The cultural policy on the Balkans and the study of Catholicism in Bulgaria

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THE CULTURAL POLICY ON THE BALKANS AND THE STUDY OF CATHOLICISM IN BULGARIA

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Abstract

In this paper, we aspire to develop a present-day concept of Catholic confessional identity and to place it in the context of identity construction in the Balkans as a “crossroad of civilizations”. The research starts from the premise that understanding confession as a marker of identity can be applied to other identity markers (such as ethnicity, language, cultural heritage, the past) in the 21st century. Our overall objective is to place religion in its broader social and cultural context and to address issues of plurality and accommodation. The process of investigation also invokes a permanent discussion on the topic within a comparative framework and from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Keywords: Catholicism, religious identity, marker of identity, cultural pluralism.

Methodological Approach and Scientific Background

In Europe, the Reformation’s identity politics followed Luther’s argument that salvation could be achieved only through an inner state of faith, and attacked the Catholic emphasis on exterior conformity to a set of social rules. True religiosity was identified with an individual’s subjective state, which lead to the division between real identity and outer practice. As a reaction to the wars of religion in Europe after the Reformation, liberalism established the principle of toleration - the idea that religious goals could not be pursued in the public sphere in a way that restricted the freedom of other beliefs or churches. But while modern liberal ideas advise that state power should not be used to impose religious belief on individuals, it left unanswered the question of whether personal identity and creed could conflict with the rights of people to uphold a particular religious tradition. [Barron, 2007: 87]

Today we live in a global society with very different religious beliefs, political ideals, moral values and community structures. Our primary aim is to transform the theoretical frames and the political practices of interaction between religion and the secular social models, applied to Catholicism. In the modern world the ideas of tolerance and pluralism rest on neo-liberal and post-secular

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ideas of personality and society and still religious identities continue to matter. What we need now is a mutual engagement of different perspectives and a comparative study of heterogeneous traditions: the inter-religious and inter-ethnic dialogue should bring together previously opposing groups by the means of an ‘open discourse’ and a pluralistic approach to the local discrepancies.

The guiding principle of the new Catholic identity is to build relations of tolerance and understanding between ethnically and religiously opposing forces and to shape a modern European civil society. So we should reconsider the inherited barrier between secular, modern and more traditional religious values. Rather, we have to develop new and creative approach to political orientations of secular modernity on the one hand and religious social practices, on the other. We should combine the global perspective on traditional Catholic thought with a social scientific research on integration and civil society in accordance with the dual sources of religious and secular attitudes.

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The current state of Catholic studies in Bulgaria gives priority to developing tolerance and new perspectives on the post-secular overlapping of religion and the public sphere (as well as their secular division). We need a solution to such problems as nationalism, religious intolerance, and chauvinism in attempt to overcome traditional intercultural and ethnical conflicts. From the early 80’s the Catholic theme in our country has been actively developed from a folklorist, historical and ethnological perspective. Researchers working in this field have enjoyed popularity and productivity: among these are the present Director-General of UNESCO Irina Bokova, R. Tasheva, N. Rashkova and others.

One of the important issues that traditionally attract the social scientists and philosophers in my research organization – Institute for Philosophical Research – Desislava Damyanova and Rumen Mudrov (Catholicism), Bogdana Todorova and Zhasmina Donkova (resp. Islam and Protestantism) – is particularly engaged in examining the fundamental assumptions of theologo-political thinking, contemporary religious problems and dimensions, the debates on secularization, etc. The former Bulgarian Ambassador to the Vatican Prof. Vladimir Gradev develops a concept of postmodern religiosity and modes of balance between theology and politics that lead to a radical change in the paradigm of the new millennium, especially the global course of modern Catholicism.

Problem Statement and Expected Results

Nowadays we pay greatest attention to modern confessional identities and communities, so our focus is on religion and our main target group – the Catholic theme juxtaposed to the orthodox Christianity in Bulgaria. In this

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2 IPhR, now part of the Institute for the Study of Society and Knowledge.
diverse, but increasingly interconnected world, we need to find ways of peaceful coexistence, especially on the Balkans. The results of our research program will be oriented in resolving the following problems:

- The nature of the relationship between salvation and faith (theology and politics) is a result of the political processes of secularization in the Age of Modernity; the church-state relations in modern democracy: Catholicism and the debate for the religious roots of Europe. Justification of modern Catholic policy and prevention of fundamentalism and religious violence.

- We are going to analyze the processes of de-secularization, which initially led to a separation of the political sphere, and then gave the modern Catholic policy its actual explanation. We will examine the growing influence of Catholicism in the stage of world politics at the beginning of the third millennium and its role as one of the traditional denominations in our country. Our research strategy should pay special attention on the continuing scientific debate about the forms and aspects of individual and group identity based on the Catholic faith in the modern era of globalization.

