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**RELIGION AND NATIONAL IDENTITY  
IN MONO-CONFESSIONAL AND MULTI-  
CONFESSIONAL COUNTRIES IN EUROPE  
AND IN THE BALKANS**

**ABSTRACT**

In this paper, the authors will firstly analyze the different places and role of religion in relation to national identity, subject to the prevalence of one or more religions. Secondly, in this context the authors will pay due attention to the role of religion in relation to the historically shaped either strong or weak connection developed between religion and the ethnos.

Based on the analysis of the available empirical material, the authors will draw conclusions on the ambivalent potential of religion regarding national identity, depending on the combination of both of the abovementioned factors.

The conclusion remarks will be illustrated by two case studies, of Macedonia and Bulgaria in order to notice and to elaborate the specificities and similarities of the basic topic of this paper.

***Key words:*** national identity, religion, mono-confessional nations, poly-confessional nations.

Religion has complex and ambiguous relations with the strengthening or the weakening of the national identity. The mono-confessional or multi-confessional character of the given country is one of the factors that, interwoven with many others, demonstrate specific influence over those relations for each particular country. There are examples of such interwoven factors both in the Western European and Eastern European countries, no matter whether the basic religion is Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Protestantism or Islam; in this case the historically created and reproduced synthesis of the ethnos/ nation and religion in the mass knowledge is important. For example, interesting and informing is a recent study of those processes in Europe: Italy (Ferrari, 2005), Greece (Molokotos-Liederman, 2005), Denmark (Riis, 2005) are described as countries where “the religion makes the nation”, while the multi-cultural attitudes characterize predominantly England, Germany and Switzerland. Certainly, the thesis that “religion makes the nation”, as well as its consequences for the social status of the small religious groups and of the other denominations depends on a multitude of factors.

One of them is the role of the state as a regulator of those processes.

“Ontological primacy” of the state over religion and the church during the secular 20th century (Zylberberg, 1990, p.93) and in the presence, defines the tendency for each European country, not subject to the form of the government – democracy, totalitarianism, welfare states etc. The “project” of the state, not subject to being called “a dialogue”, “interaction”, dictate, “protectionism”, “ethnic management” etc., is to control the social positions of the church, to instrumentalize it for its own purpose or to marginalize it. In democratic regimes, it is realized through democratic means – legislation, consensus; in totalitarian regimes - both with violence and compulsion (Bogomilova, 2010).

The reason for the comparatively poor presence of the religious pluralism in the contemporary world is namely the state’s pursuit to support the historically created, or even to form missing symbiosis between ethnos and religion, nation and religion for the purposes of strengthening the very statehood. In this context, the mono-confessional character of the given nation is potentially “favourable” circumstance for its strengthening and the strengthening of the statehood, but the way of realization of the later depends on the type of the state and its regulation: monistic or pluralistic, secular or religious etc.

Another factor on which depends the connection between religion and national identity, the direction in which the mono-confessional or multi-confessional peculiarity and their potential conflicting character will act, is whether they are realized in a country, situated in the “centre” or in the “periphery” of the global world - problem, that is considered by the American sociologist of religion J. Spickard. He divides the ethnical conflicts in three types (Spickard, 2010). The

peaceful type is characteristic for the countries that are in the “centre” of the global economy (according to him, the economic factor, the level of the economic development determines the way of defence of the rights; in the more developed countries, identities are changed more freely). The conflicting type is valid for the semi-peripheral and peripheral regions of the global system.

E. Gellner conceives the created prejudices as being deeply determined by the social status of their holders, and secondary enhanced by the different cultural features /religion, race/. The ethnical, cultural and other distinctive marks are conflicting factors that underlines the basic features – differences in the access to education and power (Gellner, 1999, p. 128).

J. Liwerant also accepts that collective identities are marginal, secondary effect of the social-structural processes, related mainly to the power and the economic process. This “drama” unfolds in different social arenas (territorial, communal or religious) and in different political – geographic nets (regional, local, national) within the global context (Liwerant, 2002, p.254).

