christianity of the young states of Serbia and Bulgaria at the end of the ninth century (regardless of its high value as a civilizing factor) created the possibility for the emergence and many centuries of circulation of the two mutually connected myths or rather of the integral myth, of the nation elected by God and personified in the God-elected state leader. Moreover, the adoption of Christianity from the Byzantine Church in particular determined another interesting feature in the formation and active working of this myth in the histories of Serbia and Bulgaria.

Byzantium built its imperial ideology and political religion on the myth of divine election. The myth represents a synthesis, a complex product of the beliefs and cultural traditions of the peoples that made up the Empire: the solar cult of the Romans with the idea of the divine sun-emperor, the belief that a holy empire is destined to establish its power across the whole world, the haughty attitude of enlightened Greece towards the rest of the world, considered to be “barbaric”, the view that the empire is the materialization of God’s Kingdom on earth, which echoes the early Christian notion of the Divine King.

These views took shape and acquired official status in the time of Justinian, remaining traditional and unchanging until the fall of the empire. The newly converted Slavic states became part of the Byzantine *oikumenos*, or the “Byzantine Commonwealth” as D.

Obolensky called it; these states were treated by analogy with the children of the powerful *pater familias*.²

Together with military rivalry over territories, borderlines, and resources, sharp competition grew for appropriating this myth. This rivalry over the myth became part of the prolonged and painful struggle for state independence, for autonomous institutions, for national spirituality. The struggle acquired particularly dramatic proportions for the Bulgarian state at that time, it being the geographically closest, and militarily and culturally most powerful, rival of the Byzantine Empire.

The idea of Divine election of the head of state and of God's elect nation can be found in the official and apocryphal literature of both countries. The presence of this idea marks the growth of state and national self-awareness, of finding a place of one's own, finding one's identity in the framework of the universal Christian tradition. The idea of imperial status and the recurrent revival of this idea in the states of the Byzantine commonwealth was not only a sign of military and economic rivalry, but also of the striving of the separate states to acquire, by force or through diplomacy, the role of political and religious center within the community of states. This was also a striving to obtain state-political and spiritual status of a *causa sui*.

2.2. Specific National Features of the Myth of the National Mission. Serbia.

One of the causes for the difference in how the breakup of the totalitarian systems took place in Bulgaria as compared with Serbia lies in the specific differences between the two countries in the meaning and preservation of what is "theirs" in terms of territory, ethnic identity, resources, mythology. While for Bulgaria, "one's own" proved vigorous only when united with something "alien"--Europe and/or Russia, in Serbia (and in other Balkan countries) people turned to the historical mythological foundation of their "own" as something superior to the "alien", whether neighboring or distant.

I will point out two of the main causes for this distinction: 1) the national consciousness had preserved over the centuries the force of the myth of uniqueness and national superiority over the "others", and 2) this construction has been revived and imbued with aggressive energies for preserving the nation and purging it of the alien (in terms of language, religion, ethnos, territory), all of this being promoted by the political elite and through propaganda.

²D.Obolensky. *The Byzantine Inheritance of Eastern Europe*, London, 1982, p.17

Among the myths that have maintained the feeling of uniqueness and superiority over others, Serbian researchers point out the cult of Saint Sava and the Kosovo myth. The sacralization of the dynasty of Stefan Nemanja (1113-1199), including his son Sava, created in the popular consciousness the foundation of the idea of historical continuity and ethnic kinship. The life of St. Sava is connected with the consolidation and development of Orthodoxy, with the autocephalic status acquired by the Serbian Orthodox Church, with devoted service to the good of the people; all this was strongly mythologized by religious authors and by popular tradition.

St. Sava's deeds and martyrdom were taken to be a sign and a result of divine election and were likened to the figure of Christ. In connection with this mythologization, the idea of the indelible bond between the Serbian nation and Orthodoxy, between ethnos and religion, which was one of the ideological pretexts and criteria for ethnic "cleansing" during the war in former Yugoslavia.

As Orthodox Christianity was the religion shared by several Balkan peoples, this confession could become distinctive for the Serbian nation only when linked to the personality of St. Sava, whereby it acquired an ethnic aspect for this specific nation. Some authors call this saint the spiritual-ecclesiastic father of Serbia, while the contemporary Serbian author Ivan Kolaric calls the St. Sava myth 'pivotal' for the Serbian ethnos and ethos.

The ideas of St. Sava concerning the Christian Church as "God's State," which unites the ethnos and is a protector of the Serbian national principle also serves to sacralize and strengthen the myth of God's elect as a function and a consequence of the merging of the ethnic principle with Orthodoxy. The mythologized figure of St. Sava became a national Jesus Christ,³ and by nationalising Orthodoxy, this faith, common to many nations, became part of "one's own" for Serbs.

