CULTA *Religion and Multiculturality: Educational Pathways for Local Church Leaders*

CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS TOGETHER FOR A COMMON FUTURE: THE BULGARIAN MODEL
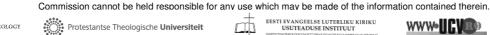
Klara Toneva, Andrian Aleksandrov

This article is part of a wider study of international Grundtvig multilateral project, related to the ministry of priests in a multicultural environment, which aims to examine pastoral ministry in regions with mixed population based on a concrete example. An important result of the study is the extraction and formulation of educational needs of representatives of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church related to their multicultural and interreligious competences.

The report is built upon complementary theoretical and empirical methods, such as learning, systematization, and theoretical analysis of the literature, oral interviews, observation, and examination of a concrete case study.

According to the latest 2011 census in Bulgaria, 76% of the people inhabiting the country identify themselves as Orthodox, 0.8% as Catholic, and 1.1% as Protestants. 10% of Bulgarian citizens are Muslim, 0.2% professes other religions, and 4.2% indicated that they had no religion, while 7.1% did not identify themselves to any of the above categories[1].

On the other hand, data from the European Values Study (2008) shows that the Church is the only one of all surveyed institutions in Bulgaria, to which the trust in 2008 has

---

[1] http://www.nsi.bg/eventbg.php?n=985

risen, compared to 1999. On the question *"How important is religion in your life",* "17.6% of respondents answered *"very important"* and 34.2% *"important."* This means that for 51.8%, or about for the half of the Bulgarians, the Church plays a role in shaping attitudes and value orientations. 73.3% belong to the religious denomination, of which 58.6% are Orthodox. 14.7% regularly go to church, while 45.5% visit the churches during major religious feasts. 55.2% of the respondents identified themselves as religious.[2]

I. The Muslim Community – at the Crossroad of Tolerance and the Global Islamic Revival

For more than two decades, the Balkans has been often associated with ethno-separatism, aggressive nationalism, and religions fundamentalism. The notion of "Balkan mentality," which merely stands for individuals who maintain some prejudices against other people, incapable of understanding or overcoming their conservatism, has become well known in Europe today. The ethnic prejudices have been often considered as an integral part of the Balkan peoples' thoughts[3]. This notion, along with the notion of the "Bulgarian ethnic model" as a synonym of tolerance towards ethnic minorities, they are both just a small element of the range of the Balkan mythologems that often turn into odd prejudices towards this region. Nevertheless, the one and the other, they both contain truth, but are also exaggerated. Their roots can be found deep in the history and in the state psychology of those people.

More than 20 years ago researchers of Islam as a doctrine and cult in historical, culturological, religious and geopolitical aspect formulated two main approaches, "easy

---

[2] http://www.bsa-bg.org/index.php/2012-05-24-08-32-37/16-4-2008

[3] Петкова Дияна. Етнически предразсъдъци на Балканите и медийно образование. – Сб. „Медии и пъблик рилейшънс. Проблеми на образованието и практиката. С., 2003, с. 94.

path" and "hard path", concerning the perception, and hence also the answer, to what is currently happening in the Islamic world.[4]

The "easy path" views Islam and Islamic Revivalism as a threat, i.e. referencing a pan-Islamic threat, foreseeing a historical enemy whose religion and worldview are diametrically opposite to those of the West.

The second, "hard path", approach moves beyond facile clichés and stereotypes, and hasty and often convenient answers that often equate Islam and the Islamic Revival with religious radicalism and terrorism.

1. Islam and the Contemporary Social Situation

At the end of the 19th and mostly during the 20th century, the House of Islam faced a new challenge - to address the modern Western way of life penetrating its territory and giving rise to dichotomies between present and past, tradition and modernity.

The beginning of the 21st century saw some major social and political changes in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria and Turkey showing that Islam will not stop trying to find and defend its place and significance in today's global society.[5]

The analysis is hampered by the controversial nature of the studied phenomena. In other words, Islam's penetration into Europe and America and the formation of Islamic minorities result in an ever increasing pressure for modernization. On the other hand, in places where the majority of the population is Islamic there is a desire for vengeful imposition of Islamic tenets. It has now become clear that is it still impossible to find a categorical answer to the old question of whether reformed Islam is still Islam.

