

THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN BULGARIA: UNEXPECTED CONNECTIONS AND VIEWS

Maria Serafimova¹

South-West University – Blagoevgrad
Department of Sociology

ABSTRACT

It presents no problem for a well established, stable social world to go from the past, through the present and towards the future, but what if the crises are consecutive and never ending? A necessity of security and support, a need of firm grounds for the worldly and social universe of the people, appears in that case. The processes of profanation of everyday life, the lack of spiritual support, have an immense importance for understanding the situation in post-totalitarian Bulgaria. The dynamics of social change and the influence of the past on different levels indicate the essence of social reality.

Key words: religion, religion preconditions

¹ Maria Serafimova, Ph, Associate Professor e-mail: serafimova@abv.bg

Introduction

The so called post totalitarian societies are going through the consequences of the domination of the false accepted notion about ideology. They all are looking for their own alternative among the changes and transformations following one after another. These societies have a vital necessity of a new instruments for surmounting the situation into which they have fallen.

A new situation in which culture, state and religion are not the same as they have been. A taking shape civil society seemingly free of the power of the party-state. Political pluralism, freedom of speech and religion and other basic features of democracy seems to be really realizable. The social and religious situation, the attitudes of people towards faith and Church and the overcoming of basic prejudices require an objective analysis of the conditions, in which the contemporary Bulgarian lives.²

In terms of religiosity and interest in the sacred, as previously known, Bulgarians fall behind most nations of Western and even Eastern Europe. That is why the preconditions for this weak interest should be clarified.

Historical preconditions

Throughout Bulgarian history, the Bible has never had a paramount importance, regardless of the early conversion to Christianity, which took place in the IX century AD. Only some parts of the Gospels and other liturgical books have been translated in the first few centuries of Christianity in Bulgaria. The first complete translation of the Holy Writ was made only in 1871, when the country was still under Ottoman rule.

We should neither ignore the consequences of Communist rule in Bulgaria. From 1944 to 1989, atheism played the role of state religion and the Churches were systematically persecuted. Several generations were deeply

² Concerning the recent sociological surveys, which are parts of the following Bulgarian Bible Society (BBS) priority projects

influenced by an atheistic paradigm of education and the repudiation of any kind of religiosity. People started respecting religious beliefs only sixteen years ago.

It would certainly take a lot of time and effort to fill the spiritual vacuum created in their souls by the aggressive atheistic propaganda. Political and ideological suggestions are the main reason for the suspicious attitude of average Bulgarians towards religious education.

Religious preconditions

First in this category falls the relatively low level of ecclesiastical activity in order to elevate the role of the Bible in people's lives. The Bible, as the chief base and source of Christian values, does not take a becoming place in the social, cultural, educational, and political life of the country. It is very clear that there is not much room for Christian values in the life of a nation, who is being pressed by serious political and economical issues.

For the average Bulgarian, faith has little importance regarding the general development of the country. The roles of faith and religion in Bulgaria are so secondary, even for Eastern Europe. They can influence neither the models for public conduct, nor the personal morality of citizens.

This grave situation is due to the incapability of the Churches to collaborate with each other on finding solution for the problem. The struggles and confrontation between the different Christian denominations are the main reason for the significant decrease of interest in the faith and the Holy Bible.

Cultural preconditions

The effect of modern mass culture in all of its forms serves as an addition to the traditionally neglectful attitude of Bulgarians towards the faith. The invading secularism of the West mingles itself with the atheistic heritage of the Communist era. The direct consequence of this interaction is an even deeper alienation from the values of Christianity and the Bible. This process concerns the young generation most deeply and that is why the surveys are focused mostly on young people and their reactions to the Holy Scripture and the questions of the faith.

Popular culture, pseudo-folkloric music and all the new tendencies of modern day life have a dominant role in a young person's view of life. Things like morality, faith or knowing the Bible seem like secondary problems. Many among the young are more susceptible to ideas of occultism and exorcism than to those coming from the Churches or the Word of God.

In its priority projects, the BBS includes some very topical questions: the role of the Bible in modern life, the ways to reveal the Bible and its message to young people, to Orthodox Christians and to the irreligious.

The answers to those questions certainly will not be simple, and finding them is a very difficult task.