While such a synthesis was something usual in the Middle Ages, its revival in the last years of the twentieth century was a result of the purposeful efforts of politicians and ecclesiastics. Many contemporary Serbian researchers point out the efforts of religious-ecclesiastic figures for reviving and modernizing the myth of the uniqueness of Savian Orthodoxy and of the divine election of the Serbian ethnic community, loyal to the saint.

Radmila Radic discusses the attempts of opposing the European man to the Savian god-man, and the belief that the Serbian people is a nation of Christ with a world mission

³ I. Kolaric. *Harismarhija Nemanjica* (Charismarhia of the Nemanjic Dynasty). In: *Socioloski pregled* (Sociological Review) ,(Belgrade) 30 /4, 1996, pp. 527-535.

connected with the spirit and eternity⁴. Dragoljub Djordjevic points out that the revival of nationalism during the 1980s in Serbia was a factor for the growing importance of the Serbian Orthodox Church and for the active use of the national-religious synthesis as a feature of divine election, superiority, and intolerance for aliens.⁵

When the criterion of “Orthodoxy” is used to define the ethnic origin, not only the non-Orthodox, but even non-religious individuals become foreigners, are excluded from the Serbian ethnic. On the other hand, the revival and consolidation of the Serbian Orthodox Church and its congregation turns out to be a quasi-religious process, for religion in this case proves to be mostly a form of preservation of the ethnos, a recalling of its mission. This process is equally dangerous for the Church, for religion, and for the ethnic community. It makes these elements mutually dependent and interchangeable, impoverishing their separate cultural contents and properties.

2.3. National Particularities of the Mythology of Mission. The Bulgarian Case

Having reached its peak of effective utilization of the myth of God’s elect and of the unique mission during the Golden Age of King Simeon, Bulgaria gradually left the historical stage of Balkan missionary mythologies. Historians and philosophers of Bulgarian history have discussed the variety of causes for this abandonment: the strong influence of Byzantine culture, the division between people and state leaders with regard to internal and external goals, the dangerous cross-roads location of the country, 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 myth broke down into competing ideas about the specifics of Bulgarian identity:⁶
1) the idea of Slavo-centric identity involving the idea of union of Slavic countries with Russia; 2) the Eurocentric identity proclaiming the adherence to European values; 3) the

⁴ R.Radic. “Serbian Orthodox Church and the War in Bosnia and Herzegovina.” In: *Religion and the War in Bosnia*, ed. by P.Mojzes, 1998, (Atlanta: The American Academy of Religion.), p.166

⁵ D.Djordjevic. “Serbian Orthodox Church, the Disintegration of Second Yugoslavia, and the War in Bosnia and Herzegovina.” In *Religion and War in Bosnia*, ed. by P. Mojzes,, p.155.

⁶ N.Dimitrova. *Opiti za nazonalnoculturna samoidentificazija na bulgarina* (Attempts at a National-Cultural Self-Identification of the Bulgarian). In: A. Krasteva, N. Dimitrova, N. Bogomilova, I. Katzarski. *Universalno i nazonalno v bulgarskata cultura* (Universal and National in Bulgarian Culture), 1996, pp. 91-93 (Sofia: ICMSIR).

Bulgaro-centric one based on the idea of the unique Bulgarian ethnos, the unique religious-pagan synthesis, the unique features of the Bulgarian national character, etc.

The force, energy, and scale of the mythological idea of God's elect people and its unique mission also depend on the environment, on the "enemy" that the idea confronts. In the history of independent national Balkan countries (in the nineteenth and in the twentieth centuries), where periods of good neighborly relations and rivalry have followed one after the other, the mega myth of God's elect is broken up into parts. It breaks down to the myths of the "bad other" in the Balkans as opposed to "us, the good ones," the myth of Macedonia, which has different meanings for Bulgarians and Serbs; the myth of the true faith, of "authentic" Orthodoxy; the myth of the nation that created the Slavonic language, etc.

In our times this resource is entirely under the control and responsibility of the political elite and media. Proof of this is the variety of approaches and usage of each of the above-mentioned myths under the various political regimes in the different Balkan countries. During the totalitarian period most of these myths lost official support, but showed through sharply, and they have obviously not lost their vitality and unifying potential, unfortunately used in recent years at the service of hatred.

The gradual waning and reduction of the myth of the unique and important national mission that is evident in the modern history of Bulgaria is one of the essential differences in the life of this myth here as compared with Serbia. Of course we are not discussing the independent mystical aspect of the myth, but its role as a symbol and symptom of the level of national self-awareness and self-confidence. As M. Lalkov writes, commenting on the strong presence of this myth in the history of Balkan peoples: 'Only the peoples who are absolutely sure of themselves can do without absolute ancestries.'⁷

2.4. Withering of the National Mission Myth in Bulgaria. For Better or for Worse?

At first glance the processes of change that began in 1989 in Bulgaria differ completely from those in Serbia with regard to the historical mythology involved, especially with regard to the myth of national superiority and "God's elect". In the modern and recent history of Bulgaria this myth has gradually lost its hold on the national consciousness, for the question of the civilizational choice of Bulgaria has been set in terms of "accession" - whether it be to the West, to Russia, or to the Soviet Union.

