

Mario Marinov

Religious Communities in Bulgaria

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Bulgaria is one of the Central-Eastern European countries for which relatively little literature about its religion is available in English. For this reason, if for none other, Dr Marinov's short book is a welcome addition. The bulk of the book is an historical account of the fortune of Christianity in the area, beginning with its arrival due to the missionary work of St Paul in the first century and, eventually, followed by its becoming the state religion under Prince Boris I in the ninth century, thereby leading to the destruction of paganism. We learn that the Bulgarian Church was initially an autonomous archbishopric under the ultimate jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Constantinople and continued as such after the country was conquered by the Byzantine Empire in 1018. Then, for political reasons, 18 years after the restoration of the Bulgarian state in 1186, Bulgaria was proclaimed a Catholic country. This, however, was only for a short period, with the Orthodox patriarchate being restored in 1235. There then followed the period of Ottoman rule (1396–1878) when, in line with the millet system, the Empire divided people according to confessional, rather than national, lines, and Bulgarians were treated as part of an integral community of Orthodox Christians. After numerous struggles, the Bulgarian Church regained its independence in 1870, and, shortly afterwards, the state regained its independence in 1878. The two World Wars saw the Church gaining and losing various dioceses. There then followed 45 years of Communist rule, out of which there developed a schism that continued well into the twenty-first century, although there is only one official Church at the present time.

The final chapters of the book include short accounts of Church holidays and festivals, modes of dress, dietary practices, rituals and the houses of worship and holy places to be found in Bulgaria. Prominent among these are the magnificent neo-Byzantine Saint Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in Sofia and the large complex of the famous Rila monastery, originally founded during the tenth century, which boasts many beautiful murals.

Dr Marinov considers Orthodox Christianity to be one of the touchstones of Bulgarian society (p. 68). The Church opposes modernization and preserves tradition. It is, however, experiencing serious financial difficulties with the state giving it only a small annual grant towards the repair of churches that are monuments of national culture. We learn that 59 percent of the population identified as Orthodox Christian in the 2011 census, but only 5.76 million of the total population of 7.36 million (78 percent) answered the religion question. In other words, of those who did actually respond to the question, 76 percent identified with Eastern Orthodoxy. However, few actually practice the faith, and, we are told, secularity is the most noticeable trend in Bulgaria (p. 13). Like many other Orthodox churches, the Bulgarian Church does not actively evangelise – a notable exception being that of Father Boyan Saraev, who has been active in converting Bulgarian Muslims to Orthodox Christianity. It would appear that, as again found in most Orthodox countries, being a member of the national Church is less a religious statement than a national one. But while Christianity has played an important role in Bulgarian political life throughout most of its history, today, the Bulgarian government is

secular, accepting the Church as a symbol of tradition but not as a political agent. The Church has, however, supported legislation limiting the functioning of new religious movements.

Almost 8 percent of those who answered the religion question in the 2011 census were Muslim. Islam in Bulgaria dates back to the eighth century, but it was to become the dominant religion during the five centuries that the region was part of the Ottoman Empire. Following Bulgaria's liberation in 1878, a large Turkish and Muslim minority remained in the country, but this was reduced by recurrent waves of emigration after the Russian–Turkish War (1877–78), during the Balkan Wars (1912–13) and at various other periods throughout the twentieth century. During the Communist period, there was a campaign to Bulgarize both Bulgarian Muslims and Turks, the latter being compelled to change their Turkish names. In the summer of 1989, the regime initiated a forceful deportation of ethnic Turks, but many of these returned after the collapse of communism at the end of that year. While the majority of Muslims are secular and wear Western clothes, it has recently become more common for the women to wear hijabs and burkas.

Just under one percent of the respondents to the religion question in 2011 associated themselves with a Protestant church. Although severely persecuted under the Communist rule, these churches, particularly the Pentecostal churches, have since had considerable success in evangelising, particularly among Bulgaria's Roma population, with the Faith Movement being especially popular. Other Protestant churches include Methodists, Baptists, Lutherans and Seventh-day Adventists. Catholics accounted for 0.7 percent, and the 0.2 percent of 'others' included the Armenian Apostolic Church, Jews, Baha'i, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Unification movement, The Family International (formerly the Children of God), ISKCON (the International Society for Krishna Consciousness), Sri Chinmoy, some Neo-Pagan groups and the indigenous White Brotherhood, founded by Petar Dunov in the early twentieth century.

The book ends with a thumbnail sketch of Father Dobri Dobrev, popularly known as Granpa Dobri, who, at the age of 86, gave away his possessions, embraced an ascetic lifestyle and devoted himself to raising money by walking each day to collect donations in front of the St Alexander Nevsky Cathedral. He has reportedly donated \$52,000 to the Church – a considerable amount by Bulgarian standards.

Dr Marinov tells us that the idea for the book came out of his involvement in writing for an encyclopaedia about religious practices, and in many ways, it reads like a long encyclopaedic entry. It is, perhaps, a book that one would be more likely to find in a museum or Cathedral bookshop than on the shelves of a university library. But this does not mean that it is not well worth the attention of scholars of religion in Central and Eastern Europe. I recommend it to readers of RASCEE as a delightfully easy-to-read and valuable source of information that is not readily available elsewhere.