Results

Concerning the attitude towards university education the survey was conducted by a team of the *Department of "Sociology"* from the *South-West University "Neofit Rilsky"* and the *Institute of Sociology* of the *Bulgarian Academy of Sciences*.

The survey was conducted in the year 2006 and the questions included concern the interests of the BBS. Their essence outlines the parameters of the general research effort on a representative level.

In an attempt to obtain the necessary authentic and thorough information, we combined quantitative and qualitative methods. This means that for the purpose of final analysis, the data from a representative sociological survey have been combined with the additional analysis from discussions with focus groups and with the results from an observation with participation and interviews.

A question was included in the survey, which inquired about the type of literature that the person reads. "The Bible" was one of the possible answers in the questionnaire.

The answers to the question - *What kind of literature do you read?* - Which was included in the questionnaire, are strongly related to the priority direction of our interest. Below are the answers, related to the reading of the

Bible. They have been deduced out of an extract of some 3000 young people (high-school students) and parents who have been inquired.

Table 1:
Structure of the preferred types of literature

Items	Number	Percent
Fiction	761	32.9
Scientific literature	529	22.9
Magazines and newspapers	823	35.6
The Bible	56	2.4
The Koran	22	1.0
Other	43	1.9
I don't read	77	3.3
Total	2311	100.0

The fact that only 56 of the participants (or 2.4 %) have read the Bible is very indicative. It is also indicative that the most preferred type of literature among the young is "Magazines and newspapers" which outlines their major intellectual directions and those of their parents, which is even more disturbing.

The results from a representative inquiry, conducted by the National Statistical Institute create a possibility for comparative analysis and drawing conclusions. This study included more than 5000 people. The fact that under 1,6 % have read the Bible is indicative, while the people that regularly read newspapers and magazines has increased from 34,6 % to 45, 8 %.

Also, the fact that the people reading scientific literature shouldn't be disregarded while the people who read fiction has increased slightly – from 32,9 % to 33,5 %.

Table 2:
Structure of the preferred types of literature.

Items	Number	Percent
Fiction	2892	33.5
Scientific literature	1325	28.5
Magazines and newspapers	3962	45.8
The Bible	141	1.6
The Koran	77	0.9
Other	245	2.8
Total	8642	100.0

In May 2009, with permission of the Department of Education team of Department "Sociology", together with the Institute of Sociology (which made field work) conducted a second survey on the topic: *Place of the Southwestern University "Neofit Rilsky" in the minds of Bulgaria, related to higher education* (ESI after students completed their secondary education and their parents in 28 municipalities in Bulgaria).

The following data are obtained, which can serve for comparison and tracking of dynamic processes that are the subject of research interest. The following table clearly demonstrates some reduction in rates related to reading the Bible and the Koran.

Not ignore the fact that the relationship between artistic, scientific literature and newspapers and magazines is changing the direction of reducing the reading of newspapers and magazines.

Table 3:
Structure of the preferred types of literature (parents)

Items	Number	Percent
Fiction	710	36.5
Scientific literature	437	22.5
Magazines and newspapers	710	36.5
The Bible	27	1.4
The Koran	11	0,6
Other	20	1.0
I don't read	30	1.5
Total	1945	100.0

Comparing the statistics clearly shows the unenviable place which religion occupies in contemporary Bulgarian society. The results of this latest survey show lower rates of reading, especially for religious literature.

The sociological surveys show that the majority of Christians in Bulgaria do not own a Bible. It is also important to remind that the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, being the most influential religious institution, emphasizes more on preserving the religious traditions than on popularizing the Bible as the foundation for religious orientation among common Christians.

Most of the Bulgarians do not regard religion as a source of moral support. The majority of the population does not believe religion can really help them in their private life. The fact that several generations were completely deprived of religious education and access to the Bible should be taken into consideration when treating the data, which is presented above.

Naturally, the mere act of reading the Bible can never be a guarantee for true religious devotion. The opportunity to read the Scripture freely, which came with democracy, does not necessarily indicate a sincere religious motivation and orientation.

In order to obtain additional in-depth information six discussions were organized. The focus groups were composed out of representatives from different strata of Bulgarian society. The places where different discussions were

held, were deliberately selected – the capital, a big city and a town – the cities of Sofia, Plovdiv and Blagoevgrad, respectively. Groups with different focus, among which – a group of young people, were composed for the purpose of the project. Representatives of different strata were invited depending on their age, social, financial, educational, and intellectual status and background.