- The regional relevance of the study of Catholicism has two dimensions: the first relates to the actual changes that occur in the identity of Catholics as a result of global transformations, taking place with different intensities in Bulgaria, Europe and worldwide by the end of the twentieth century. This subject is extremely relevant to the post-socialist countries and especially for Bulgaria, which is facing problems of its specific cultural heritage in view of the challenges of its changing socio-political role in the EU.

- The second dimension relates to the analysis of the factors that influence the various forms and manifestations of faith. Maybe we should relinquish the conviction that there is a common meaningful world and to recognize the presence of many ‘religious languages’ and value paradigms. They tentatively enter into a dialogue with each other and coexist more or less combatively. Our task is very responsible: to find the optimal conditions for mutual understanding and tolerance between distinct denominations, to involve them in the global civilization process.

One important issue we must face, is the following question: what is the specific area within which the subject – a person or a group of persons – should be left to take a stand, act and determine his/her religious position in accordance with his/her own views, without interference by another subject? With the exception of Europe, in most parts of the world the public sphere is not
secularized, religion remains a public and not a private matter, politics are articulated along visions of a ‘truth community’ and the self is seen as constituted by collective definitions, rather than by purely individual pursuits and interests. Given the continued, if not renewed, salience of confessional identities on the Balkans, as well as the potential of religion to provide legitimacy for existing conflicts world-wide, it is crucial to take it seriously, but not solely as a source of clashes and oppression. In our case study in Bulgaria, this means to see the potential of Catholicism to provide resources for tolerance and mutual acceptance with other faiths that are traditional for our country.

This is no less true of secular communities, which have their own beliefs, codes and myths. By the nature of the case, “communities of belonging” are not universal, but are bounded - they have their own histories and trajectories, their own languages and obligations. They may be more or less open, more or less ascribed, their boundaries - more or less permeable, but they always define some “us” as against some “other”. For our specificity is precisely the marker of these different communities of belonging, that define who we are and provide the settings in which we live our lives and where we feel most secure. Our primary aim is to transform the theoretical frames and the political practices of interaction between religion and the secular social models, applied to Catholicism. The fundamental assumptions of theologo-political thinking and the debates on secularization form a balance between theology and politics, leading to a radical change in the paradigm of the new millennium, especially the global course of modern Catholicism.

In today’s globalized world reticence and ethnocentrism give way to the dynamic development in comparison with others - not just with neighbors in the region, but with all creeds that co-exist in the local cultural, political and religious communities. Bulgaria has a traditional contribution in these areas, especially in prevention of ethnic conflicts and mutual acceptance of people, belonging to different denominations. During the change of the political regimes in East-European post-totalitarian societies, these processes used to be overshadowed by measures for overcoming the economic crisis.

Today our state is focused more than ever on religious tolerance and the ability to deal with the problems of fundamentalism. Mutual acceptance between the representatives of opposing beliefs is placed in the context of our membership in the European Union. We must face the difficulties in establishing this process by way of comparative analysis and well-grounded evaluation of the abovementioned trends, according to global standards, principles and criteria. This is possible by following the specifics of traditional Catholic communities in our country as well as in the rest of the world, taking into account the present-day condition of the faith.

In Bulgaria the Catholic identity divides into Roman and Greek Catholicism: the Latin rite as well the Uniats are deeply connected with the
history of our church and state liberation. Traditionally Catholicism used to be the third largest religious congregation in Bulgaria, after Eastern Orthodoxy and Islam. It has roots in the country since the middle Ages and is part of the worldwide Catholic Church, under the spiritual leadership of the Pope and Curia in Rome.\(^3\) Common problems of faith and of the Bulgarian Catholic Church are solved by the Episcopal Conference, which includes bishops, chaired by the Apostolic Exarch Hristo Proikov (Secretary-General is Father Srecko Rimats, monk of the Order of the barefoot Carmelite). It is named Inter-ritual episcopal conference in Bulgaria, because the confession of two different rites.\(^4\)

We face serious challenges in clarifying the nature and the trends of the new social phenomena associated with Catholicism in Bulgaria and the manifestations of the Catholic identity within the Balkan people. The judgments and assessments should always be placed in a broader international perspective. The revival of some traditional religious forms and their transformation in modern conditions also require from the inter-confessional dialogue to bring the message of the harmonious reconciliation of different faiths.

