

**DIVERSITY OF NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS IN BULGARIA: THE  
EUROPEAN DIMENSION**

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**РАЗНООБРАЗИЕТО НА НОВИ РЕЛИГИОЗНИ ДВИЖЕНИЯ В БЪЛГАРИЯ:  
ЕВРОПЕЙСКОТО ИЗМЕРЕНИЕ**

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***Abstract:** The major problem of this paper is how the basic concepts of diversity and standardization can be applied to the issues of new religious movements. This social phenomenon usually appears on the micro level of society but in its concrete appearances it can affect the way major problems like tolerance, globalization, nationalism, and human rights can influence other spheres of social life.*

*I argue that new religious movements (NRMs) bring diversity and are often perceived as a challenge to standardization. Hence one of the problems which the greater society often faces with NRMs is the lack of predictability, which Elchardus (2010-a, 11) associates with standardization.*

*Keywords: diversity, standardization, new religious movements*

***Резюме:** Основният проблем на тази статия е как основните концепции за разнообразие и стандартизация могат да бъдат приложени към въпросите, свързани с новите религиозни движения. Този социален феномен обикновено се появява на микро нивото на обществото, но в конкретните си прояви може да повлияе на начина, по който основни проблеми като толерантност, глобализация, национализъм и права на човека могат да повлияят на други сфери на социалния живот. Твърдението на статията е, че новите религиозни движения (НРД) носят разнообразие и често се възприемат като предизвикателство пред стандартизацията. Следователно един от проблемите по отношение на НРД, с които широкото общество често се сблъсква, е липсата на предсказуемост, която Elchardus (2010-a, 11) свързва със стандартизацията.*

*Ключови думи: разнообразие, стандартизация, нови религиозни движения*

To mention my possible methodological starting points, I would like to keep to the approach of the Sociology of Religion and to avoid the use of theological, historical or philosophical vocabulary of categories. There is a number of reasons for this, but I would like to outline social problems which require a sociological approach to them. The use of a sociological approach also requires the distinction between scientific and everyday life conscience. Hence, I have to outline the definitions (or at least the working terms) within the Sociology of Religion such as "traditional religion", "church", "sect", "cult", "new religious movement (NRM)". A special attention is to be paid to the different use of terms, and especially the wide use of the term "sect" in modern Bulgarian press and everyday life, which is different from the scientific term and covers a much wider collection of religious movements.

The methodology applied is mostly qualitative due to methodological reasons. Participant observation, in-depth interviews, focus groups, content analyses, study of photographs, etc. have been applied in different case studies and analyzed over a period of 18 years. Comparative cross-national qualitative research is always a problem when we want to define clear criteria for comparison. Though, examples of similar researches in the United Kingdom and Bulgaria can be used as a model of comparison: one West European country with a traditional state-church relation within the model of Western Christianity and an East European country with traditional Orthodox Christian religion, high degree of secularity, and a strong communist influence in all spheres of life for a period of 45 years.

New religious movements in the United Kingdom have been extensively studied by Eileen Barker (1984, 1985, 1987-c, 1991-b, 1995), Bryan Wilson (1961, 1966, 1967, 1982, 1990), George Chryssides (1991), Roy Wallis (1984), David Martin (1990), Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas (2000), as well as by many other world-class scholars. Some of the most famous studies are listed in the bibliography. An interesting sociological question is why the United Kingdom is so popular as home to new religious movements in Europe.

This article studies the different images of Europe and reaction towards Bulgaria's membership in the European Union among representatives of traditional religions, new religious movements, nationalists, state officials.

The study describes the diversity of new religious movements, appearing in Bulgaria after 1990. The diversity ranges from the Unification movement and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) - "world-rejecting" new religious movements in the

classification of Roy Wallis (1984); through the big variety of charismatic neo-Pentecostal churches (“world-accommodating” new religious movements); to the White Brotherhood, Sri Chinmoy, the Silva method (“world-affirming” new religious movements), and many quasi-religious corporations, like AquaSource. The diversity among movements is described in several indicators: former religious affiliation, knowledge about religion, gender, age, social class, ethnic groups, growth.