In contrast to the presented points of view, according to which the connection between religion and national identity and its social impact, especially in regard to the potential conflict, depends on the state regulation, economic and power processes, the location of the given country in the global system, Zigmund Bauman shares the thesis that the main factor in that relation are the interests of the developed countries. He associates the religious and ethnical conflicts in contemporary times, the opposition of the religious and ethnical relations to the interests of the powerful, developed countries. Confirming ironically, “The global order is in need of large local disorder ...”, he points out, that the issues of sex, the ethnical and religious feuds eliminate the debate on the material penury “as the deepest source of all inequalities and the entire injustice.” (Bauman, 2003, p.127). He endorses recently increasing criticism of the ideology of multiculturalism, but from a different, humanistic perspective – as a plausible facade that hides, conceals the depth of the problem of poverty, of “material penury”: “The moral shame of the deprivation of resources is miraculously interwoven as esthetical beauty of cultural diversity”; the new culturalism / multiculturalism is equal as the old racism, it is “reconciliation to the fact of inequality”(Bauman, 2003, p.129); “the intellectual burnish of the human’s doom”; “manifest of acquiescence”; “product of mimicry of the world” (Bauman, 2003, p.160). Z. Bauman shares the point of view of the philosopher Richard Rorty, that the involvement of 95% population of the world in the ethnical and religious feuds is premeditated policy.

Looking for the subjects responsible for such state of the matters, Z. Bauman blames the intellectuals to be lacking humanism and courage to choose and protect

some particular living style instead of declaring “multiculturalism”; instead of fulfilling their spiritual obligation, they enter new roles and niches of “experts, academic clowns or media celebrities” (Bauman, 2003, p.150). According to Bauman, determination of the theoretical and humanistic horizon in the solution of those problems is the “universality of the human” (Bauman, 2003, p.169).

As usual, each of the points of view, holds as the basic and determining the action of a sole factor (mono-confession, state regulation, position in the world system, economic and power status etc.) goes beyond its methodological limitation in the interaction with the other points of view and factors.

The above-mentioned trends are observable in the Balkan countries as well. One of the most marked tendencies in the last decades of the 20th century has been the involvement of religion, and especially of Eastern Orthodoxy, in the ethnic-political projects in most Balkan countries. But the situation is quite different in each of the countries here depending on the combination of many social and cultural factors.

## I. BULGARIA: THE DOMINANT ROLE OF THE POLITICAL-STATE SYSTEM

### 1. National Identity and Political Division

Although it was an important historical factor for cultural and national preservation in Bulgaria, Orthodoxy was not connected with the founding myth of nationality. Moreover, during the Turkish domination the religion tended to acquire an overtone of Greek domination, becoming associated with Greek interests promoted by the Patriarchate of Constantinople (Stanimirov, 1925, pp.141-142).

This was one of the causes why the attempts in modern times to unite the national idea with Orthodoxy were not particularly active or successful. National mythology about the values and missionary projects of the nation were fuelled mostly by the idea of joining “imported” large-scale mythologies such as European values (science, economic growth, pragmatism); or the Slavic idea, usually embodied by Russia and connected with values such as warm human relations, spirituality, etc. (Bogomilova, 2005).

The second reason for the gradual withering of the Orthodox-based national mission myth in Bulgaria is connected with the specific features of the Bulgarian political elite. In modern and recent history internal divisions and contradictions have marked this elite, by differing foreign-policy orientations, by lack of character and a sense of its historical mission. The political confrontation between the two basic political parties, UDF and BSP, has divided the Bulgarian society into two hostile factions ever since 1989, thus depleting the emotional energy of the elite.

This division affected the Bulgarian Orthodox Church as well, weakening it by the creation of two parallel synods vying for legitimacy. The use of Orthodox religion in the national historical mythology in the course of the changes would have been understandable if the confrontation had occurred along ethnic lines - Bulgarians vs. Turks - a conflict that the Communist Party tried to activate in the 1980s. With the start of changes in 1989, this confrontation was replaced by confrontation between parties: the political division overcame the ethnic confrontation.

## **2. The influence of the political division on the Bulgarian Orthodox Church: the Schism**

Since 1992, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church has been in a state of painful and lasting schism. This division and opposition was a reflection of and influenced by the political opposition between the two main Bulgarian political parties in the beginning of the democratic changes, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (former Communists) and the Union of Democratic Forces.

In coming to power after the democratic changes of the early 1990s, the party Union of Democratic Forces proclaimed that the Holy Synod of the BOC had been a collaborator of the communist regime. Three of the bishops belonging to the circle of associates of the Patriarch Maxim founded a new, “authentic” synod, which received legal status under the administration of the UDF. After the UDF fell from power in 1993 and the former communist party, the BSP, came to power in its turn, state support was transferred to the Synod headed by the Patriarch Maxim.

Analysts believe the schism has political, economic and religious causes (Broun, 2000). The political causes involve the political interests of the parties coming to power in turn and successively supporting either side of the divided Church. The economic interests involve ownership of the property of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church.

The ultimate result of the schism, to which the ruling party NMSS coercively put an end, first through the Religious Denominations Act in 2002 and then by the intervention of court and police in 2004, was the loss of authority and trust in the BOC. The fragile relation of the Eastern Orthodoxy to the national identity has been eliminated.