Among the basic causes for this feature, I would point out the following:

⁷ M. Lalkov, "Some Myths in New Balkan History," In: *History and Myths*, 1999 (Sofia), p. 36.

First, there is a gap of five centuries separating the time when that myth was active, in the first centuries of the Bulgarian state, especially after conversion to Christianity in the ninth century, from the modern history of Bulgaria. While in this same period of “timelessness” for Bulgaria, in Serbia the Kosovo myth grew in cultural force; by this myth the fall under the Turkish yoke (after the Battle of Kosovo) was transfigured as a heroic feat of martyrdom in Serbian history. Combined with the myth of unique Slavonic Orthodoxy, it created a spiritual heritage, a continuity of Serbian history in the national consciousness.

Although it was a factor for cultural and national preservation in Bulgaria as well, Orthodoxy was not connected with the founding myth of nationality. Moreover, during the Turkish domination the religion tended to acquire an overtone of Greek domination, becoming associated with Greek interests promoted by the Patriarchate of Constantinople⁸.

This was one of the causes why the attempts in modern times to unite the national idea with Orthodoxy were not particularly active or successful. National mythology about the values and missionary projects of the nation were fueled mostly by the idea of joining “imported” large-scale mythologies such as European values (science, economic growth, pragmatism); or the Slavic idea, usually embodied by Russia and connected with values such as warm human relations, spirituality, etc.

In the first half of the twentieth century Europeanism was less popular than the Slavophile idea. At the same time, even the proponents of the Slavic idea (writers, historians) defended the trend for Bulgarian culture to join universal and the advanced culture, and resisted cultural isolationism. The idea of a unique Bulgarian messianism, upheld by a few thinkers, called for a neo-pagan renaissance, and was inspired by anti-Slavic and anti-European emotions; it usually involved authoritarian and totalitarian trends.⁹

The period of totalitarianism (from 1944 to 1989) put an end to these orientations, involving Bulgarian national destiny in a large-scale social project in which mythology and social pragmatics were tightly interwoven. Bulgaria was now a submissive member of the Soviet “commonwealth,” the Socialist bloc. The “Golden Age” of King Simeon, the epic rivalry with the Byzantines, the liberation struggles were left behind in history, or rather had

⁸ S.Stanimirov. *The History of the Bulgarian Church*, Sofia, 1925, pp.141-142.

⁹ N.Dimitrova. “Opiti za nazonalnoculturna samoidentificazija na bulgarina“ (Attempts at a National-Cultural Self-Identification of the Bulgarian). In: A. Krasteva, N. Dimitrova, N. Bogomilova, I. Katzarski. *Universalno i nazonalno v bulgarskata kultura* (Universal and National in Bulgarian Culture), (Sofia: ICMSIR, 1996) ,pp.70-80.

become a prehistory, for the triumph of Communism in Bulgaria was considered the crowning achievement of national development, as well as a completely new social start.

In Serbia the resilience of the Kosovo myth in its quality of “eternal ethics, unchanging with time”¹⁰ served both the Yugoslav unity and proletarian values. Of course, when comparing the mission myth in Bulgaria and Serbia, I am not referring to some advantage on one side or another in this comparison, but simply point out the differences. In Bulgaria the communist missionary mythology engulfed and effaced the already weak missionary strand in the national mythology.

Of course the real social role of the communist mission myth cannot be given a simple assessment. It is ambivalent and its negative sides have been the object of a great quantity of publications. One of its advantages over the national mission mythologies of the Balkans was that it served as a source of scientific-technical modernization of Balkan societies. Moreover, Arnold Toynbee considered that in the twentieth century the same processes of modernization had taken place both in the West and in the East, but were carried out in different political and ideological forms.

3. Some Present-day Problems of the Religious Situation in Serbia and Montenegro

There are three main religious traditions in contemporary Serbia and Montenegro: Orthodox Christianity, prevalent throughout the country, Islam, concentrated in the southern regions, and Roman Catholicism, concentrated in the northern regions. The united state is a multi-confessional society in which, besides the majority of Orthodox Christians, there are members of other Christian and non-Christian religious traditions and denominations: Muslims, Catholics, Greek-Catholics, various Protestant denominations, Jews, members of Eastern religious cults, and others. In the province of Vojvodina alone, there are more than 30 different religious denominations.¹¹ In the predominantly Muslim Kosovo region during the conflict (1990-1995) nearly 800 Serbian Orthodox religious sites and 300 mosques and other Islamic sacred buildings were destroyed or damaged, especially in 1998 and 1999.

