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Towards confessional unity: Bulgarian struggle with a difference

Abstract. The paper raises the question of the relationship between the notions of nation and religion in modern Bulgarian culture from the point of view of intellectual history and the history of concepts. It proposes to broaden the field of view by interpreting the idea of religious unity from the perspective of the structures of utopian thinking. Various texts of the Bulgarian intellectuals from 19th and 20th centuries that are devoted to the ideal of national unification by means of confessional unification are brought up in order to historicize and contextualize meanings and discursive practices aimed at annihilating religious differences. The analysis is focused on two concepts/ideas “confession” and “politics.” It is conducted in terms of “the monastic utopia” and “the utopia of politics” by Jerzy Szacki, which seems to have great potential for capturing the ways in which the Orthodox tradition manifests itself in the conditions of local modernity.

Keywords: utopian thinking, nation, politics, religion, unity, confession, Bulgaria

*Keeping your faith is synonymous with keeping your nation.
If we want to destroy a nation, we have to shake its faith, its
morals and its religion (M.St.P., 1932, p. 84).¹*

¹ All the translations are mine.

Introduction

Research on the relationship between the ideas of nation and religion, primarily in regard to various manifestations of nationalism and the influence of religious traditions and institutions in the “Balkan” context has a long tradition.² This is due not only to the fact that these links are founded on the common Ottoman heritage and the social stratification that was based on the millet system, but also because in the light of the Western-centric social sciences they seem particularly evident, gaining the status of a local specificity that is often associated directly with the alleged nationalist inclinations of the Eastern Orthodox Church. The issue of scientific presumptions and research practices in relation to the Eastern Orthodox cultural area is a key element in the process of shaping the image of the “Balkans” and is manifested, for example, in the approach to religious identities in the countries of the former Yugoslavia or Bulgaria in terms of “national religion” or “cultural religion.” It has even become a kind of cognitive, politically engaged paradigm. While the relationship between the ideas of religion and nation are fundamental, they are manifested at various levels not only in the “Balkan,” “Eastern European” or “post-communist” context. Since they should be perceived with regard to the local meanings and cultural practices, it is necessary not only to move away from the Russian experience which is supposedly a model, but also to go beyond the understanding of Eastern Orthodoxy as generating relations between religious and national identity in genetic terms, as well as relations “State – church” on the basis of the theological idea of the symphony of powers (Makrides, 2013). Undoubtedly, the notion of confessional unity as a guarantee of national harmony is one of the leading ideas in the social and political life of the modernizing states in the context of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, but one should go beyond the functionalist model of thinking about religion, as well as mentalist research prejudices against non-Western Christian denominations which in a significant extent is motivated by the Protestant genealogy of social sciences (Asad, 1993; Hann, 2011; Lubańska & Ładykowska, 2013).

In this article, I propose to broaden the view on this matter by interpreting the idea of religious unity in terms of the structures of utopian thinking

² I use the term “Balkans” in quotation marks because I want to emphasize its conventionality. In research, it is often used to describe the countries of the former Yugoslavia or Bulgaria, which is related to a specific perception of this region and its history. The meanings related to the ideas of nation and religion on the basis of (Slavic) national cultures in the Balkans are described in the 1st and the 3rd volume of the *Lexicon of migrating ideas in the Slavic Balkans* (2018–2020). Regarding Bulgarian culture, see Juda, 2019; Drzewiecka, 2018a.

that seem to be present in a discourse of local intellectual elites, which was developed in the context of the ambivalent experience of changing the cultural paradigm and opening up to the patterns of Western European modernity in the second half of the 19th century. The relationship between the ideas of nation and utopia is one of the most important research problems, especially in the context of the modernity project and the notion of national state. My subject, however, is not utopian texts in terms of genre and their relations with the shaping of images within the national culture, including spatial ones (Wegner, 2002), but the possible relations between utopian thinking models and the formation of specific ideas about national unity, and in regard to source material that has not been undertaken in utopian studies, i.e. the Bulgarian and Eastern Orthodox one.