## **3. The state and the new Religious Denominations Act; mono-confessionalism and religious pluralism**

The new Religious Denominations Act (December 29, 2002) asserts “the right of each person to freedom of conscience and religion, as well as equality before the law, regardless of religious affiliation and conviction.” (RDA, 2004, p.77).

According to data of the Directorate on Religious Denominations, by December 29, 2002, there were 31 registered religious denominations. 6 years after the new Act coming into force there were around 100. The statistics of the process shows: 1989 – eight registered denominations; 2002 – 31; registered under the new Act: 2003 – 4, 2004 – 25, 2005 – 12, 2006 – 13, 2007-8 – 15; the total number of registered denominations in 2008 – was 99. The Christian religious communities are 87% of all registered religious communities. According to data from the statistical census (NSI, 2011) the confessional belonging of the Bulgarian citizens (total number 5 758 301) is as follows: Eastern Orthodox – 4 374 135; Muslims – 577 139; Catholics – 48 945; Protestants – 64 476; not indicated – 409 898, etc.

Regardless of its positive aspects, compared to the law of 1949 and the fact that it has taken into consideration the basic European standards in this sphere, the new Religious Denominations Act was quite critically judged by certain organizations for the protection of rights, by representatives of the new religious movements, by the largest opposition party, the Union of Democratic Forces especially regarding Article 10(1) of the law that states: “Eastern Orthodox is the traditional denomination in the Republic of Bulgaria. It has played a historic role in Bulgaria’s statehood and has current meaning in its political life. Its spokesperson and representative is the autocephalous Bulgarian Orthodox Church... (2) The Bulgarian Orthodox Church is a legal entity... (3) No Act or secondary legislature shall use Paragraphs 1 and 2 as grounds to grant privileges or any advantages.” (RDA, 2004, pp.80-81).

The specialists on the issue accept the “traditional Church” status as compatible with the European legal standards and practice (Ferrari, 2000, p.29).

Criticism was based on the interpretation of this Article whereby the very law assigns legal status to the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and to one of the two opposed synods, headed by Patriarch Maxim. According to “ECHR Judgment in Case of Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and others v. Bulgaria”: “Moreover, although, the ex lege recognition of the Church cannot be seen as incompatible with Article 9 in principle, its introduction in a time of deep division was tantamount to forcing the believers to accept a single leadership against their will.”

## II. CASE STUDY - MACEDONIA

### 1. Macedonian Orthodox Church and National Identity

It is common to talk about the Macedonian Orthodox Church as a “spiritual mother of the orthodox Macedonian people, in or outside their homeland, as well as of all orthodox Christians living in the Republic of Macedonia” (Commission, 2011).

The commonly known syntagm, Macedonia – the biblical land, applies to Macedonia in the true sense of the word. The roots of Christianity are related to the missionary journeys of the Holy Apostle Paul, recorded in the Apostolic Acts. Macedonia is the first European country where the apostle Paul had arrived, upon the call of a “Macedonian” who had kindly asked him, “Come across to Macedonia and help us!” (Grozdanovski, 2007) Apostle Paul was followed by the other Apostles, Silas, Timothy, Lucas, Mathews. In the fifth century, apostle Paul’s brother, Apostle Andrew was crucified. Macedonia was entirely Christianized during the apostolic period.

The long history points out the significance of the establishment of the Macedonian Church Justiniana Prima, then the Ohrid Archbishopric and, of course, the Macedonian Orthodox Church.

In the history of the orthodoxy of exceptional importance is the work of the Slavic educators Cyril and Methodius, as well as their disciples Saints Clement and Nahum of Ohrid. During the Samuel Kingdom, the Ohrid Autocephalous Archbishopric was established with the rank of a patriarchate. After the fall of Samuel’s Kingdom, the Ohrid Archbishopric existed for entire eight centuries. It was abolished by the Turkish sultan (Mustapha III) in 1767. The period that followed was a period of strenuous and “fierce struggles” for its restoration and acquiring autocephaly.

In 1944, an Initiative Board for organizing the Macedonian Orthodox Church was established. Then followed periods of improving and worsening in its relations with the Serbian Orthodox Church, under which jurisdiction it was. However, because the Macedonian Orthodox Church did not find a common language with the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Holy Synod of the Macedonian Orthodox Church in Ohrid in 1967, two hundred years after the abolishment of the Ohrid Patriarchate, has proclaimed the Macedonian Orthodox Church as autocephalous (Dimevski, 1989).

