

# Symphonic Secularism: Eastern Orthodoxy, Ethnic Identity and Religious Freedoms in Contemporary Bulgaria

Kristen Ghodsee, Bowdoin College

Q: Are you a Christian?

A: Yes, of course.

Q: Do you believe in God?

A: No.

Q: How are you a Christian if you do not believe in God?

A: I am [Orthodox] Christian because I am Bulgarian. Boris baptized the Bulgarians to make a Bulgarian Kingdom. [So] Bulgarians are [Orthodox] Christians.

Q: What about Muslims and Jews?

A: They are 'Bulgarian citizens.' They are not 'Bulgarians.'

-- Krassimir, a Bulgarian taxi driver, in 2007

*[W]e need to explore the assumptions underlying judgments made by historically constituted states regarding the proper place of religion.*

--Talal Asad, 2006

In 1998, Bulgaria had the distinction of becoming the first country in the world where Jehovah's Witnesses and their children could receive blood transfusions without the threat of spiritual sanction from the New-York-based Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, the international body responsible for the official interpretation of Jehovah's Witnesses' dogma (Watchtower 2007). The Bulgarian government refused to allow the Jehovah's Witnesses to legally operate in the country unless they allowed their Bulgarian members to receive blood in life threatening emergencies. Eight years later, the government upheld a local decision that prevented two teenagers from wearing Islamic headscarves to their secondary school (Ghodsee 2007). In both cases, the Bulgarian government stepped in and decided that these particular individual religious freedoms challenged the state's responsibility to protect the rights of minors, to uphold the principles of gender equality, or to maintain its commitments to secular public education. International observers (US Department of State 2004, 2007) and human rights organizations (Bulgarian Helsinki Committee 2004, 2008) were quick to charge the Bulgarian government with violating its own constitutional clause guaranteeing the freedom of conscience.

Recent critical scholarship on Western secularism would view the blood transfusion and

headscarf cases in Bulgaria as evidence of a coercive secular state trying to relegate religion to the private sphere. Furthermore, anthropologists of Islam are keen to point out that secularist discourses are specifically derivative of Protestantism, and that they ideologically privilege a notion of religion that prioritizes personal, private faith over collective, public practice, and are therefore inherently discriminatory toward Muslims (Asad 2006, 2003, 1993; Mahmood 2006). This article uses the example of Bulgaria to explore alternative definitions of secularism and religious rights in a part of the world that has largely been ignored by recent post-colonial debates about secularism and secularization (See for instance, Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2008, Taylor 2007, Keddie 1997).

My first goal is to extend the valuable critical interventions of Talal Asad and others to an examination of Eastern Orthodoxy and its particular construction of the appropriate relationship between state and church. I want to try to pull apart some core assumptions about how concepts like “tolerance,” “pluralism” “modernity,” and “religion” are defined in scholarly debates and normatively deployed as measurements of democracy. The second is to ethnographically investigate the way that contemporary men and women in Bulgaria collectively understand the concept of religion neither as a private personal relationship between an individual and her God nor as a spiritual commitment requiring daily public displays of piety. Rather, religion is a core constitutive element of ethnic and national identity, one that is historically rooted in the distant past and which does not necessarily require belief in any form of divinity. This conception of religion is not unique to Bulgaria (see for instance, van der Veer 1994), but I will use the Bulgarian case to explore how this conception of religion fits within larger debates about secularism, pluralism and tolerance as normatively defined by the West.

This particular conception of religion shows itself most clearly in Bulgaria through what I will call, “symphonic secularism,” or an Orthodox ideal of state-church relations. *Symphoneia* (symphony) refers to the Eastern Orthodox doctrine that asserts that the spiritual authority of the Church should not take precedence over the temporal authority of the state, but rather that they should work together for the common good. Compared to the Roman Catholic assertion of Papal supremacy (or ultramontanism<sup>1</sup>), *symphoneia* is often imagined to be an arrangement where the Church is working in unity with the state, and it is historically the Tsar who has the final authority to appoint or dismiss religious leaders or to convene ecumenical councils to alter or amend religious dogma.<sup>2</sup>