The resistance coming from incomprehensible for our traditional worldview cultural keys focuses our attention on the value of religious diversity; the cultural forms rearrange tradition in such a manner that the casual phenomenon suddenly opens a whole cycle of future and manages it with the authority of the established. Europe today is facing simultaneously the challenges of its expansion and the need to act jointly as an actor on the global level. The discourse, referring to the idea of homogeneity and stability of the group belonging, should be rejected and displaced by another, which is suitable for studying the identity dynamics, which is predominantly moving, interactive and shifty. [Joppke, 2004: 239-241]

Without taking into account the specific cultural premises, the post-national dimension of religious policy cannot be fully responsive to societal changes and

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\(^3\) As an entity, the Catholic Church consists of (1) two dioceses in Bulgaria, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Sofia and Plovdiv with Seat in Plovdiv, and the Roman Catholic Diocese of Nikopol with Seat in Rouse, for those of the Latin Rite and (2) an Exarchate with its seat in Sofia for those of the Eastern Rite.

\(^4\) In Bulgaria in 2004 according to “Annuario Pontificio 2005” there are: Bishops: 3, dioceses: 2. Apostolic Exarchate: 1. Catholics: 79,000 (According to the census of NSI in 2011 – 48945); priests: 52, secular priests: 17, monks-priests: 35; monks: 43, nuns: 87. While Bulgaria was contending with the Greek patriarchate for ecclesiastical autonomy, and the patriarch refused to make any concession, a movement was set on foot among the Bulgarians which pointed towards union with Rome. On 30 Dec.1860, 120 deputies of the people petitioned the Apostolic Delegate to receive them into the Roman Church on condition of the recognition of their language and liturgy, and the appointment of a bishop of their own nationality; almost 60,000 of their fellow-countrymen joined in the request. On 21 January, 1861, Pius IX himself consecrated a priest named Solkolski – the first Vicar Apostolic of Uniat Bulgaria. This movement, however, did not win the support of Catholic Europe, while the greatest obstacles were placed in its way by Russia and the patriarchate of Constantinople (http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/030466a.htm).
responsible for generating a common ground for personal, as well as group identity. The politico-cultural context in which universalistic principles could be applied, include a population accustomed to keeping the institutions of freedom alive and equally respecting the faith of each individual. If citizenship has to preserve its solidarity-building functions, it has to be given a valuable status, associated not only with civil and political rights, but also with the fulfillment of social and cultural rights. [Habermas, 1998: 118-119].

Cultural maintenance for institutionalized ethnic, traditional and religious differences intercepts its course with the national-identity dimension of multiculturalism. That is why we have to build new cultural policies and concepts of confessional identity, inspiring trust and a common store of knowledge across religious communities; to construct a shared frame of reference (to be drawn upon when events that may divide our societies threaten the ability of the faithful to live their differences together). We should also enhance the understanding of what has generally been viewed as a tension between modern secular and more traditional concepts of self and society and to interpret it in a “creative” way, rather than as an unbridgeable obstacle to communication. Hence we need to uphold the religious traditions as well as the modern secular thought and practice, realizing the crucial part that the relation between Church and culture takes in shaping a truly civil society, devoted to tolerance and plurality of human experience. [Joppke, 2004: 247]

For Hegel “the struggle for recognition” between initially equal conflict parties unfolds in an inherently deficient and unstable way. According to Jürgen Habermas “it is very important for different cultural, ethnic and religious forms of life to interact on equal terms within the same political community, which should provide a sufficient stimulus to integration in complex democratic societies.” [Habermas, 2002: 128] There is no need for a background consensus based on national homogeneity to act as a “catalyzing condition” for the public opinion, involving the process of deliberation and decision-making, underlying the possibility of a reasonable political understanding even among strangers. In the absence of more substantive commonalities between different faiths, democracy, as a set of procedures can supply the demand for stable legitimacy, securing the social integration on the Balkans.

Conclusion

The very end of the 20th century was a time of severe trials for the Bulgarian people and the Balkan Peninsula as a whole. Our belonging to the European civilization both in geographical and cultural aspect, though historically doubtless, has become a source of identity crisis. Most threatening to the Balkan region today are not the political failures, the economic instability,
nor even the demographic collapse, but the religious clashes and ethnic conflicts. This inter-cultural study is trying to point out why in times such as these, our hidden strength lies in the effort to rediscover the traditional spirit of solidarity, tolerance and charity (which Catholics call caritas).

The ideas outlined above can be briefly summarized as the following new trends: a) the establishment of a secularized public sphere within the Catholic community; b) the privatization of religion; c) a politics of rights rather than a politics of the good; d) a post-secular idea of the individual as a self-regulating moral agent. However in many regions of the world these ideas simply do not hold: in most parts of the world the public sphere is not secularized. Religion remains a public and not a private matter, policies are articulated along visions of the truth and the self is seen as constituted by collective definitions, rather than by purely individual pursuits and interests. The continued popularity of religious identities world-wide reveals their potential to form a focus of conflict and to provide a dangerous base for existing conflicts. This means that building a new cultural policy and religious politics can develop the potential of Catholicism to provide resources for tolerance and mutual acceptance.

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