

CHRISTIANITY WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE POST-TOTALITARIAN TRANSITION IN BULGARIA

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The author writes about the changes in the religious life of the Bulgarian people in the post-totalitarian period. Based on her own field research, she finds that the changes are reflected in the fact that practical religious life takes place at the family level. Deformations of religious life due to the prolonged period of repression have become ingrained and are still present today at a time when the authorities no longer officially conduct a process of de-Christianisation. Various compensatory models exist which have been adopted from folklore tradition and make up for the shortage of priests.

Bulgarians use a proverb, which is a neologism, in connection with the numerous senseless bans of the totalitarian period: "Banned but not revoked". The opposite was valid for the religious life of the Bulgarians during the same period: "Revoked, without being banned". The religious rights of the Bulgarian people were *pro forma* guaranteed by the Constitution, but in practice the religious professions were quite severely restricted with the help of a whole system of unofficial but unambiguous sanctions. For the members of the communist party the attendance of a religious ceremony could entail a party punishment, including expulsion

from the party; for the non-party people analogous measures took the form of difficulties and obstacles raised in their making a career, a ban on travel abroad, no access to applications to take one or another job. It is common knowledge that at major Christian holidays, such as Easter for instance, the attendance of the solemn mass was monitored by informers, and afterwards the management of the respective enterprise or office was informed about the offence of its employee. All these facts are common knowledge; I'm only mentioning them because the phenomena and processes referred to further on can thereby be explained.

The divorce of folk culture from Christianity under the totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe has been a subject, given attention in ethnological literature.¹ This question will not be discussed on its own here, but it has been mentioned only from the point of view of the correlation between Christian church tradition and folk tradition.

The suppression of the Bulgarian people's religious life had two dimensions, or two levels, which were interconnected and interdependent. On the one hand there were the restricted religious rights of the Bulgarian people. The forms of religious life practically "dwindled" to be found only within the closest family circles. Even in the 1960s, church services were attended predominantly by people of an advanced age, mostly women. The church rituals which were an invariable part of the rites and rituals of the life cycle were either omitted or performed secretly at home. The priest was invited home and the funeral service for the deceased was performed there instead of in a church; children were secretly baptized "with a priest"; though less frequently, there were secret weddings, too. In various periods of time and at different places in Bulgaria, the authorities employed the most varied methods to restrict and smother the Christian tradition. In the 1980s, the practice of the municipalities providing a coffin free of charge had become established; that privilege, however, was not granted to those who had decided to have the funeral following the Christian ritual; in such cases the families of the deceased undertook the expense of providing a coffin themselves. That coincided with the state's streamlined efforts to create new civil rituals which were to substitute fully the Christian ones. Such attempts were undertaken by various institutions at various periods of time. For instance, in 1981 the Ministry of Culture set up commissions which were to work out the scenarios of baptisms, weddings and funerals as civil rituals obligatory and valid throughout the whole country. Those rituals were performed by ritual personages, officials specially appointed for this purpose by the municipalities.

¹ Rihntman-Auguštin, D. *Etnologiyata pri sotsializma i sled nego.* - *Bulgarska Etnologiya*, 1995, 1, 17–24 (Ethnology under Socialism and Afterwards. Bulgarian Ethnology. In Bulgarian).

These commissions were made up of stage and film directors, poets, artists and researchers (ethnographers and folklorists). I happened to be a member of the commission entrusted with working out the scenario of the civil burial ceremony. The scenarios mentioned and the process of their unfolding deserve special attention, therefore I shall not dwell on them further now. What is more important is that the initiative of the Ministry of Culture evinced a purposeful striving on the part of the state to oust the church, filling in the resulting spiritual void with something else.

In practice, the members of the communist party never entered a church on any occasion; what is more, restrictions were usually imposed on the members of their families, i.e. the conflict between ideology and traditional Christian values was interiorized and transferred into the realm of the family, too.