This history of *symphoneia* is well known to modern Bulgarians; the way that they imagine the legacies of *symphoneia* in their present society gives Bulgarian secularism fascinating characteristics. It is not the purpose of this article to judge whether this specific understanding of secularism is right or wrong, but merely to explore the ideological underpinnings of the Bulgarian society’s desire to regulate religious groups like the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the new, universalist forms of Islam coming into the country from abroad. Nor do I wish to make the claim that the wearing of headscarves and the refusal to give your loved ones life-saving blood transfusions are equivalent acts of piety, but only that they may seem equivalent in the local Bulgarian context. Finally, I recognize that Western histories of secularism are diverse and that

individual states have rearranged the relationship between state and church in different ways. But the accepted ideology of secularization relies on an ideal configuration of these two institutions (as separate and distinct) and critiques of secularism and religious rights have reified this configuration.

These conceptualizations of secularism, however, are themselves deeply rooted in a discursive field forged by either the embrace or rejection of the epistemological legacies of the Enlightenment. Genealogies of secularism often begin with the Protestant Reformation and often ignore any non-Western historical antecedents (for instance Asad 1993, Taylor 2007). But there may be important alternative configurations of these concepts that are difficult to comprehend from the Enlightenment worldview, especially if there are societies today that popularly imagine an ideal form of state and church relations that were forged in an earlier historical period, in this case, as far back as 1054 C.E. and the Great Schism that rendered Christendom into its Eastern and Western halves.

Understanding different conceptions of secularism and religion is crucial today because international organizations and Western governments are increasingly deploying religious freedoms as a normative measure of democracy. Many Orthodox nations such as Russia, Greece, Romania or Moldova have been criticized for violating religious freedoms. This paper will focus on Bulgaria, one of the two newest members of the European Union, which has been accused of religious intolerance by both human rights organizations (Bulgarian Helsinki Committee 2007, Tolerance Foundation 1997) and the United States government in its annual religious freedoms reports (US Department of State 2007, 2004). More recently, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in Strasbourg found Bulgaria in violation of Article 9 (freedom of thought, conscience and religion) of the European Convention of Human Rights. In its January 2009 decision, the ECHR fined the Bulgarian state 8,000 Euro because the government had intervened to forcefully heal a schism in the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC) by officially recognizing one Church leader over another. The Court declared that the government had overstepped its bounds by interfering in the internal affairs of a spiritual community. Outraged, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and the Bulgarian government lashed out at the ECHR, claiming that it was the Court that had overstepped its bounds by challenging a one thousand year history of *symphoneia*, which requires the state to take an active role in regulating spiritual affairs. Exploring the way that contemporary Bulgarians embrace the legacies of *symphoneia* can help explain much about the state's seeming intolerance toward religious groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses and newly devout Muslim girls who want to wear their headscarves to public school.

Although I have been studying Bulgarian society and culture for over a decade, the research for this article is based specifically on fifteen months of fieldwork<sup>3</sup> spent in the country between 2005 and 2009 for a project looking at inter-religious relations between the Bulgarian Orthodox Christian majority and its sizeable Muslim minority.<sup>4</sup> In addition to living among this minority in a small Muslim city in south central Bulgaria and in the Bulgarian capital city of Sofia, I conducted official and unofficial interviews with Muslim religious leaders, religious rights activists, government officials in charge of religious denominations, journalists, civil

society advocates and politicians. The article attempts to untangle the meaning of secularism, pluralism, religious freedom and tolerance from the point of view of my informants, with a particular focus on the way that individuals deploy popular understandings of Bulgarian history to justify their personal comprehension of how far the state can go in regulating religiosity in every day life.

### **Asad's critique**

The intellectual launching pad for this critical inquiry is the seminal work of Talal Asad (2003, 1993) and his 2006 call for a more historicized examination of the meaning of religion and secularism in different states (see epigraph). Asad has critiqued secularism as an Enlightenment-based political project that assumes a very limited view of religion. According to this critique, secularization projects, whether externally imposed or willingly imported, inevitably privilege a Western European ideal of religion because they seek to subsume conceptions of religion that place an emphasis on embodied practices and rituals in the public sphere (such as Islam). Indeed, Asad roots the creation of the contemporary (hegemonic) concept of religion in post-Reformation Western Europe and emerging distinctions between the public and private sphere. He views the process of secularization as the “forcible redefinition of religion as belief, and of religious belief, sentiment, and identity as personal matters that belong to the newly emerging space of private (as opposed to public) life” (2003: 207). For Asad, religion became “a new historical object: anchored in personal experience, expressible as belief-statements, dependent in private institutions, and practiced in one’s spare time” (Ibid: 207).