¹⁰ Th. Emmert. “Kosovo: Development and Impact of a National Ethic,” in: *Nation and Ideology*, 1981) (New York), p.83.

¹¹ M. Vukomanovich. “The Role of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the Protection of Minorities and “Minor’ Religious Communities in the FR Yugoslavia,” in: *Facta Universitatis*, vol.2, N6, (1999), University of Nis, p.19. ; Z.Kuburich. “Diffusion and Position of the Protestantism in the Balkans,” in: *Ethnic-Religious Relationships in the Balkan*, YUNIR, Nis, 1997 /in Serbian/; Z.Nikolich. “Religiosity in Orthodox Areas,” in: *Ibid.*; M.Beshich, B.Djukanovich. “The Gods and the People. The Religiosity in Montenegro,” Podgorica, 2000, pp.210-213 (in Serbian); *Roma Religious Culture*, ed D. Djordjevich, YUNIR, Nis, 2003, and others.

In the early 1980s, with the start of the Kosovo conflict, a general crisis and transformation of Yugoslav society began, accompanied by a change in the religious situation in terms of quantity and quality. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, sociological surveys registered a growth of religiousness among all confessions and nationalities¹². The Center for Political Studies and Public Opinion registered a growth of religiousness in Serbia, not including Kosovo, of 7% (from 35% to 42%) in the period 1990-1993.¹³

Religiousness is still a predominantly rural phenomenon: the degree of religiousness in Belgrade was 37%, while it was 67% among the rural population.¹⁴ At the end of the period being studied (1993) a growth of religiousness in the cities was registered (38% of religious respondents and 31% of non-religious) and among the male population and youth.¹⁵

The changes in the religious profile of society after 1990 can be accounted for by the growing ethnic homogenization (society has been divided in the course of the civil and inter-ethnic wars of 1991-1995) as a result of which what was once a multi-ethnic Yugoslavia is now a set of communities, differing in religion and in ethnic belonging.

This process has naturally found expression in the rise of confessional identification: in 1990, 84% of respondents declared their confessional affiliation; in 1991 the percentage rose to 94.7; while in 1993 it was 96.7%, and in 1999 reached 93.5%¹⁶. This may explain the higher percentage of religious people among the local confessional and demographic minorities, i.e. the Serbs in Kosovo and Metohia, the Albanians in Macedonia, the Muslims in Serbia.

Surveys conducted in 1996, show that in the late 1980s and early 1990s, 98.9% of the Serbs in Kosovo indicated they were religious (Orthodox); 95% of the Muslim respondents in Serbia declared their religiousness and 93.7% of them in Montenegro; so did 97.8% of the Albanians in Macedonia¹⁷. Confessional affiliation usually implies commitment to the faith of one's ancestors, not necessarily personal religiousness. As for the correlation between ethnic affiliation and the degree of personal religiousness, the following has been registered:

¹² M. Blagojevich. "The Religious Situation in the UR Yugoslavia from the End of the 80-s to the beginning of the New Century," in: *Teme*, N3, 2003, University of Nis, p. 412 (in Serbian).

¹³ Ibid. p.414.

¹⁴ Ibid. p.415.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 416.

¹⁶ Vukomanovich. *op.cit.*, p.422.

¹⁷ Ibid.

the highest degree of religiousness is evident among the Hungarians – 68 %, and the Muslims – 56 %; the percentage among Serbs is 42% and among Montenegrins 25%.¹⁸

A sociological survey of religiousness of youths, initiated by the Open Society Foundation of Belgrade and conducted in several large regions of Serbia and Montenegro (Subotitsa, Novi Sad, Pristina, Podgoritsa) has shown that 93.7% of high school pupils indicate their confessional affiliation. Young Serbs, Montenegrins, Albanians indicate their confession in more than 90% of the cases, while 90% of those who have indicated being non-religious also accept their confessional affiliation.¹⁹

The general picture of religiousness in Serbia as revealed through self-estimation in 1999 was as follows: 59.3% indicated they were “religious”, 21.3% were “not definite” about the question, and 19% stated they were “not religious.” In Montenegro the highest degree of personal religiousness was registered among the Muslims, an average degree among Catholics, and the lowest degree among Orthodox.²⁰ As the bitter memories of the interethnic and inter-religious conflicts gradually recede into the past, investigators increasingly turn to the peaceful dimensions of everyday religiousness.²¹

4. Church and Politics

The interaction between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the government elite has usually served as the basis for organizing and directing the accumulated inter-ethnic and interreligious feelings of people. For centuries the state-political sphere has been the predominant factor in this interaction, and this is true not only for Serbia, but for the Orthodox model of state-Church relations in general.