The historical introduction to the elaboration of the issue of the orthodoxy and the national identity points out how big is the contribution of the orthodoxy, and at the same time, how big is its significance for the Macedonian identity. The very name – Macedonian, attached to the doctrinal determination, speaks about the special place that the Macedonian Orthodox Church has in the providing and, of course, preservation of the Macedonian identity. The proclamation of the autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church was simply inseparable from the political structures that have provided the necessary support. The building of the relations between the Macedonian Orthodox Church and the political structures has unfolded gradually without any disturbances and conflicts in the church / state relation. Exactly in those relations, church – state or vice versa, the symbolic, as well as the real significance of the Macedonian Orthodox Church – Ohrid Archbishopric for the Macedonian people is especially expressed. The symbiosis of the sacred elements



and the secular political practices, with their entire fierce occasionally express and develop both the collective and the individual identity (Belchovski, 2011).

The issue of the mythology bases of the Macedonian national identity, of course, supported by the historical facts, as well as the current events related to the non-recognition by the worldwide orthodoxy (Belchovski, 2011), as well as the disputes about the name issue, largely contributes to strengthening the historically founded bases of the Macedonian orthodoxy regarding the national identity. Nonetheless, they also create basis for production new myths (Proeva, 2009).

The sociological analyses of religion in Macedonia, after the collapse of socialism, point out to the revitalization process of the religion. According to the empirical data, obtained from the research, it is said that in Macedonia, religion is revitalized and it is promoted within the nation. In a period permeated with conflicts, religion becomes identification marker of the nation. The national designation in the political events in the region, involves religion in the political segment, whereby covering a significant level of legitimacy of the national policy. The conflicts on the territory of Yugoslavia in the post- socialist period cannot be defined as religious, but religion significantly affects both their course and consequences (Vrcan, 1986). The process of religious life basically expresses the need of emphasizing and living both the individual and collective identities. What characterized this period was, of course, the need to keep and clearly profile the specificity and the distinctiveness of the Macedonian identity. The opening and, of course, the development of the recent events related directly to the Macedonian identity, increasingly contribute for religion to play special important role in keeping the national identity.

It should be also taken into consideration the fact that the ethnical dimension of the political-party organization and operation, as well as the 2001 ethnical conflict, significantly positions the role of religion, assigning a specific colouring to the contemporary political struggle on the Macedonian social scene.

The Church is financially independent. The Church was supported by some of the nationalized assets. Part of some its objects as accepted as cultural heritage and the state takes care for its maintenance.

## **2. Macedonian Orthodox Church and the “possible” divisions**

The Macedonian Orthodox Church – Ohrid Archbishopric – acts as the sole Orthodox Church on the territory of Macedonia. According to the official data (Commission, 2011), other churches of orthodox doctrine in Republic of Macedonia do not exist or operate as un-registered.

Due to the fact that the Macedonian Orthodox Church – Ohrid Archbishopric is not recognized by the worldwide orthodoxy, part of the believers headed by the



Bishop of the MOC, Jovan Vranishkovski, entered into a canonical unity with the Serbian Orthodox Church and on 23 September 2002 the Assembly of the Serbian Orthodox Church appointed him Egzarch of all territories of the Orthodox Ohrid Archbishopric. Since Jovan was appointed a Serbian exarch in Macedonia, he was accused of several charges for financial misuses, as well as for “inflammation of national and religious hatred, discord and intolerance” (OOA, 2011). The Orthodox Ohrid Archbishopric is not officially registered and recognized by the Macedonian state.

At the official site of the Orthodox Ohrid Archbishopric, there are a number of articles, which inform about its existence and operation. Among them, the most striking is the movie that especially underlines that the Government of FYROM had destroyed the temples of the canonical Orthodox Ohrid Archbishopric, which is in unity with the canonical orthodox churches in the world. The movie points out that the temple they had sanctified was a month later destroyed by the police of FYROM (October 2004).

Currently the disordained bishop Jovan, as a Serbian exarch in Macedonia or as the Macedonian public calls him “schismatic”, because of the investigation actions and charges brought against him, is outside the borders of Republic of Macedonia. The top leadership of the Serbian church often connects (and sometimes conditions) the dispute with the Serbian Orthodox Church on the issue of autocephaly exactly with the operation of the Orthodox Ohrid Archbishopric.

However, what is characteristic is the fact that the Orthodox Ohrid Archbishopric headed by Jovan Vranishkovski did not meet with a response among the Macedonian believers and the number of its members remained relatively small. What caused criticism among the Macedonian believers is exactly the fact that part of the Orthodox Ohrid Archbishopric’s activities has been financed by the Serbian Government, as well as by the Greek.