Asad roots the production of this new understanding of religion to Christianity and the struggles in Western Europe to replace faith and superstitions with science and reason in the public domain. Other philosophers (Taylor 2007, Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2008) and theologians (Ratzinger and Habermas 2007) have also argued that modern conceptions of secularism grew out of the Protestant Reformation and that the secular imperative of keeping faith in the private sphere is a smoke screen for establishing the hegemony of a distinctly Eurocentric conception of religion (Mahmood 2006, Scott and Hirshkind 2006). Expanding on this idea, Partha Chatterjee (2006) argues: “In all countries and in every historical period, secularization has been a coercive process in which the legal powers of the state, the disciplinary powers of the family and school, and the persuasive powers of government and media have been used to produce the secular citizen who agrees to keep religion in the private domain” (60).

This critique of secularism has become the template for recent explorations of liberalism and secularization processes in the post-colonial context,<sup>5</sup> particularly those that wish to explore the inner logics of Islam. Asad’s critical analysis of secularization in the Muslim world demonstrates how the demands of Western conceptions of church-state relations can amount to a form of ideological cultural (i.e. Christian) imperialism. But this is a critique that is based on a very selective genealogy of Christianity, a genealogy that excludes the Eastern Orthodox Church and conflates Christianity with Western Christianity. On one hand, it is an understandable exclusion given that Asad’s critical focus is the movement of secularist discourses from Western

Europe into its former colonies. On the other hand, it excludes an entire history of Christianity that might have produced a very different conception of religion than the hegemonic Western one, one that might have been more tolerant and inclusive of Islam.

Exploring this alternative genealogy of Christianity might reveal different collective understandings of the appropriate roles for the state and church. Indeed, Orthodox believers may not believe that “secularism” was imported from or imposed by the West, although scholars like Chaterjee (quoted above) argue that it has been universally coercive in its application. Instead, in the Bulgarian case, the local version of secularism grew out of the nation’s own unique historical trajectory. This history is distinct from the Protestant and Catholic histories of the West. It is a history that for most modern Bulgarians begins in the ninth century when a medieval Bulgarian king, Boris I, Christianized the Slavs and when the Bulgarian kingdom embraced Orthodoxy and sided with the Byzantine Empire during the Great Schism of 1054.

Thus, if Asad and other post-colonial scholars can be read as supporting a theoretical position that defends individual religious rights and individual desires for embodied religious practices against a Western secularist imperialism that reduces religion to belief, this article pushes Asad’s critique beyond the Muslim world to include Orthodox countries such as Bulgaria and other societies which might embrace a different notion of religion and secularism. Although there are obvious theological differences, Islam and Eastern Orthodoxy have traditionally been othered by the West – orientalized and essentialized as fundamentally non-modern. From the earliest days of the Enlightenment, Orthodox symphoneia was derided as a pejoratively Byzantine form of government (Wood 1967). In his 1689 “A Letter Concerning Toleration,” John Locke condemned state interference in Church dogma, comparing Henry VIII and his self-serving heirs in England to the Orthodox, “caesaro-papist” Emperors in the East. More recently, Samuel Huntington (1996) relegated the Eastern Orthodox world to the status of a completely separate civilization from the West because the East did not benefit from, “the separation and the recurrent clashes between Church and State” (70). In its 2009 decision, even the European Court of Human Rights (2009) explicitly stated that “democratic societies” (4) should not have governments that interfere with religious communities, even if those religious communities have always been intertwined with state authority.