A group of believers who actively practice a certain religion was composed. The other groups were focused respectively on irreligious people, students from secular and theological faculties, manifest atheists, and experts. All of the participants were between 20 and 70 years of age.

The place and context into which a focus-group discussion is organized has a serious effect on the nature and quality of the information that is obtained. The medium where focus group discussions were held, greatly influenced the interaction and the kinds of response and feedback that was obtained.

The optimal conditions and atmosphere were created so that the participants could feel comfortable and really take part in the discussion. They were seated around a table, which created the opportunity for direct questions and visual contact between them.

It is notable that all of the focus groups went on in a spirit of calmness, mutual tolerance and sincere desire to speculate on the topical problems. The participants were calm throughout the conversation and after the initial acquaintance, all of them eagerly joined the discussion.

Outcome of the focus-group stage

What is the difference between believers and irreligious people?

The most frequent kind of answer suggests that irreligious people, in general, admit that there is no God. Atheists may also believe in the inexistence of God or they merely claim that there is nothing “up there”. Irreligious persons, on the other hand, are undetermined. They do not have a definite attitude towards the divine, while atheists have a clearly negative, even an aggressive one. (Participants regard religious persons as trustworthy, they share that their

soul is relaxed when they communicate with believers and they do not expect any harm from them. Nevertheless, it is also obvious that when an essential discussion on the matter takes place, the confrontation between believers and irreligious people is inevitable. The situation depends greatly on whether the irreligious person realizes clearly, in what exactly he does *not* believe. Many participants who declare themselves irreligious, turned out to be genuine but isolated believers. A person should not be definitely classified as "Irreligious" before conversation is held with him. Only in a topical discussion can a person reveal its true religious orientation.

Another obvious deduction is that very few people in Bulgaria are actually interested in the Bible.

- A. People who declare themselves irreligious think that the modern way of life is predominantly materialistic and deprived of any kind of spirituality. They point this out as the main reason why they cannot find any time for faith and religion.
- B. Many among the irreligious show interest in religions and teachings outside Christianity.
- C. Some consider the contents of the Bible incomprehensible. Even though they possess a Bible in their homes, they hardly ever open the book.
- D. Some of the people in this category think of God only during major religious festivities and that is the only time they actually visit a temple.
- E. A certain proportion of the people are repulsed by the continuous confrontation inside the *Bulgarian Orthodox Church* (BOC) and they declare their distrust in ecclesiastical institutions.
- F. Some are unhappy with the educational activity of the BOC and the insufficient charity initiatives. They think that the Church neglects the actual problems of Bulgarian society.
- G. Some explain their own indifference towards the Bible with the lack of religious orientation in their families.

- H. Many people are repulsed by the religious propaganda that is broadcasted by the media on different occasions. They consider it too aggressive (the movie "Jesus" for example).
- I. The weak level of acquaintance with the Bible is due to the insufficient educational activity of the BOC. A campaign of a larger scale is necessary during religious festivities in order to popularize the Bible.
- J. The study of the Bible might be encouraged in schools. Different forms of acquaintance with the Word of God can be examined, in relation with the age of the students.
- K. At present, the Bible is available for sale in very few locations – certain bookstores and churches; a larger system of distribution is necessary.
- L. Bible books should be available at places where people gather every day: railway stations, airports, hotels, kiosks, etc.
- M. Auxiliary biblical literature should be provided, also newsheets with quotes from the Bible and additional materials, sold along with books.
- N. Bibles of different sizes and formats should be printed, for example - an edition with a larger font size of the text or a small, portable one.
- O. Individual parts of the Holy Writ can be published and distributed separately.
- P. Interpretations, commentaries, and reference books on biblical subjects can be issued.

Here is the expressed opinion of one of the participants in the focus groups: *"I've read enough of it, several times. Well, the Bible, literally spoken or retold, I am sorry but, most of it, in my opinion, does not represent any religious interest, really. It is not something that inspires. It is the story of a semi-nomadic people from the Bronze Age, roughly told but it is just like that. At the same time, I encounter a great number of contradictions inside it, too many facts with no connection whatsoever. If a person wants to find an integral religious doctrine, a model for living and conduct, a way to know the world, well, I personally think that they won't find it, not without assistance. One needs interpretation and guidance on how to understand all this. I mean someone has to retell things in a*

different, more comprehensible way, because if a person has decent historical knowledge, you know, things look very unconvincing. In spite of gaining clarity and an insight into Christian dogma, a person becomes more and more suspicious every time they read the text and that's a paradox. Instead of finding true faith, you end up being more suspicious than before. There are many examples..."