The case of Bulgarian culture is particularly interesting, because it is as misunderstood as illustrative. On the one hand it illustrates the accumulation of fundamentally different cultural experiences (Byzantine, Ottoman, socialist, folk-Orthodox), although within the national “great narrative” it is quite blurred, on the other, the policy pursued by the Bulgarian authorities in the 20th century is constantly oriented towards the ideal of national unification regardless of changing historical and ideological conditions. My source material is various types of texts of secular and church intellectuals from the second half of the 19th and 20th centuries that update the ideal of national harmony by means of religious union. I am interested in their arguments for unity, and thus – the way they deal with a difference in a broader socio-cultural context. In this sense, I am looking towards a kind of synthesis of the local history of thinking about unity. The proposed interpretation is based on a historical and critical analysis of selected written texts that are understood as testimonies of (self)knowledge of intellectual elites, but also documents which reveal the mechanism of self-reflexivity (e.g. anthologies, school textbooks, magazines, journalism, historical and cultural and scientific dissertations in culture), and is a result of adapting the tools of cultural studies as well as the intellectual history (LaCapra, 1982; Szacki, 1991) and the history of concepts (Koselleck, 2011).³

The slogan “United we stand strong” (Bulg. *Saedinienieto pravi silata*) is the motto of the Bulgarian state, although – being in fact a long-established Latin phrase *Virtus unita fortior* – it is used by many countries, provinces and associations. In Bulgaria, it appears after the liberation from the Ottoman rule in 1878 as a translation of *L’Union fait la force* and confirms is the young

³ The article presents the results of a research conducted as a part of the Polish collective project “Migrating ideas in the Slavic Balkans (18th–21st centuries),” founded by the National Centre of Science, Poland (no. 014/13/B/HS/01057). For more on its assumptions and the eclectic research procedure, see Szwat-Gylybowa, 2018.

political elites were following the example of the Belgian constitution. This choice is indeed meaningful: the newly established Principality of Bulgaria faces the challenge of consolidating the community after five hundred years of the so-called Turkish yoke. The slogan makes sense not only geographically, which results from the ideal of uniting all the lands inhabited by the Bulgarian-speaking population, including Macedonia which was still part of the Ottoman Empire. It also reveals local struggles with various differences resulting from the heterogeneity of the traditions and cultural patterns found on these lands. Thus, due to the imperative of national unity, the community of origin, language and history is being invented, as in other countries during the so-called long 19th century. It seems, however, that in this case, the idea of common religious denomination is of particular importance. The Bulgarian nation is seen as united *because of* and *in terms of* religion in the discourse of the local elites.

The monastic utopia

Although the first Bulgarian Constitution of Tarnovo (1879) introduced freedom of religion, Eastern Orthodoxy is indicated as the ruling religion. Nevertheless, the new legislation allowed for schools for non-believers (dissenters), so the issue of “foreign” education and the role of the Orthodox Church in the process of upbringing citizens became essential. The figure that symbolizes the dominant position in this regard is Bishop Kliment of Tarnovo (1841–1901), a clergyman and politician who claimed explicitly that the Church is responsible for the education of citizens as a guarantor of both Christian values and Bulgarian national identity. The division exists on the line “Orthodox – non-Orthodox,” and, according to him, “various Protestants, Roman Catholics, liberals, heathens and deceivers” are the biggest threat to the state (Letter to Metropolitan Bishop Grigoriy, 1890; Drumev [Kliment of Tarnovo], 1968, p. 571). A vision of a nation in opposition to the negatively perceived external world emerges here. It is founded on the act of separation in religious terms. Not the state but the Orthodox Church is the superior instance. In this sense, the postulate of confessional integrity as a only way of survival and prosperity of the nation is a kind of the monastic utopia as defined by Jerzy Szacki (Szacki, 2000, pp. 131–152).