If individuals in post-colonial societies have the right to resist a definition of religion that relegates faith to the private sphere, might not communities also have a right to defend conceptions of faith that root religious identity in the public sphere? This is a particularly salient question if the popular imagining of the category of religion is not about private faith, but rather about clearly defining the (often contested) boundaries of historically constituted ethno-national communities. If post-colonial scholars are pushing back at liberal secularist discourses for the sake of protecting the public spiritual commitments of non-Christian minorities in Europe or the non-Christian majorities in the post-colonial world, why not take this same critique and examine an Eastern Orthodox Christian society? Although a truly comprehensive study of these issues requires an examination of more than one Orthodox society, this case study deals with the Bulgarian case in hopes that I might be able to put these issues on the table for further research

and debate.

### **Headscarves and blood transfusions**

The decision to force Jehovah's Witnesses to accept blood transfusions for themselves and their families was the result of a Bulgarian law that required all religions to be officially registered with a national Directorate of Religious Denominations. Although initially registered in 1991, a change in the law forced the Witnesses to re-register in 1994. At that time, the Bulgarian government refused to recognize the Witnesses as a real religion, making it illegal for followers to proselytize, distribute literature, organize services or perform religious activities of any kind on Bulgarian soil. A complaint was immediately filed with the European Court of Human Rights (1998) claiming that Bulgaria had violated Article 9 of the European Convention protecting religious freedoms.

The Watchtower Society claimed that blood transfusions were unsafe, unhealthy and against the scriptures; the receipt of blood was forbidden to Witnesses and their families. The Bulgarian government argued that this policy undermined public safety and that it violated the rights of others. In particular, the idea that Jehovah's Witnesses would willingly refuse a medically necessary blood transfusion that could save the life of their own child or incapacitated spouse in an emergency was deemed unacceptable. Since the state was immovable on this issue, the Christian Association of Jehovah's Witnesses in Bulgaria had to ask for a special dispensation from New York. As a result, the Watchtower Society has two official policies on blood transfusion, one for Bulgaria and one for the rest of the world (Associated Jehovah's Witnesses for Reform on Blood 2007). Once the Jehovah's Witnesses conceded their position on blood transfusions, the Bulgarian government allowed them to register, and the ECHR case reached a friendly settlement.

Unlike the Jehovah's Witnesses, Bulgaria's Muslims have been part of the fabric of society for centuries. Yet it is only recently that Muslims girls have started demanding to be allowed to wear their Islamic headscarves when in attendance at non-religious, public schools.<sup>6</sup> In the Bulgarian headscarf case, there were two girls who had been studying the Qur'an with a group of young Bulgarian Muslims recently graduated from Islamic universities in Jordan. The young Bulgarians came back to Bulgaria to promote a "purer" interpretation of their religion, an interpretation far more literal than that traditionally practiced. Although few Muslim women wore the headscarf in 2006, the two girls believed that head covering was mandatory for all Muslim women; wearing the headscarf was a necessary outward sign of public piety.

After the girls were banned from school, a new Islamic NGO (formed in 2004 by the Jordan-educated Muslims) filed an official complaint with the Ministry of Education alleging a violation of the girls' constitutional right to religious freedom. The Ministry responded that Bulgarian education was secular and that conspicuous religious symbols had no place in public schools, particularly since secondary school education in Bulgaria was not mandatory. The NGO then filed a complaint with a newly established national anti-discrimination Commission (State Gazette 2003). The Commission (which was headed by a culturally Muslim Bulgarian

Turk) also ruled that religious symbols were not allowed in schools. The Commission argued that the Islamic requirement that women wear headscarves amounted to a gender inequality because there was no similar dress requirement imposed on men (Commission for Protection against Discrimination 2006). The Islamic NGO hoped to appeal to the ECHR, but lacked the support of the Chief Muftiship in Sofia, the spiritual authority of Bulgaria's Muslim community (US Department of State 2007).

In both the headscarf and transfusion cases, the Bulgarian government invoked the idea that the state has the right to regulate religious activities in order to protect other (non-religious) human rights (e.g. women's rights or cultural rights), to ensure national security or to promote the public interest. But it also summoned the notion of secularism, a fascinating discursive move considering that the Bulgarian constitution establishes Orthodoxy as the traditional religion of the country and that the Bulgarian Orthodox Church has always worked in symphony with the leaders of the Bulgarian kingdom or state. Furthermore, the 2002 Law on Religious Denominations required registration of all religious groups excluding the Orthodox Church and the government openly provided resources for the upkeep of religious properties. So what does "secularism" mean in this context? And how might local understandings of secularism be shaped by Bulgaria's Eastern Orthodox history?