Concerning new religious movements, one could always argue either whether they are new or whether they are religious. This is particularly true about the United Kingdom, where a certain degree of religious freedom has been present. In Central and Eastern Europe, and particularly in Bulgaria, the situation is different, as the oppression against religions has prevented many non-mainstream religious bodies from establishing earlier their legitimately functioning structures. In this sense the most of them are really a new social phenomenon for the post-communist countries. The other question – whether they are really religious, is much more complicated. Bulgarian society was not less secularized than the British society, and the appearance of new religious movements in Bulgaria coincided with the total opening of society toward more freedom in all spheres of life.

The appearance of a variety of political parties in Bulgaria in the beginning of the 1990s coincided with the appearance of a variety of churches and for many Bulgarians the basic differences between these two processes were not so obvious. Especially in a highly politically polarized society as the Bulgarian society of 1989 - 1991, where all non-political organizations (including women's, youth, cultural and other organizations) had to be defined in a discourse within the bipolar distinction “communist” or “democratic”. Apart from politics, the re-emergence of religious freedom also coincided with the re-emergence of phenomena like pornography, prostitution, freedom of travelling and the first challenges of the transition toward a market economy. My own opinion is that at the beginning of their existence in Bulgaria the new religious movements were more secular than in the later phases of their development when they became more engaged in their international structures and the Bulgarian society as a whole started to develop more normally as a free democratic society. In the later phases, for example, a young future entrepreneur does not need to become a member of a NRM in order to establish his international contacts through their networks, and a young future scholar does not need necessarily to join a NRM in order to be able to travel abroad and to read in Western libraries.

A characteristic feature of the newly emerging societies was the problem of the free choice versus the inability to realize it. People in Bulgaria, especially youth, did not know

how to behave within the new socio-political order and this created a number of social problems.

The re-establishment of many basic religious rights and freedoms brought a number of people back to the churches, but this was not a clear indication of religious commitment. Spirituality, however, emerged with a new force. Despite of all typical post-communist features of church-going as a “new fashion” or a symbolic ritual of political commitment, the different religious communities at last had the chance to express freely their specific beliefs and to undertake the first steps toward a legitimate recognition.

The specific features of the Bulgarian situation may be summarized as peaceful co-existence of different religions along with the compromises of the Bulgarian Orthodox church. The historical conditions had laid the foundations for the appearance of many ethnic groups with specific religious commitments, which has normally been supported throughout country's history by a certain degree of ethnic and religious tolerance. In the years of the communist regime many steps have been taken towards devaluation of the rights of Catholic and Protestant communities, Muslims and representatives of different smaller religious groups. The traditional religion in this society – Orthodox Christianity had to experience a great state intervention in its internal structures and organization of church life. The contemporary development in Bulgaria shows a continuous spectacle of splits and questioning of legitimacy inside the headquarters of the Bulgarian Orthodox church.

All these strange patterns of development lead us to a question: who can attract the youth? This is a strong argument for the explanation of the appearance of different new religious movements and their attempts to gain influence. Spirituality becomes a sphere of struggle for influence among different social communities.

The different stages of transition from communism are marked by the presence of different types of NRMs, according to the classification given by Roy Wallis (1984):

The beginning of the 1990s – the period of rejecting the communist past – is marked by the appearance of “world-rejecting” new religious movements, which tend toward a decline through the years 1990 – 2007. At the middle of the 1990s – the most difficult years of transition in economic terms – there was a steady growth of “world-accommodating” groups such as neo-Pentecostals. The other type – the “world-affirming” new religious movements is still not very popular in terms of membership, but they tend to appear in the public sphere after Bulgaria became a member of the European Union.