This approach can be explained by the Ottoman tradition. Faith was the basic element of identity in the Ottoman Empire, and as a result, it determined the social status and the prospects of an administrative and military career. Thus, confessional affiliation and the related legal subordination of religious

institutions were of paramount importance. The image of the world was unambiguous, as based on “Muslims – non-Muslims” dichotomy, which had its inverted reflection in “Eastern Orthodox – non-Eastern Orthodox” opposition. The importance of the theological order is testified by the Bulgarian writings of the early period of the so called National Revival: Orthodox Bulgarians are true Christians and all dissenters are heretics. This medieval church-folk model of the world is gradually being overlapped by a newer one, which was related to the national movements of the first half of the 19th century. Religious distinction (via linguistic distinction) began to be seen in terms of ethnicity. Confession became the basic determinant of national identification. As a result, having a *national* church within the Ottoman Empire was perceived as a proof of recognition. Therefore, the overriding goal of the Bulgarian elites in the 1860s and 1870s was to obtain the Sultan’s permission to establish the Bulgarian Church, and thus – to emancipate from the power of the Greek church elites.

The understanding of religious institution as a guarantee of identity is illustrated by the case of a leading intellectual of the period of National Revival, Petko Slaveykov (1827–1895), who, believing in the “orthodox paternal faith,” “holy and enlightened,” claimed that the universal Church deprives people of “national independence” in the plan of “spiritual life.” A metaphor, which, as a matter of fact, is of patristic provenance, is meaningful here: a church is a mother, a foreign church is a stepmother (*Historical writings on the Bulgarian Church*, 1864; Slaveykov, 1980b, p. 137). The argumentation for religious education proves that the affairs of the Church are subordinated to the good of the national community. The foundations of faith are “the Christian spirit” and “the sacred Orthodox tradition.” Thanks to the first one, a person becomes happy in this world, thanks to the second – they act in the name of the prosperity of his homeland (*In the topic of upbringing*, 1871; Slaveykov, 1981, p. 279).

The process of creating a national identity based on confessional identification requires reference to the question of the activities of various (neo) Protestant missions in the Ottoman Empire and the existence of Bulgarians-Catholics in these lands for several centuries (Elenkov, 2004). An analysis of the 19th-century polemics of Bulgarian intellectuals with other Christian denominations shows that the presence and the essence of the activities of the “foreign” missions were reduced to political issues, which was a consequence of identifying religion and national affiliation. The following assumption was crucial: denomination is an expression of not only faith, but also customs and history of the people/nation.⁴ Therefore, the so-called Protestant propaganda

⁴ Here it is important that the Bulgarian word *narod* means both “nation” and “people”; in the period of socialism understood both in ethnic and class terms.

was accused of dividing the nation in the sense of separating particular groups and individuals from the Orthodox Church. In turn, Catholics were associated with the violence of spiritual power, represented by the “papal despotism,” which is very far from the real interests of the people/nation (Drzewiecka, 2020a). At the same time, the attitude to the local Protestants was ambivalent. Being representatives of “modern” Western countries, they played the role of intermediaries in the transfer of knowledge and cultural goods which was seen as useful for the development of the nation (Drzewiecka, 2017). Moreover, after the liberation, the issue of the Islamic population living on the Bulgarian lands appeared. On the one hand, a Muslim was traditionally identified with a Turk, thus a foreigner and an enemy, but, on the other hand – there was freedom of religion in the principality, and the Turkish minority had the right to separate education in Turkish. In the face of the growing problem of national integration, an interest in converts and Bulgarians-Muslims emerged. Stigmatisation was replaced by the positively valued victimisation of this population, allegedly forcibly torn away from the “womb” of the Orthodox Church.⁵

The issue of national unity increased in the inter-war period, when Bulgaria had to cope with the effects of the so-called national catastrophe: a defeat in the Second Balkan War and the First World War which resulted in a collapse of the national ideal and social crisis. The dominant discourse which was characteristic of both school textbooks and journalism, as well as the writings related with the environment of the Church was aimed at discrediting the Other and homogenising Our Own. It manifested itself especially in the attitude towards Bulgarians-Catholics and Bulgarians-Protestants. According to the Church writers, the former are to return to the bosom of the Eastern Orthodox Church, once detached from the Bulgarian “element,” the latter appear to be traitors to the nation or victims of missionary lies.