For the Serbian Church itself, nationalism, as many authors have pointed out, proves to be a last resource for preserving its role as the dominant religious factor in society. The democratization of society would promote a “market” of religious confessions, and would hence have unfavorable consequences for the privileged position of the Church in this respect. The Church is therefore willing to support the state elite in the periods when the national project is politically dominant.

¹⁸ M. Blagojevich. *op.cit.*, p.416.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.424.

²⁰ M.Beshich, B.Djukanovich, *op.cit.*, pp.222-223.

²¹ D.Radisavljevich-Ciparizovich. “The Religion and the Everyday Life,” in: *Teme*, 1-2, 2005, pp. 41-55 (in Serbian).

According to a critical analysis made by the Helsinki Committee of Serbia, the social ideology of the Church and the state are involved with the new Serbian right-wing politics²² or with pro-monarchy parties, which have about 15% support in Serbia. Some radical Serbian parties have attempted to cooperate with the high-ranking clergy in order to attract voters (the Democratic Party of Serbia, Democratic Alternative, the Party of Serbian Unity, etc.)²³.

The Helsinki Committee has criticized the Serbian Orthodox Church for striving to maintain its ecclesiastic monopoly over Macedonia and Montenegro, and not recognizing the legitimacy of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church and the autonomy of the Macedonian Orthodox Church. On these issues the known Serbian sociologist of religion B. Djurovic gives a different, better argued view. The author points out that the Montenegrins are divided on the matter of their Church; the attitude of the Montenegrin political establishment on the issue is also undefined; given the sharp division of the Montenegrin population concerning their independence and a separate Montenegrin ethnic identity, if the elite vouching for state independence prevails, then the position of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church would be stronger.

According to B. Djurovic, there is now in Montenegro a strong pro-Serbian aggregation of three elites, political, intellectual and clerical²⁴. The state financially aids the Serbian and Catholic Churches and the Islamic community, but not the Montenegrin Orthodox Church. Ministers of faith of Montenegro have never acknowledged this Church. The coordinator for issues of faith, Prime Minister Vujanovic, has publicly stated that for him the Serbian Orthodox Church is the only canonic church in Montenegro²⁵.

Prof. Dr. D. Shijakovich, Secretary of the Secretariat on religious affairs of Serbia and Montenegro in the period 2001-2002, has also expressed the same opinion in conversation on June 22, 2004, in the University town of Nikshich, near the capital of Montenegro. He believes that the Montenegrin Orthodox Church amounts to a bunch of schismatics pursuing political goals. He cites the book "Traders in Souls", which contains a collection of documents, letters and articles reflecting the formation of the Montenegrin Church and the reaction in the Orthodox world and the political elites of Serbia and

²² Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia. Human rights and responsibility. Serbia 2003., Belgrade, 2004, p.63 (n Serbian).

²³ Ibid., p.63.

²⁴ B.Djurovic. "Canonic Disputes or Clerical-political Proselytism: Relations between Serbian, Macedonian and Montenegrin Orthodox Churches" in: *Evangelization, Conversion, Proselytism*, ed. by D.Todorovich, YUNIR, Nis, 2004, p.59.

²⁵ Ibid., p.59.

Montenegro.

The book contains letters by patriarchs who have expressed support of the Serbian Church in this conflict and rejected the Montenegrin Church as not canonically legitimate (letters from the Patriarchs of Moscow, Bulgaria, Georgia, Constantinople, Serbia, Alexandria, Jerusalem, etc.)²⁶ as well as letters by M. Dzhukanovich,²⁷ President of Montenegro, to the Serbian Patriarch Pavle, in which the President expresses support for the Serbian Church.

This division and the uncertainty about the eventual state autonomy of Montenegro, which if it were to come about, would have an impact on the religious situation in the country, came up in conversations I had with Montenegrins of various regions and professions. At a meeting I had on June 23 with the directors of the library in Tsetinje, the former capital of Montenegro, people expressed discontent and mistrust of the economic-political situation. Poverty, unemployment, growing drug abuse among the youths, these were the major problems that people indicated.

My interlocutors felt that religious differences were often being used to divert the attention of people from the urgent problems. The intellectual elite of the country has also fallen into apathy due to the low pay, unemployment, the manipulation. The people I talked with feel that, while in Serbia there have after all been some positive changes, here in Montenegro things remain as they were in the totalitarian period. Unlike Serbia, there is no religious education in schools, despite the lively debate on this matter between the high-rank administration, the higher clergy and academic circles.²⁸

Two days after I left Podgoritsa, the capital of Montenegro, there was to be a major religious event: seven golden crosses were to be placed upon the nearly finished, imposing construction of the church of the Ascension (June 27, 2004). The announcements throughout the city indicated that the service would be performed by the Montenegrin bishop Amfilohije of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

Nevertheless the Serbian Orthodox Church initiated and supported some inter-religious events and dialogue especially during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina: “the Serbian Patriarch publicly condemned a series of bombing attacks on the Bajrakli Mosque in

²⁶ B.Aleksich, T.Krstajich. *Traders in Souls* /documents/, Nikshich, 2003, pp.103-125.