According to the positive law in Macedonia, until 2008, within one religion cannot be registered more than one religious community. Therefore, the Macedonian Orthodox Church was already registered, which automatically means impossibility for the Orthodox Ohrid Archbishopric to be registered as another orthodox church. However, the application of the latest 2008 law allows that possibility. Due to the fact that the Macedonian Orthodox Church has added the words Ohrid Archbishopric to its name in the court documentation for registration, the Orthodox Ohrid Archbishopric had demanded to be registered as a Greek Orthodox Archbishopric of the Pekj patriarch. Their operation was often sanctioned by the state authorities as being illegal.

Although the Orthodox Ohrid Archbishopric enjoys the support of the orthodox world, it still does not enjoy the support of the Macedonian orthodox believers.

The large majority of the Macedonian population continues to identify themselves with the Macedonian Orthodox Church - Ohrid Archbishopric, which is not in canonical unity with the rest of the orthodox churches. The non-recognition of the Macedonian Orthodox Church - Ohrid Archbishopric by the worldwide orthodoxy is interpreted as a "motive" for increased need of identification with its ethnicity. In the empirical research, more than 90 % of the respondents that declare themselves as orthodox believers come out as Macedonians.

### **3. Legal Framework for Regulation of the Religious Life**

In the constitutional act of the Republic of Macedonia, the churches, religious communities and religious groups are part of the non-profitable sector. They have the opportunity to establish religious schools, as well as to act within the social policy sphere through foundation of social and charitable institutions. The Macedonian Orthodox Church, the Islamic Religious Community in Macedonia, the Catholic Church, the United Methodist Church and the Jewish Community are mentioned in the Constitution. The multiplication of the minority religious communities in Macedonia was intensified during the last decade of the last century. Their active missionary activity, attached to the established core as well as the developing of religiosity in general, first of all, of the dominant religious structure, stimulates their public promotion. This became especially apparent during the presidency of Boris Trajkovski (1999-2004).

According to the Law on the Legal Position of Church, Religious Community and Group (2008), there are 13 churches, 6 religious communities and 7 religious groups registered in Macedonia. In this classification, one cannot "recognize" the criteria according to which it is determined why religious collectivities are defined as a church, religious community or religious group. In such a typology of the religious organizations, new religions can register themselves like either a church, or religious community or group. The registration of the religious organizations is done upon the request they submit to the competent authorities, that is, more precisely, according to the title they determine for their religious collectivity. What is characteristic is the fact that most of the religious collectivities tend to register themselves as churches, that is, within that organizational framework. Exactly such arrangement of the matters makes the real picture of the typology of the religious organizations in the Macedonian society to become vague.

The long disputed article of the previous Law, according to which only one church, religious community or group can be registered for one religion, is amended. The objections which were often made and which contested this article as representing

“protection” of the traditionally existing or majority religious collectivities, now are not “legally” grounded. Reports of the various monitoring in this sphere state that “the freedom of religion is respected in the practice”. However, they underline that the latest legal frameworks regarding the procedure of registration are slowly going into effect and they disable the religious groups to acquire legal status (State Department, 2009).

The Primary court Skopje 2 is in charge of the registration of the religious groups, in accordance with the Law on the Legal Position of a Church, Religious Community and Group (2008). Although the Constitution lists five religions, as well as the fact that significant resources are “invested” in the majority religious communities, we must emphasize the fact that there is no state church in Macedonia.

There is a legal framework for revival of the religious pluralism. Nevertheless, connecting the issue of religion to the ethnic belonging leaves small space for development of other and new religions. The number of believers in the new religions is minor, which, of course, again indicates the importance of the symbiosis between the ethnicity and religion in the Macedonian religious configuration. The process of formation and registration of the new religious communities takes lot of time. The remarks regarding the “slow” application of the new legal regulation are also attached to it. Although there is a sound legal framework, it is occasionally applied incompletely and improperly.

## CONCLUSION

The dominant religious subject in the Bulgarian “case study” (the Orthodox Church) is in an ambiguous situation with regard to the state and political sphere: a) being institutional element of the as yet unstable state/national identity, the state tends to support and give it preference in some respects; b) being a possible institutional competitor of the political elite when vying for influence over mass demands and moods, the elite is motivated to limit the potential influence of the Church. Today those complex relations undergo interesting changes towards new symbiosis.

In the Macedonian case, the state tends to support the Macedonian Orthodox Church, as one of the key pillars of its identity. The Church and the political elite are rather partners than competitors, in the case of Macedonia. In general, the Church is financially independent, but not internally divided. The Church received support from some of the nationalized assets.

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