The Church discourse focused on three issues: the critique of sects and other religious denominations, the history of the Church as a history of the nation and the role of the Eastern Orthodox faith in education. It was based on the (quasi)dogmatic opposition “Eastern Orthodox – non-Eastern Orthodox,” but the major threat was seen in terms of denationalization and destruction of the social order. Arguments against other denominations and sects referred both to the idea of true religion and solid community, and even modern science. For example, it was claimed that since Eastern Orthodoxy is the indigenous religion of Bulgarians and at the same time a true faith, it

⁵ The issue of interreligious relations in Bulgaria, especially in relation to the Muslim minority, is extremely complicated and has a rich literature on the subject. Here I am referring only to: Ivanova, 2002.

ensures the proper development of a child in the process of education, as opposed to teaching in a foreign faith, which is supposedly harmful from the point of view of psychology (*Nasty fascination. Foreign schools in Bulgaria*, 1932; Stalev, 1932). In this way, the coexistence of two orders reveals itself once again: theological (the pre-modern dictionary of the church tradition) and the social (the modern dictionary of the secular tradition). On the one hand, the apology of the Bulgarian people/nation is built due to the history of their survival and the specific resistance to foreign influences, supposedly resulting from the strength of the Eastern Orthodox faith and tradition. On the other hand, religious indifferentism of Bulgarians who were following foreign patterns or were too tolerant and in this sense were betraying national values, was strongly criticised (Dimitrova, 2006; Drzewiecka, 2019).

What is particularly significant is that during the communist period, the Eastern Orthodox religion was also understood as a guarantee of the unity and survival of the nation, which was possible thanks to the radical reduction of Eastern Orthodoxy to the determinant of Bulgarian culture, existence and tradition. Although the new constitution of 1947 guaranteed national minorities the right to learn their own language and develop their own culture, the ideal of internationalism quickly gave way to the idea of national unity. The situation of the Muslim population, which was even more complicated by the situation that after the war Turkey found itself on the side of “the West,” was a litmus test here. Emphasizing the national – i.e. Bulgarian and, *in this sense*, Eastern Orthodox – characteristics of the class society after all had a strictly propaganda goal: to draw people away from Islam and to create an orthodox citizen of atheistic Bulgaria. The culmination of the idea of a united socialist nation was the so-called revival process (*vazroditelen proces*) which was expressed, inter alia, in the forced change of names of the Muslim population in 1984–1985 (Gruev, 2008).

In line with the tradition of National Revival, non-Orthodox Christian denominations in the socio-cultural sense appeared to be metonyms of Western culture. In the religious sense, they were discredited by being reduced to a political phenomenon. However, the attitude towards converts, the so-called new Bulgarians (mainly former Muslims), shows the situation was more complicated. The elimination of the religious obstacle did not lead to integration – converts remained strangers, which proves that the link between “Bulgarianness” and the Eastern Orthodox faith was perceived as genetic. This was confirmed by the provision of the democratic constitution of 1991, according to which the Orthodox faith is a *traditional* religion. And as a *tradition*, it is a symbol of Bulgarian identity that it monopolizes state rituals today, constituting a constant point of reference in civic declarations.

The utopia of politics

The introduction of the monastic utopia, however, was carried out not only through the discursive annihilation of differences, but also through the practical annihilation, i.e. not only by the ideological, but also political means. The place of the Eastern Orthodox religion in schools and its role in the upbringing of Bulgarians have been the leitmotif of public discussion since the period of the National Revival. The narratives are dominated by the Old Testament historiosophy, according to which the history of the nation coincides with the history of its religious institution. In this perspective, the diagnosis of social decline and secularisation of the nation that was made in the conservative circles at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, and especially in the inter-war period, was directly related with the growing number of “sects,” which – due to the historical experience and the circumstances of the fall of the medieval Bulgarian empire – was supposed to indicate the collapse of the current state. In this context, the Church writers noted a wrong state policy, by which they revealed the tension between the constitutional regulation of freedom of religion and the official status of the Eastern Orthodox Church. They made demands for changes in legislation aimed at limiting the “subversive” activity of sects: “Let us remember that a statesman who does not want to raise the religion of a nation is in fact an enemy of the nation, because he ignores the most powerful national creative force and creates anarchy by dividing national strength” (*The need to legally limit the activity of dissenting propaganda*, 1924; Goszew, 1924, p. 6). The culmination of these persuasive conservative discourse is the direct association of Catholicism with monarchism and despotism, and Protestantism with revolutionism and anarchism (*The incorrectness of foreign religious propaganda in our country*, 1926; D-r B. 1926).