²⁷ Ibid., pp.99, 130, 133-135, etc.

²⁸ Education and Instruction, N4, 1997, Podgorica, (In Serbian).

Belgrade; he also visited the chief rabbi Mr Cadik Danon and directed a very touching ecumenical epistle to the Jewish community after the publication of an anti-Semitic text".²⁹

According to Dr. M. Vukmanovich, there is no solid consensus of opinion within the Serbian Orthodox Church regarding its relations with the state and politicians. This has been confirmed by the one of the brilliant contemporary Serbian theologians, Prof. Dr. Radomir. Bigovich. According to this author, there are contradictions and vagueness in the social-political doctrine of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The Council of bishops, held in May 1990, suggested that the Church would support the democratization of society, would be for political and party pluralism and would remain neutral regarding parties; however these claims have not being strictly realized in practice.³⁰

Various representatives of the higher clergy have voiced support for a kind of theocracy, for a Christian democracy, for monarchy; suggestions have been made about the cooperation, coexistence of state and Church, but mostly in general terms, not involving a concrete program.³¹ According to Bigovich, the political ideal of unity between state, nation, and Church is utopian; though the nation once gave impetus to the Church, today it weighs the latter down, and the national factor is losing the battle with the civil and international factors.³²

Bigovich criticized the prevalent opinion in the Serbian Church that Orthodoxy is synonymous with the Serbian ethnos, for trying to build a unity based on "blood and body" would be tragic and perilous. "We cannot go back. The models and forms of life of the past are no longer applicable. The past should be respected, but not deified."³³

5. The religious situation in the present-day Bulgaria

According to data from the statistical census (NSI, 2001)³⁴, the confessional belonging of the Bulgarian citizens is as follows: Eastern Orthodox – 82.6%; Muslims – 12.2%; Catholics – 0.6%; Protestants – 0.5% ; Armeno-Gregorians – 0.1%; other – 0.1%; not indicated – 3.9%. A strong correspondence is observed between ethnic and religious belonging, especially among Bulgarians (Eastern Orthodoxy) and Turks (Islam).

²⁹ Vukomanovic, *op.cit.*, p.19.

³⁰ R.Bigovich."Religion and Society." Belgrade, 2000, pp.259-260 (In Serbian).

³¹ Ibid., pp.265-266.

³² Ibid., pp.259-260.

³³ Ibid., 273.

³⁴ www.nsi.bg/census/religion

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% of the respondents. Women and elderly persons attach 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.

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% of the Christians in Bulgaria identify themselves as “deeply religious,” every fourth person does not attend church services, and 21% of the deeply religious persons do not pray.

The sociological surveys carried out 8 years after the beginning of the changes, showed that 15.5% of the respondents believed definitely in God or Allah, 47% believed “to some degree,” 10% believed but not in God, 8.9% identified as atheists, and 18.7% were not interested in religion.³⁵

In general, these findings reflect a process of fermentation, of individuation, of a more open and non-traditional attitude to the religious rituals, dogmas, beliefs. As in 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 life style.

At first sight it looks as if the present-day religious freedom is favorable for the authority and the social importance of the Church. The churches are full of people on the major religious feasts; the mass media are devoting growing attention to religion and to ecclesiastic issues; the Theological Faculty has been re-established; “Religion” is being introduced as an optional subject in the school curriculum; part of the nationalized Bulgarian Orthodox Church property has been returned to the Church.

But the conservatism and the ecclesiastic institutional instability and strife have set the Church away from the cultural fermentation of present-day public consciousness. The Church schism, continuing for more than 13 years, has largely reduced the authority of and public confidence in the Church. The institutional schism has divided the bishops of the

³⁵ Zh. Vladimirov, I. Katzarski, M. Badzhakov, T. Todorov. *Bulgaria in the Circles of Anomie*, Sofia: SOPHILOS, 1998, p.58 (in Bulgarian).

Bulgarian Orthodox Church into two hostile alternative synods, both claiming legitimacy, and vying for Church property, holding alternative celebrations of religious holidays, etc.

5.1. The Schism and the Political Parties

Since 1992, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church has been in a state of painful and lasting schism. 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.

The complicated and contradictory processes around this second synod suggest there was a strong intervention of the state in the religious affairs of the BOC, and show a lack of understanding and respect for Church canon. 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. None of the canonic Orthodox Churches in the world recognized the new synod, but the administration of the UDF, come back to power in 1997, did recognize it. In 1996 a schismatic ecclesiastic council elected Pimen patriarch.