Therefore, a person that has merely read the text of the Holy Writ is not an obvious believer. Some of the most convinced atheists are very well acquainted with the Word of God.

The next step in the research was *interviews with forty respondents completed the "picture" of religion in Bulgarian society.*

Respondents were young people with different religious orientations, different outlook, and business, artistic and scientific intelligentsia. Without exaggeration, it can be argued that this is a very interesting and effective research effort.

Discussed problems can be grouped into several problem rounds that are expressive enough to confirm, complement or bring out a new emphasis on issues that were investigated.

Bulgarian society and the "spiritual coma"

- A conclusion that the atheistic period in the history of Bulgarian society is a factor in the spiritual vacuum in the Bulgarian society, but more serious reason for it is the period of transition leading to total weightlessness - economic and spiritual weightlessness.
- The institutions of church self-discrediting, this is a total coma, no landmarks, and no spiritual reference points.
- Young people need spiritual direction and they're not the only ones, because in modern society and its dynamic rhythm, the material side of things prevails. We are witnessing not only a material crisis but also a profound spiritual one.

- The spiritual is inverted to the point that kept the material and where available, can be said that there is some form of native flashes that are not organized in any process.

Influence of religion in Bulgarian society

- The Bulgarian has a healthy dose of skepticism, it is due to his intelligence and not least for his alertness and his quest creature in real life, including faith.
- Many people are influenced by popular culture, but it is different, and her motto is absolute chaos of information, but it seems basic, necessary for building a complete person.
- Originally the main elements of human culture, including and religion are phenomena with great momentum. They change more slowly and more difficult than other items.
- The main thing that has changed is the massive sense of freedom of expression and prestige of formal religion as a phenomenon.
- In general, according to respondents, there can be no society without religion. It has its place in social space, but is something very individual.
- Most say that everyone in modern society "*believe in their own thing*".
- Some time ago the belief was associated with some ideas, but now - with others.
- Most say the way to the temple can be found in a different way.
- Unfortunately, young people turn to religion only when something bad happens to them, if they suffer, or have a dilemma that excites them.

The spiritual vacuum, anomie and uncertainty, has generated a situation of searching for a meaning.

The major part of the participants were students and university graduates, therefore special attention was paid to their concept of the Bible and to the possible ways to reveal its values to them.

On one hand, a growing need for answers to the fundamental questions, for something more spiritual, for some kind of an explanatory system was affirmed

among the young. On the other hand, they are clearly repulsed by the confrontation in the BOC. This and the mercantile intentions of some representatives of the clergy act negatively on young people's general attitude towards religion and the ecclesiastical institutions.

It appears that young people with a low level of Christian culture tend to regard the Bible as an old, retrograde and antiquated book. They often think of it as a sectarian text and are even afraid sometimes.

Religious ignorance has a destructive effect on our organized efforts to reveal the Bible and its message to more families in the country. We should not disregard this circumstance.

The notions of the young generation can be classified in several categories: according to their opinions on the way of life, values, religious identity and observance of traditions.

By means of a peculiar *bricolage*, attempts are being made in the Bulgarian society to create a modern sacred, in order to give an answer to the question: "*how is it possible for what is, to no longer be what is*".

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УЛОГАТА НА РЕЛИГИЈАТА ВО БУГАРИЈА: НЕОЧЕКУВАНИ РЕЛАЦИИ И ПОГЛЕДИ

Марија Серафимива

АПСТРАКТ

За добро етаблираните општества, стабилни општества не претставува проблем не претставува проблем да се движат од минатото, преку сегашноста и кон иднината, но што ако кризата таре постојано? Во таков случај се појавува потребата од безбедност и поддршка, потребата од црста основа за световен и социјален универзум на луѓето. Процесите на профанизирањето на секојдневниот живот, недостаток на духовна поддршка имата огромно значење за разбирање на ситуацијата во пост-тоталитарната Бугарија. Динамиката на општествените промени и влијанието на минатото на различни нивоа укажуваат на суштинат ана општествената реалност.

Клучни зборови: религија, религии предуслови