At the beginning of the 1940s, in war circumstances, the introduction of appropriate provisions in the law on protection of the nation was even discussed. According to the Church writers, being aimed against religious sects, they would ensure an education which is national and moral (*The Harmfulness of Religious Sects*, 1940; Vreda..., 1940). The contradictions between the right to freedom of religion and the hegemony of the dominant religion, as well as the pluralism of the modern state and the conservatism, lead to the conviction that it was necessary to apply more radical measures. The Church required that the state intervention would be greater, which may be seen as an expression of the traditional Eastern Orthodox ideal of the close relationship between the church and the state authorities, in compliance with the theological idea of the symphony of power. Adapted to new conditions, it expressed

itself in an expectation the religious matters should be resolved politically. This is where *the utopia of politics* appears. According to Szacki, the utopia of politics places a given ideal within reach because the use of political and legal means is an obvious way to achieve the goal, in this case the implementation of the monastic utopia (Szacki, 2000, pp. 153–171).

The modern idea of politics appeared among the Bulgarians in the context of their fight for independence in the second half of 19th century (Drzewiecka, 2020b). For example, Petko Slaveykov pointed out that a full agreement between the rulers and the ruled is necessary, the mutual knowledge about objectives and needs is possible only thanks to the free press which is an intermediary between individual social groups in the state, but also between nations as well as between nations and authorities. If the authorities are to be strong, they must be based on the people/nation. The government should be like a father or even a business partner (*The right intermediary between the government and the nations*, 1871; Slaveykov, 1981, pp. 121–128). Nevertheless, almost from the beginning, as shown in the writings of the Bulgarian intellectual elites from that period, there was not only a notion of crucial role of the press and public opinion, but also a sense of ambivalence being part of political life, which was associated with both the evident journalistic manipulations and the cynicism of Western powers. Various dictionaries shows that what was always present on the semantic horizon of the modernizing Bulgarian culture was a vision of politicians as crafty buggers.

The politics was understood as a sphere of conflict of interests, and not a sphere of agreement or seeking a consensus as documented by the etymology and classic tradition of the use of this notion. The alienated power, the abstract public sphere, and the unjustified hierarchy, resulting from the new social stratification after liberation, were among the issues that had an impact on the Bulgarian notion of the politics. At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, due to the problems with the parliamentarism, high prerogatives of the monarch and general social and economic problems, the initial pro-state enthusiasm was replaced by a disappointment with the real situation and political practices.

What is particularly meaningful, however, is that according to Bulgarian intellectuals, the reason for these fast collapse of ideals lied not only in the new political system, but also in the Bulgarian nation itself. The thesis that the Bulgarians were not prepared to change their socio-political status, to abandon their “orientalism” or “Balkanness,” became a leitmotif. For example, Stoyan Mihaylovski (1856–1927), one of the leading writers and critics of the period of building modern statehood, claimed that the public order reflects the condition of the nation. Referring to the French philosophical and political thought and

the idea of moral progress, he insisted on a vision of politics as a teaching of moderation, the aim of which is to arrange, i.e. channelize, human interests. Therefore, he postulated healing of public life by shaping the sense of duty, solidarity, devotion, and love. For without morality, neither true freedom nor true democracy is possible (*How states fall and die*, 1924; Mihaylovski, 1940).