---

[4] *Esposito, Jh.* The Islamic Threat. Myth or Reality? Oxford University Press, New York-Oxford, 1992, p. 169.

[5] For more information, see *Смарт, Н.* Религиите по света. От възникването до съвременните секти. С., 2000, с. 531 сл.

.

CULTA Religion and Multiculturality: Educational Pathways for Local Church Leaders

Generally speaking, the adaptation of Islam to the contemporary social situation helps streamline Muslims' lives. This process runs parallel to the socioeconomic and political development of Muslim nations. Reconceptualizing Islam in a contemporary context incites believers into a more active participation in political life, while their value systems now also include duty towards the nation. Thus Islamic believers not only feel bound to their God, but also to the societies in which they live. This is exactly what the reformist currents in Islam of the 20th and 21st centuries have proposed to counter the opposition between Islamic doctrine and the new rationalistic tendencies of the global society.

The diversity in the House of Islam and the disparities in its social, economic, political and cultural development determine both the different adaptation approaches and the ambiguous interpretation of the process. This is both the cause of tension among Muslim countries themselves and between the Islamic civilization and Judeo-Christian countries.

2. *Characteristics of the Islamic Community in Bulgaria*

The issue concerning the overall picture of Islam in Bulgaria and the challenges facing the Islamic community is very topical. The term "Muslim community in Bulgaria" is not only just too vague, but it is also quite difficult to speak of a unified Muslim community in view of its highly fragmented nature.[6] Several sub-communities can be identified within this broader community based on two major features - ethic, i.e. ethnic belonging of Muslims in Bulgaria; and religious, i.e. based on the religious trend of the Islam they profess.

Based on ethnic origin Muslims in Bulgaria can be divided into four communities: 1. Muslims of Turkish ethnic origin, which is the most numerous Muslim ethnic group in Bulgaria; 2. Muslims of Roma ethnic origin, which can be characterized by its unclear and

---

[6] *Босаков, В.* Трансформация на исляма в България. – В: Динамика на световните религии и значение на ортодоксалността. Тематичен сборник. С., 2011, с. 86.

uncertain ethnic identity since a larger part of the Muslim Roma population see themselves as Turks[7]; 3. Muslims of Bulgarian ethnic origin (the so-called Pomaks) inhabiting compact areas of the Rhodopes, parts of Rila and Pirin, and some villages around Lovech and Teteven; 4. Muslims of Tatar ethnic origin – the smallest Muslim group in Bulgaria, which lives in the North-East and a significant part of which has already been turkisized.

Based on religious belonging Muslims in Bulgaria can be divided into two major communities: 1. Sunni Muslims, which is part of the theological jurisprudence of the Hanafi school; 2. Alevi Muslims (also known as Alians or Qizilbash) - a radical Shiite sect that emerged in western Iran and Asia Minor during the 15th-16th centuries. In Bulgaria there are separate Alevi communities whose members are ethnic Turks, however, unlike Sunni Muslims, Alevis are not officially registered as a religious denomination in Bulgaria.[8]

3. *Muslims in Bulgaria: The Choice between Tradition, Re-Islamization, Secularization and Radicalization*

Until the 1990s Muslims in Bulgaria professed the so-called traditional Islam[9], however, after the changes of 1989, processes of religious search and revival began in all Muslim communities. Each was faced with the choice between tradition, re-Islamization, secularization and radicalization. It was perfectly normal for a re-Islamization process,

---

[7]For more information on the issues surrounding Roma ethnic and cultural identity see *Кръстева, А.* Идентичност. С., 1995, с. 113; *Велчева, Н.* Етническа и културна идентичност – проблеми на интеграцията. – В: Етнокултурен диалог на Балканите. С., 2001, с. 129–139; *Тодорович, Д., Д. Джорджевич.* Ромите за ислямския фундаментализъм на Балканите: „Не, благодаря!". – В: Рискове за България от ислямски фундаментализъм и тероризъм. С., 2005, с. 160–172; *Колев, А.* Циганите-мюсюлмани и ислямският тероризъм. – В: Рискове за България…, с. 172–183; Ромите – другото измерение на промените. Сборник. С., 2004.