As a result, the priesthood became a profession of low prestige. Therein is the second dimension, the second level of deformation of the Bulgarian people's religious life. Quite naturally the number of priests decreased. The results of that process became most tangibly felt in the 1980s. The most common practice has been for one priest to be officiating (and this goes on to this day) in several villages and/or towns. Therefore the churches have been operating normally only in population centers with a priest in permanent residence. Where no priest is in residence, they are called from other places only on particular occasions, usually to officiate at funerals and memorial services. Moreover, all this has affected the very structure of the church service and its "quality". It has been common practice both during the past decade and in the present for the priests to read only part of the texts specified by the church canon for the respective occasion; in other words, the church service itself has been curtailed in a specific manner.

Thus during fieldwork in northeastern Bulgaria I happened to go to a house where a memorial service, to which I was invited, was to be held for a deceased member of the family. The priest was called for the service from the neighbouring village, and he came. I asked and was granted permission to record the service on tape. After the priest had left, the hosts noted that, owing to my presence there, the priest had put in greater effort. Since the service lasted for about a quarter of an hour, there is no answer to the question how long it would have lasted if the priest had not had a special reason to be more diligent.

In other words, the deformation in the religious life of the Bulgarian people has affected the church itself as a specific institution. The example referred to goes back to 1990. Therefore, the elimination of the religious restrictions since 1989 has not meant that the void in the religious life of the Bulgarians has automatically been filled. On the other hand, the

practice which had become established during the totalitarian period for the performance of religious rituals at home to replace the church service in its authentic form, continues to be current. For instance, today no one forbids people to observe the burial ritual following the established church tradition. This happens, however, mainly in the centers of population where the cemetery is in the church yard. Elsewhere, where the cemetery and the church are located in different places, the practice of the burial ritual service at home rather than in church continues. The innovation, having gained grounds during the totalitarian period, seems to have turned into a tradition. For their part, priests continue to be "in short supply" and in order to be able to go and perform services at more places, they omit essential elements of the religious chanting as well as of the very ritual practices.

During a burial which I attended in person in November 1994, the priest interrupted the service at the most important stage of the ritual. The consecration of the canopy of the deceased prior to the entombment, traditionally performed by a priest, as well as the ritual actions of pouring wine and oil, were performed in that case by the gypsy grave digger. The priest had to go to another burial. At a later date, when he was invited to perform the memorial service on the fortieth day after the death, the same priest answered that he could only perform the ritual service provided that he could combine it with another memorial service agreed upon even earlier. In that case too, as in the service in northeastern Bulgaria, the reading of the canonic texts lasted for only fifteen minutes instead of an hour.

It should be pointed out that tradition - folk and religious - contains in itself mechanisms which make up - partially or in full - for the destructive processes taking place within it. These mechanisms operate by various instruments. For instance, the shortage of Christian priests is made up for in various ways. In some cases people who meet the requirements only partially are ordained as priests. In the late 1980s, in the village of Svalenik, Rousse region (northeastern Bulgaria), the former team leader of the local cooperative farm who had retired was ordained as a priest. His fellow villagers remembered that once in his youth - before serving in the army - the team leader had attended a religious seminary to become a church singer. By special permission from the bishop, he was ordained as a priest. In such cases, the church as an institution has also been involved in actions which could be referred to as compensatory. Those cases, whereby some of the functions of the clergyman are taken over by a layman can be listed under the same type of mechanisms of upholding tradition. During field research in 1977 and 1979 (in southeastern Bulgaria) I watched how unexperienced (or negligent) clergymen were