In the Bulgarian reflection on the domestic political life, a certain regularity can be noticed, resulting from the sense of the crisis of representativeness, the disappearance of the link between the rulers and the ruled, and thus from the experience of the radicalisation of the “power – people” opposition. The criticism of political parties and the parliamentary system in general was accompanied by proposals concerning either the introduction of an alternative organisational order, or the initiation of some social correction mechanism, a kind of a new intermediary. This was about public opinion and proper civic conduct especially. They both were supposed to be achieved not so much by changing the criteria of the organisation as by a new education. However, regardless of specific solutions, the argumentation of the Bulgarian elites always referred to the axiological sphere.

That is how the paradoxical functioning of the idea of politics in the Bulgarian culture reveals itself. On the one hand, the main subject of political reflection is the criticism from the point of view of morality – so the notion of politics as a sphere of conflict and struggle for personal interests emerges; but, on the other hand, the reformist imperative is also articulated – so the notion of politics as consent and common action for the good of the nation comes in the foreground. Nevertheless, the hope for change was quite weak, since the common belief was that it is impossible in (current) Bulgarian conditions. Ultimately, the only possible solution was the new way of upbringing citizens, and not the new organisation of the state, as it was only seen as a manifestation of a national character. And so, these notion that political and legal measures never appear to be effective are in the core of the fall of the *utopia of politics*. What remains is a dream of raising an individual who is capable of both introducing and acquiring all necessary changes.

The dilemma between the desire to establish a new political order and the general sense of maladjustment of individuals and the community deepened in terms of communist ideology. From the point of view of the typology of phenomena, it can be pointed out that after the both coups of 1944 and 1989, it turned out that what was necessary was to gradually educate citizens and carry out transformation through a reform and not a sudden change. The paradox was that the changes in education were also implemented by means of political measures, which lead to a fundamental impasse. At the

turn of the 21st century, the contradiction between the ends and the means was articulated (again) in the common observation of a double lack of morality in politics and civic conduct in society (Todorov, 2011; *Balgarski prehod*, 2015).

Although the politics appears to be a dirty sphere, in the Eastern Orthodox Church environment, the voices of close cooperation between the state and the church, and, in this context, the need to revise the religious policy in Bulgaria were still prevailing. However, the differentiation and fragmentation of social life, as well as the loss of trust in the church institution, which resulted not only from the nature of a modern pluralist society but also from local anti-clerical traditions (Drzewiecka, 2018b), have made the ideal of national unity based on confessional unity a mirage. In the new conditions, the search for new categories of understanding national harmony continues. Struggling with a difference is even more difficult. What can be seen as an attempt to neutralise the problem is current updating the idea of Bulgarian tolerance – for example by bringing up the narrative about saving Bulgarian Jews during World War II (Avramov, 2012), as well as the existence of multinational and multireligious traditions on Bulgarian lands.

The fragmentary and local history of thinking about unity presented here illustrates certain structures of meanings that combine pre-modern ideals and ways of articulating with the conditions of a modernizing society, which is defined by advancing social differentiation and ideological pluralism. It testifies to ideological struggles within the modern social imaginary, which refer to the coexistence of various (post)Enlightenment concepts of the community life (and as such is relevant also for other countries): the idea of confessional unity as a guarantee of national harmony, the idea of politics as a tool for control in matters of worldviews, the idea of education as the only way to a real change. In this sense, the use of the categories of *the monastic utopia* and *the utopia of politics* offers an insight on the relationship between the notions of religion and nation. Addressing the issue in a mediated way, it helps avoid the pitfalls of modern scientific pre-judgments and reductionisms. On the other hand, it seems to have the potential to capture the ways in which the tradition of thinking in terms of the theological idea of the symphony of powers is manifested in the conditions of a secular nation-state, i.e. it is understood as a metonymy of a solid – in the sense of a homogeneous – community. In this sense, it can offer an in-depth look at the experience of modernity on the Eastern Orthodox ground, as long as it is expressed in a belief that there is a close relationship between the notion of national harmony and the ideal of cooperation between the state and the Church. These issues require further historicization and contextualization in regard to other cases, nevertheless it

can be concluded that the modern ideas of politics and education or social upbringing are particularly important and still underrepresented points of reference.⁶

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⁶ Prospects for further comparisons in this regard are offered by the Lexicon 2018–2020.

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