[8] *Босаков, В.* Пос. съч., с. 86–87.

[9] Scholars distinguish between three types of Islam: traditional household Islam, moderately political and radical. For more details, see *Проданов, В.* Има ли опасност от ислямски фундаментализъм и тероризъм в България? – В: Рискове за България…, с. 16–17.

running at an uneven pace in each community, to occur among Bulgarian Muslims. Among ethnic Sunni Turks, who continued to be under the influence of their compatriots from neighbouring Turkey, re-Islamization mainly took the form of returning to the Muslim traditions from before 1944. Old mosques were repaired and new ones were built; spiritual schools opened; there was a growing urge for religious education among the people. Re-Islamization among Alevi Turks took a similar shape, however with the main difference that for a small part of them there was an attempt for a Shiite interpretation of faith, implying purification from Christian and pagan borrowings and traces. Re-Islamization was not as smooth among Roma Muslims. Despite the occurrence of processes similar to those among Sunni Turk communities, the norms of traditional Islam are generally not legitimate for the Roma community. This led Muslims of Roma ethnic origin to seek grounds for their faith beyond the authorities and traditions of the Balkans.[10]

Scholars believe that re-Islamization is most problematic among Muslim Bulgarians, the so-called Pomaks (a common designation for this compact group is yet to be agreed). A large part of these 200,000 to 250,000 people identify themselves as ethnic Bulgarians but still profess Islam. The results of the survey *Attitudes of Muslims in Bulgaria - 2011,* conducted by a team of the New Bulgarian University and Alpha Research, show a trend for emergence of Pomak ethnic identity. This mostly results from the opposition between Bulgarian and Turkish identities as Pomaks are rejected by both communities.[11] Generally speaking, the Islam professed by Muslim Bulgarians is typically syncretic, and what is meant by "traditional" Islam with regard to this group is the Islam handed down from one generation onto the next, which is mostly household Islam. In the process of re-Islamization,

---

[10] *Босаков, В.* Пос. съч., с. 88

[11] *Величков, Вл.* Българските мюсюлмани между бита и религията. В-к „Култура", бр. 1 (2663), 13 януари 2012 г.

however, it cannot stand up to Quranic critique and, for a significant part of the community, it loses its validity.

Muslim Bulgarians also include a small "secularized" community that practices Islam only for feasts and rituals.

All of the above trends suggest that there is a need for educated people with profound understanding of the Quran and Islamic theology. And while some Muslims receive their education in the Muslim religious schools in the country, dominated by the Turkish ethnic element, others prefer the Arabic countries, where they interact with the local Muslim culture, which more than often is at odds with the one they were brought up in.

The young Muslims studying at secondary schools and higher institutions today are the future spiritual leaders of the Muslim community in Bulgaria. The expectations they face are quite high - they must create and establish the new dimensions and the dynamics of the integration process. Similarly high are the expectations faced by the scholars of Islam - they must conceptualize the issue of Muslim integration precisely by analyzing the ideas, reasons and arguments of the spiritual and intellectual leaders of the Muslim community.

Further attention ought to be paid to three negative aspects of the religious life of the Muslim population in Bulgaria. The *first* is connected with the strengthening of the fundamentalist frame of mind among them[12]; the *second* with the attempted turkification on the part of certain political parties with the assistance of the Turkish state; and the *third* with using Islam as means of ethnic separation of Muslims in Bulgaria.
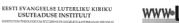
The processes of religious revival among the Muslim population in Bulgaria should in no case be construed solely as a threat to secularism or social peace. A shift from negative to

---

[12] A detailed analysis of fundamentalism was carried out by Prof. Ts. Teofanov in his study „Християнският и ислямският фундаментализъм: „актуализирането" на религията в съвременен контекст". – В: Библия. Култура. Диалог". Т. I. С., 2010, с. 63–86.

positive polarization can be achieved through active cooperation, which, however, still maintains differences as integration stimuli. Respect for diversity should develop into a willingness to defend individual relationships in a mutually accepted and clearly needed dialogue.