corrected by persons of a special social status. These were devout people - most often women - without any religious training and not even performing the functions of church wardens, who assisted clergymen in their work. For instance, in the village of Stoudena, Svilengrad region, one such woman was giving instructions to the priest which chants precisely to perform during the church service. Sometimes what results are rather curious clashes between the religious and the folk ritual prescriptions. In the 1990s I attended funerals and memorial rituals in villages of the mountainous part of northwestern Bulgaria. In one of those villages there is no church, for the village is in the parish of a monastery located ten kilometres away. During a memorial service on the fortieth day after the death, a very young and very newly arrived monk refused to perform what was referred to as "levelling" (levelling of the burial mound), which is traditionally performed by a priest. The monk explained that he had not been trained for anything other than reading from the religious service books. A conflicting situation came to a head: the elderly women present insisted that the unwritten rule be observed. Finally, two of them took the monk by the hand and showed him what he had to do with the hoe. And he did it. On the other hand, however, it should be noted that during the few burials and memorial services I have attended performed by various monks from the same monastery, I have observed for the first and last time so far, religious services performed according to the religious canon. This case gives ample food for deliberation on the problem of syncretic Christianity, which have not been touched upon here, due to the prescribed length of this article.

Another type of a compensation mechanism can be observed in cases in which the lapses in the performance of the religious ritual are overcome, and the ritual practices prescribed by folk tradition are performed despite the absence of a priest. This type, just as the preceding one, has held good both for the totalitarian and the post-totalitarian period. For instance, the most important memorial ritual practice - the memorial service on the fortieth day after death, includes ritual actions at the grave on the eve of the ritual service itself, as well as on the date proper. Both rites require the participation of a priest. If the latter has several centers of population to serve and is too busy, the evening ritual (on the eve of the fortieth day) is performed by women without his participation. What is noteworthy here is that the impossibility to abide by the prescriptions does not entail giving them up and failure to perform the rite; exactly the opposite is the case: the fulfilment of purely folk prescriptions is considered sufficient. The implementation of the folk rites and rituals related to childbirth (characteristic to the totalitarian period) has similar meaning even when the child is not baptised in church. These

rites performed exclusively by women are typical of the rural and the urban environment alike, both under the totalitarian rule and today. What is particularly indicative is that the ritual has preserved its name - "baptism" - obviously associated with the Christian religion even when the Christian ritual is not performed.

In other words, if the unity of folk and religious practices makes up the integral whole of the ritual, that integral whole is in this case substituted by one of its component parts, i.e. one part plays the role of the whole. The folk tradition makes up for the incompleteness of the religious ritual. These actions are considered full-fledged insofar as the manifestations of folk Christianity, as well as some practices of an apparently pagan origin, are mentally experienced (and sometimes even recognized) as acts of Christian piety in the Bulgarian people's everyday way of thinking. That interpretation is fully in the spirit of the tolerance traditional for the Eastern Orthodox Church. Interpretations in this spirit can also be found in Bulgarian theological works.²

There is yet another, third type of compensation for the void brought about by the suppression of the religious life of the Bulgarian people. This type should be referred to as manifestations of non-intentional behaviour. It could be disputed whether it is only "religious shortage" that substantiates the phenomenon; or are the changes in the Bulgarian people's standard of living and the corresponding new adjustments also of importance. What I have in mind are the feasts, extremely lavish and ostentatious, typical mostly of the villages and small towns, that are given on occasions related to rites of the life cycle, mostly christenings and weddings, as well as some newly-emerging rituals of socialization such as send-offs for new army conscripts or celebrations of birthdays, anniversaries and/or retirement. These celebrations are characterized by a great number of people invited, especially when held in bigger villages or small towns. It was quite normal for a wedding in urban conditions to assemble two or three hundred wedding guests, and in the villages the guests number as many as five to six hundred people. What was more curious, however, was that other celebrations related to rituals of the life cycle followed the model of the wedding, even in the great number of people invited. Quite often in the villages, as well as in small towns, one could see, and one can see today, too, tables laid out in the street (collected from many houses or borrowed from the local workers' canteen). This is done when not only the house, but also the courtyard cannot hold all the

² Archimandrit Euthimius. *Vuvodni misli i materiali za rabotata po "istoriyata na religiite"*. - *Godišnik na Sofijski universitet. Bogoslovski fakultet*. [Introductory Thoughts and Materials on Work on "The History of Religions". - Annual Publications of the Faculty of Theology. In Bulgarian]. T. 17 94, 1939/1940, 1–56.