Analysts believe the schism has political, economic and religious causes.³⁶ The political causes involve the political interests of the parties coming to power in turn and successively supporting either side of the divided Church. The economic interests involve ownership of the property of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (it is revealing that in July 2004, with the brutal intervention of the court and police, 250 Church properties were seized and the clergymen of the alternative synod who occupied them were violently thrown out). Yet as strange as it may sound, the BOC has never raised the question of the restitution of its nationalized property. The participation of the legal institutions and especially of the police in solving the conflict was criticized by the Bulgarian citizens and by media.³⁷

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 complete loss of authority and trust in the BOC. Against the backdrop of this low public status, no kind of activity or stance of the BOC would be

³⁶ J. Broun, "The Schism in the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, Part 2: Under the Socialist Government, 1993 – 97," in: *Religion, State, Society*, vol.28, no.3, 2000.

³⁷ <http://www.focus-news.net /July 22, 2004/>; <http://www.standartnews.com /July 22, 2004/>

respected and considered significant. Thus the political elite failed to win a partner for its cause, but rather eliminated a potential rival.

The process of politicization and schism alienated the Church from the need and problems of the believers. There are differences between post-communist countries with regard to expectations and hopes regarding the social and cultural role of the Church.³⁸ Bulgaria is among the most sceptical about the role of the Church in solving these problems: the Eastern part of Germany (27.6%), Bulgaria (33.9%), Czech Republic (36.4%), Estonia (38.5%). In the middle range of the scale are Hungary (42.3%), Belarus (44.5%), Slovenia (46.8%), Latvia (52.8%), Russia (55.1%), Slovakia (59.7%), and Croatia (60%). The highest shares of respondents in Rumania (74.7%), Lithuania (74.4%), the Ukraine (63.1%), and Poland (62.7%) feel that the Church can contribute significantly to solving the moral, family, spiritual, and social problems of society.

5.2. Religious Pluralism and Religious Changes among Main Ethnic Groups

Bulgaria is known for its good and peaceful ethnic-religious model (especially in comparison with the ethnic-religious wars in ex-Yugoslavia,) established here during the democratic changes. In Bulgaria the line of cleavage in society since the start of reforms was not ethnic-based but political, hence religious differences (especially between Orthodoxy and Islam) never became a basis for mutual aggression and contention. The prevalence of political strife over religious-ethnic differences is evident in the divisions within the Orthodox community itself.

The research on the ethnic-cultural situation in Bulgaria, carried out by a team of sociologists, ethnographers, demographers in 1994, reached very interesting conclusions in a comparative analysis of religious changes among the main ethnic groups:³⁹ 1) The relations between Christians and Muslims in everyday life are relatively peaceful and neighborly; 2) The name-changing campaign of the Bulgarian Turks, carried out by the Communist government in the 1980s created animosity between ethnic groups in Bulgarian society, but such feelings are dying out; 3) There are no fundamentalists here, neither Islamic, nor Christian; neither religious, nor anti-religious; 4) The younger generation is far more open to contacts and cooperation with people from other ethnic communities or other religions; 5)

³⁸ M.Tomka." Tendances de la religiosité et de l'orientation vers les Eglises en Europe de l'Est." In: *Social Compass*, vol. 49, N4, 2002, pp. 540, 544-545, 547.

³⁹ P.Mitev, P. "Relations of Compatibility and Incompatibility in the Everyday Life of Christians and Muslims in Bulgaria." In: *Relations of Compatibility and Incompatibility between Christians and Muslims in Bulgaria*, ed International Center for Minority Studies and Intercultural Relations/ ICMSIR/, Sofia, 1994, pp.180-189.

Political groups and parties that attempt to play a trump using nationalism are for the time being without any significant influence; 6) Yet there is an explosive potential in certain ethnic prejudices - especially toward Gypsies - that are rather freely exploited by the press; there are also certain conditions for ethnic tensions above the level of everyday life, sometimes used by politicians; 7) All these tendencies are cultural forms of the tension between traditional, collective identities and democratic, individualistic and pluralistic values.

In general these results were confirmed by the surveys, realized in 1999-2000:⁴⁰ the ethnic situation in Bulgaria is calm; the ethnic and religious differences do not occupy the top ranks as possible causes for conflict between the corresponding groups – only 34% of the respondents indicate such reasons. My local study (interviews with people from both ethnic groups, observation of the local political and cultural process during 2003-2004) of the ethnic-religious situation in town of Kubrat, characterized by large number of Bulgarian Turks living here, confirms that conclusion too.