The study of the two paths mentioned above will not be complete without considering them in the context of world globalization in which three important tendencies can be identified:

"The *first* is connected with aspirations towards global religious syncretism, the *second* with the attempts of emerging religious movements to dominate global cultural religions, and the *third* with the understanding that Christian and Islam theologians will gain insight into the meaning of God's providence for the diversity of religious forms in the world".[13]

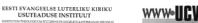## II. Analysis of a case study

For the purposes of this research, we conducted a case study in the region of Kardzhali (South Bulgaria)[14]. The main feature of this region is the demographic collapse of the Bulgarian population, which is so severe that the presence of the Bulgarian there is on the verge of becoming a minority. The Bulgarian and the Christian elements prevail over the Islamic and Turkish in the town, while in the surrounding rural areas is exactly the opposite - the Turkish and Muslim population far exceeds the number of the Christian's one.

---

[13] *Стаматова, Кл.* Публичността – място за среща на християнството и исляма в България. – В: Библия. Култура. Диалог. Т. II. С., 2010, с. 95.

[14] The town has now about 43 880 citizens (according from a collected data from 2011) and is the major administrative, trade and cultural centre in the South Rodopi Mountain.

CULTA *Religion and Multiculturality: Educational Pathways for Local Church Leaders*

According to some researchers, the efforts of local religious leaders have been now guaranteeing the peace and the stability in the local society. In January 1990, the mixed regions of the country were overwhelmed by nationalist rallies, most of them led by the church clergy. These rallies were based on ethnic principles. *"The Church has quietly encouraged her flocks to take part in the rallies of the threatened by unrest areas ",* says one of the participants in these processes. And further continues: *"It should be noted that they prevented precisely the clash between the Turkish and the Bulgarian rally on January 4 at Kardzhali's main square. They calmed the crowd and prevented the outbreak of an ethnic violence, through peaceful sermons in these troubled areas.*[15] It appears from the review of the newspapers that the rhetoricians of these rallies are local church leaders. They often use the tested method of the missionary preachers travelling from one place to another one.

On the other hand, the policy, which has been implemented by the ethnic political party Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) for many years, is often challenging and confrontational.[16] The observations show that any attempt to change the ethnic or religious situation especially in small towns and villages, evokes in all communities a feeling of threat and a fear of destabilization, which triggers the instinct of self-preservation and preservation of the status quo. Outside the regions with mixed population, the ethnic self-determination shifts or rather includes the religious context.

In this region, Bulgarian means Christian and Turkish means Muslim, while gipsy means gipsy, regardless of how strong and in what they believe. In these mixed areas, however, the society is interested in the self-determination of the individuals or of the

---

[15] Гарена Камен. Предизвикателствата пред православния свещеник. С. 2002, с. 187-188, 228-229.

[16] „Neither the best, nor even the noblest of Christians could I trust. Even the dearest and the kindest are strangers. Remember this. Strangers who will never be blood of our blood or our brothers. (said by Ali Sukardi, Head of the General Council of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, Blagoevgrad, on 2 March 1991).

groups, perceiving the religious and ethnic changes as a "national threat" or "human rights violation".[17] The observations also show that the multi-religious environment reinforces religiosity of the religious communities. The quantitative analysis of attendees during the worship in the churches of cities like Kardzhali (multi-religious town, with a population of around 44000 people, both Christians and Muslims) and Vidin (mono-religious town, with a population of around 48 000 people, all Christians) shows that the number of the believers in Kardzhali is several times larger. Both the Christians and the Muslims in this region have been competing for decades to show the others that they are good believers. This religious competition leads to aspirations for a better understanding and manifestation of someone's own faith. The experience shows that the priests and imams sent to serve in these regions are usually accepted normally and naturally by the local community, but if they fail to adjust, if they do not respect the traditions, customs and language of the local population, the society reject them and their mission become difficult or even impossible. Any act of hostility against other people and other religion is perceived as a potential conflict and is considered dangerous for the ones and for the others. Thus, the spiritual leader becomes unwanted both for the Christians and for the Muslims.

The religious communities of the mixed Bulgarian regions perceive, organize, and maintain their mutual lives through a combination of codes that include the following components: language, religious norms and behavior, cultural and everyday rituals and traditions. The knowledge of the local customs, the language or the dialects facilitates the relations of the religious leader with the people. However, the flawless weapon to win their hearts is the songs. If he can sing or play their songs, his success is definitely assured.[18]
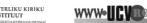
---

[17] Гарена Камен, Пос. Съч., с. 195-196.