This trend of presence of a certain type of new religious movements in a certain historical period is empirically observed in Bulgaria but it could be applied as a model of

studying the presence of new religious movements in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe as well. The transition from “world-rejecting” to “world-affirming” new religious movements is also mentioned by Hunt when studying NRMs in the United Kingdom.

Social reactions towards new religious movements in Bulgaria include the constructions of reality offered by the media, parents and relatives of members of new religious movements, traditional religions, anti-cultists, nationalists, the public administration, human rights activists, the new religious movements themselves, lawyers, therapists, sociologists. The advantages of the sociological construction of reality are discussed.

The comparison between Bulgaria and the United Kingdom can take the different values given to notions of diversity and standardization as possible variables. These are the level of state interference in religious affairs and the level of tolerance towards new religious movements by the larger national society. The expected outcome is that the historically different cultures are strongly embedded and influence the different value of diversity and standardization in these countries. The process of European integration and its influence on the state interference in religious affairs, and on the level of tolerance towards new religious movements by the larger national society is another strong argument. This is also different in the two cases.

Diversity is to be found within the huge spectrum of NRMs, which, though very small in numbers, are to be found in Bulgaria. The small number of adherents is one of the indicators of diversity. As Elchardus argues, “The smaller such communities become, the more diversity there is” (Elchardus 2010-a, 11-15). The diversity ranges from the Unification movement and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) – both defined as “world-rejecting” NRMs in the classification of Roy Wallis (Wallis 1984); through the big variety of charismatic neo-Pentecostal churches (“world-accommodating”); to the White Brotherhood, Sri Chinmoy, the Silva method (“world-affirming”), and many quasi-religious corporations. The diversity among the individual movements and their respective members is to be found in several indicators:

1. Former religious affiliation – it can range between former atheists, adherents of traditional churches, spiritual “seekers”, members of other NRMs, etc.

2. Knowledge about religion – here diversity ranges between those who have sought exploration of different traditions and the desire for new knowledge has converted them to a NRM, and those who have had no previous knowledge about religion and find it in a NRM for the first time.

3. Gender – here you can have all three possible types of NRMs: with predominantly female membership, with predominantly male adherents, or with mixed membership.

4. Age – an interesting indicator for religion in Bulgaria in general. Sociological studies suggest a missing middle generation in most traditional religions in the country supporting a picture with flows of very old and very young activists. In most of the new religious movements when they flourished in the beginning of the 1990s the predominant age cohort was the one between 20 and 30 years of age. Now, in 2008 the change over time has shifted this generation in the group between 30 and 45 years of age, but there are many drop outs, as well as few new converts.

5. Social class – studies in the United Kingdom indicate the upper middle class as one of the most affiliated to the formation of NRMs. In Bulgaria children of the intelligentsia and former nomenklatura were among the first leaders of non-traditional religious groups. It is worth noting that “measuring” this indicator is somehow tricky. There is a tendency of the movements themselves to exaggerate the presence of members of families of political figures or rich families, and to undermine the ordinary members from all walks of life.

6. Ethnic groups – the universalistic globalized point of view of the churches of Pentecostal origin attracts many adherents of minority ethnic groups such as Roma. On the other hand, the White Brotherhood is attractive to its adherents with its emphasis on pan-Slavism, and old Bulgarian pagan traditions. There is also the other extreme – some groups tend to be rather exclusivist in their appeal to membership.

7. Growth – a tendency which I have observed in the period 1990 – 2008 is the decline of “world-rejecting” NRMs and the steady growth of “world-accommodating” groups such as neo-Pentecostals. The other type – the “world-affirming” is still not very popular in terms of membership.

As far as standardization is concerned, in the case of new religious movements it can be applied through the idea of human rights and its universal acceptance in different countries. Legal provisions of the treatment of new religious movements in Bulgaria should apply the same criteria as in other countries which have accepted the Universal declaration of Human Rights and other European provisions. People should be treated in the same way before the law regardless of their religious identity.

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