guests invited. The picture thus painted is characteristic of weddings, as well as of christenings of children, seeing off of new army conscripts, celebration of retirement, and the like. Professional or quasi-professional orchestras are hired not only for weddings, but for christenings, for send-offs for army conscripts or retirement celebrations. What is more, singers also perform with orchestras. Quite often the whole village spends a sleepless night because of the loudspeakers, carrying the hoarse voice of the singer. These excessive, almost Rabelaisian, celebrations have spontaneously been called "weddings with no bride" or "barren weddings". I re-emphasize that that specific deformation has probably not been the result of the suppression of the Christian faith alone, but undoubtedly is a sure sign of the missing spirituality. Now, the economic crisis is naturally restricting events of this kind, particularly in towns and cities. In the villages, where in addition to holding state employment people have never ceased to grow farm crops, this kind of celebration has not been completely abandoned.

What has characterized the past five years or so of post-totalitarian transition has been more than just the processes outlined, which are a direct aftermath and continuation of the totalitarian deformations. Parallel to the numerous robberies of churchware intended for illicit trade in works of art, opposite processes have also been observed. For instance, in northwestern Bulgaria, from which I have systematically collected observations over many years, today the churches are being rebuilt or are being repaired in most of the towns and villages. This is done with funds and donations contributed by private individuals or by managers of state enterprises. It is noteworthy that the funeral ritual (which has been the most conservative phenomenon in the life of the Bulgarian people) has focused efforts and funds alike. In a period when the bans are no longer holding, this ritual is undergoing a process of specific reinterpretation, whereby the active component is again the folk tradition. For instance, in the churchyard of the freshly repaired church in the village of Osselna, Vratsa region, one can see several long tables; they have been purchased with the assistance of a sponsor who is also financing the repair works. The tables are designed to facilitate the holding of the feast accompanying memorial services in the churchyard. Discernible in this case are both the direct perpetuation of the prescriptions of folk tradition, and an element of innovation, running counter to the very spirit of that tradition; for the authentic requirements regarding the funeral or memorial feast demand that it be arranged on a cloth spread directly on the ground. Further observations of this kind could be adduced.

In conclusion, the following short inferences can be formulated. On the one hand, in the post-totalitarian period of transition, processes which

are a continuation and an aftereffect of the suppression of the Christian religion imposed during the time of totalitarian rule in Bulgaria have been observed. To a certain extent, the folk tradition has been making up for the deformations brought about by the suppression of Christianity. On the other hand, signs of a revival have been observed in the religious life of the Bulgarian people. Only the future will show how far that religious life will manage to assimilate some "novelties", specific for the post-totalitarian period, such as the invasion of various religious sects coming from abroad, and will acquire the parameters normal for a modern Christian state.

KRŠĆANSTVO U KONTEKSTU POSTTOTALITARIZMA U BUGARSKOJ

SAŽETAK

Na temelju terenskih istraživanja autorica piše o promjenama religijskog života Bugara u poslijetotalitarnom razdoblju. Uočava da se promjene ogledaju u potiskivanju praktičnog religijskog života na razinu obitelji. Deformacije religijskog života zbog predugog razdoblja represije uvriježile su se, i prisutne su i danas, kad vlast više službeno ne provodi dekristijanizaciju. Promjene su utjecale i na Crkvu kao instituciju, pa i na crkvene obrede koji se silom prilika skraćuju. Navode se različiti kompenzacijski modeli preuzeti iz folklorne tradicije koji nadoknađuju nedostatak svećenstva. Laici često preuzimaju poslove svećenika, ponekad obavljaju i vjerske obrede, a ima primjera i da se umjesto crkvenoga obreda, primjerice krštenja, krštenje obavlja prema tradicionalnim običajima lokalne zajednice.