[18] Видева Магда. Календар на православната българка. С. 1998, с. 87.

CULTA Religion and Multiculturality: Educational Pathways for Local Church Leaders

- The first element for success is the language itself. In order to enjoy success, the Church leader, serving in regions with mixed population should speak the mother tongue and the dialects of the local Muslim community.

- Another important aspect is the observance of the norms of a religious behavior. By tradition, the religious affiliation, and the religious respect to the other, is publicly demonstrated during major religious feasts. During these religious celebrations, sacred gifts have been exchanged. At Easter time, Christians handing out colored Easter eggs to Muslims, while the Muslims give them meat during the feast of the Sacrifice (Kurban Bayramı). They congratulate each other for the certain religions feast in meetings and conversations;

- The third component that characterizes the coexistence of Christian and Muslims is the combination of their cultural rites and local traditions. This is a continuation of a long process that began centuries ago and became a mixture of religious culture and folklore traditions. The common celebration and the compulsory attendance of neighbors belonging to different religious communities to weddings, family celebrations, and especially after a birth of a child, or a funeral, contribute to the progress of this process. Even a basic observation on the Christians and Muslims burial customs shows that in mixed areas, the both rites are combined in a third, valid for these regions with mixed population. The mutual respect and the participation in family religious rites is a sign of trust and a guarantee for personal security. They are based on mutual understanding and complying with the norms of the other faith and actually create a new chain of ceremonies that bridges the gap

NORWEGIAN SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY Protestantse Theologische **Universiteit** EESTI EVANGEELSE LUTERLIKU KIRIKU USUTEADUSE INSTITUUT INSTITUTUM THEOLOGICUM ECCLESIAE EVANGELICO-LUTHERANAE ESTONIAE WWW•UCV•RO europe direct Emilia REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOUNDATION

between the two religions. The people from mixed areas realize that they live together and on this basis, they set their religious and ethnic differences.[19]

Therefore, the everyday life of the Muslims is balanced, they are good neighbors and friends of the Christians, they celebrate together different religious feasts. However, in their role of Muslims as citizens, they are often perceived as a threat to the established order and status in the society. The evidence of the specific Bulgarian ethnic model is the active participation of the Muslim community in the state decision making processes through its political party "Movement for Rights and Freedoms" (MRF).
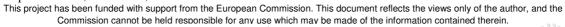
However, in our days, the most important and based on ethnic grounds appointments of representatives of this party as government officials is one of the main reasons for the numerous daily protests against the tripartite political coalition between former communists, Bulgarian Turks, and nationalists.

A kind of paradox could be that, despite the solid indisputable doctrinal and cultural differences between the Christianity and the Islam, the Christian-Islamic dialogue in Bulgaria is extremely tolerant at theological level. The main source of controversy and conflict is rooted primarily in the insufficient efforts of the state to build fair social relations, rather than in the ethno-cultural and inter-religious dialogue. The understanding of the differences between religions is important, but this equally applies to the understanding of the main social factors of the environment in which their interaction takes place.

Conclusions and assessment of the training needs:

1. It is of particular importance to understand better the ethnic "other." The more a religious leader or a priest learns the history, the language, the customs and the
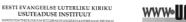
---

[19] Гарена Камен, Пос. Съч., с. 198-201.

traditions of other religious communities in the parish, the more he can understand the nature of their psychological aspect and mentality.

2. Critical for reducing the interethnic and interreligious tensions and for establishing of an intercultural dialogue is the adherence to ethics in the communication. The ethical principles take the lead role in the interpersonal communication, regardless of whether it takes place between different ethnicities, races or nationalities.

3. Extremely effective way to deal with potential tensions and for maintaining a suitable climate for fruitful intercultural dialogue is the so-called "Ethnic marketing". It embrace the idea that many, perhaps the majority of the people tend to overlook and even abandoned their negative attitude towards the "other" only if this brings them personal benefit, such as trade or business. Therefore, it is crucial to identify and promote the benefits from the contact and dialogue with various religions communities.