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. Certain specific features in the formation of religiousness and practice of religion among the Roma justify the thesis that religion is a cultural bridge thrown by them, a positive sign of goodwill and a striving to equality with the others. One of the basic proofs of this is that they usually adopt the religion of the community in which they live; where the society has more than one religion, they adopt the more prestigious, the more authoritative one.⁴¹

For instance, in Bulgaria 44% of the Roma identify as Orthodox Christians, 39% as Muslims, 15% belong to various Protestant confessions, less than 1% are Catholics, and 0.5% practice Judaism.⁴² Thus this attempt at bridging the distance proves to be not particularly successful: what is considered a bridge, a path by the one side turns out to be unacceptable, is negatively viewed by the others.

This is one of the main reasons for the success of some Protestant churches among the Roma communities in the studied countries.⁴³ They give the Roma a feeling of being

⁴⁰ Zh. Vladimirov, I. Katsarski, T.Todorov, M.Badzhakov. *op.cit.*,pp. .89-92.

⁴¹ E. Marushiakova, V. Popov. "The Gypsies in Bulgaria," Sofia: "M.Drinov" Academic Publishing House, 1993, p.,65.

⁴² I. Tomova. "The Gypsies in the Transition Period," Sofia: International Center for Minority Studies and Inter-cultural Relations /ICMSIR/, 1995, p.25.

⁴³ D.Djordjevich." Evangelization, Conversion, Proselytism: Example of Roma's Protestantization, in: Evangelization, Conversion, Prozelytism," ed. D. Todorovich, YUNIR, Nis, 2004, pp.77-78; Cacanaska, R. "Possibilities for Changes in Roma Confessional Matrix in the Republic of Macedonia," in: Ibid., pp. 84-86; Slavkova, M. "The 'Turkish Gypsies' in Bulgaria and their New Religious Identity," in: Ibid., pp.90-92.

accepted, of being an equal part of the brotherhood/sisterhood, a way of associating that is quite close to their temperament, through the medium of music and singing, rather than incomprehensible preaching. The field research I realized in town of Kyustendil in 2004 among the Roma supported that observation.

But this proves to also be a new line of distancing and alienation of the Roma from the macro-society, inasmuch as there are negative feelings toward the so-called sects. Thus the ethnic-centric stereotypes on the one hand and the inertia of the ethno-cultural model, the culture of poverty on the other, mutually determine and enhance each other.

But this does not imply that the responsibility for the future development of these mutual relations should be divided equally between the two sides. The greater share of responsibility for the direction of relations (rapprochement vs. confrontation) falls to the macro-society, which creates the social framework and psychological climate of ethnic relations in society.

Conclusion

1. The dominant religious subjects in the countries studied (the Orthodox Churches) are in an ambiguous situation with regard to the state and political sphere: a) being institutional elements of the as yet unstable state identity (especially in the case of Serbia and Montenegro), the state tends to support and give them preference in some respects; b) being a possible institutional competitor of the political elite when vying for influence over mass demands and moods, the elite is motivated to limit the potential influence of the Church; the Churches are financially dependent and internally divided (the division in the Bulgarian Orthodox Church).
2. It can be observed that the Orthodox Churches themselves in these countries are dependent and not autonomous with respect to the state and politics: a) in their competitive situation as one religion among others, where some of the others might have a richer and more effective experience of working in a democratic and pluralistic environment, the kind of environment to which the Orthodox Churches are not used; b) in matters of ownership, financing, religious education, which are hard to achieve where civil society is underdeveloped; c) as concerns the complicated situation of some Churches in their status among other Orthodox Churches (Montenegro), and in controlling internal divisions and schisms (Bulgaria, Montenegro).

3. These complicated and contradictory tendencies provoke ambivalent public valuations and hopes concerning religious (and especially – confessional) “revival”. Feelings range from excessive expectations and entrusting religion with important social functions, to accusations of loss of religious ideals - more specifically, that religion remains enclosed in conservative clericalism instead of performing its mission of spiritual and moral consolidation of society. On the other hand, in some extreme forms of the synthesis between religion and ethnos or religion and politics, religion seems to play a role that is alien to it, but which is assigned to it due to the weakness and immaturity of other social subjects and institutions such as the state, political parties, secular ideologies, civil society. The development and modernization of the latter will probably place religions and the Churches in their specific place, that of forms of spirituality and social communion which, in their various social activities, are guided by their own specific motivation and ethos.

4. All these processes show that the democratization of the religious sphere in the studied countries is difficult and involves collisions in a way that reflects the overall complication in the course of social-political and economic democratization of the respective societies. This process is made even more complicated by the fact that the West European mode of democratization of the religious sphere is also being revised and innovated under the impact of globalization. The pressure of European legal standards, tools, and practices as a fundamental framework of values and motivation is an important element of this necessary and difficult evolution. The success and future of the frail buds of democracy in the delicate sphere of religion, will depend on the future of the European Union.