### **Religion and ethnicity in Bulgaria**

On the surface, modern Bulgaria is remarkably similar to Western Europe in terms of a general decline in religious belief, despite its lack of state-church separation. For instance, in 2006, Bulgaria ranked 17<sup>th</sup> out of the 50 most atheist countries in the world, joining the overwhelmingly European top 20 (Zuckerman 2006). The study found that 34-40 % of the Bulgarian population was atheistic, agnostic, or non-religious. Another study in 1998 asked a national representative sample of Bulgarians: "Would you like your child/grandchild to be religious?" Only 13.7 percent of respondents wanted their children to regularly attend "church/mosque/synagogue." However, 52.4 % of Bulgarian Christians and 52 % of Turks living in Bulgaria said that they wanted their children to be religious "just as a cultural identity." Another nationally representative survey conducted in 1999 (Kanev 2002) found that 96 % of ethnic Bulgarians said that they were Christians and 98 % of the Turkish minority declared themselves Muslim. In analyzing these results, the Bulgarian scholar Petar Kanev concluded that religion in Bulgaria is "rather peculiar," and argued that being "religious" and believing in God had little to do with each other (Ibid: 84). Kanev points out that religion is primarily about ethnic and national identity, a legacy of the state's long association with the BOC and the fact that "Bulgarian and Orthodoxy were synonym concepts" (Ibid: 84).

My ethnographic fieldwork in the country confirmed this "peculiar" conception of religion. Although other scholars of the Balkans have observed this link between religion and ethnic identity (for instance, Bringa 1995, Todorova 1997), I was always intrigued to see how Bulgarians discursively constructed the link in their own lives. There were numerous examples of individuals claiming a religious affiliation while also admitting that they did not believe in

God. In one conversation with a Slavic Muslim (Pomak) in Madan in 2006, a 49-year-old man explained: "I am a Muslim because my grandfather was a Muslim and I was given a Muslim name. My father was an atheist and I am an atheist. I am a Muslim, but I do not believe in God." I later had a remarkably similar exchange with a twenty-something Bulgarian taxi driver in Sofia (recounted in the first epigraph at the beginning of this article), demonstrating that "Christian atheists," like their "Muslim atheist" compatriots, also claimed a religious affiliation because it was an essential part of their cultural identity.<sup>7</sup> A 40-year-old lawyer in Sofia, who called himself an "atheist fundamentalist" had no problem regularly going into Orthodox churches to light candles. He explained, "The Church preserved the Bulgarian language during the time of the Ottoman yoke. Buying candles gives money to the Church. I have to support it [the Church], because I am Bulgarian."

Where I did my fieldwork in the Rhodope, the way different ethnic groups named each other was also evidence of this slippage between religious and cultural identity. This was a mixed region composed of ethnic Turks, ethnic Bulgarian Christians and ethnic Bulgarian Muslims (Pomaks). The Turkish-speaking minority in the region was referred to as "Turks." The Bulgarian-speaking Christians in mixed Christian-Muslim villages were called "Bulgarians." Bulgarian-speaking Muslims were simply called "Muslims." Even though the Turks were also Muslims, the label "Muslim" was used exclusively to distinguish between the Christians and the Pomaks. The exclusion of Bulgarian-speaking Muslims from the category "Bulgarian," however, did not go unchallenged. In one conversation with two high-school-aged girls in Rudozem, one girl argued that: "We are Bulgarians, too." But her friend then defended the term "Muslim" for Pomaks by saying: "We are all Bulgarian citizens (*Bulgarski grazhdani*). But we are not "Bulgarians" (*Bulgari*) because we are not Christians."

This distinction between "Bulgarians" and "Bulgarian citizens" was a very common way to distinguish between ethnic Bulgarians (i.e. Christians) and Turks, Roma and Bulgarian Muslims. In an oft-repeated national television advertisement for the 2005 parliamentary elections, the ethnic Turkish party (The Movement for Rights and Freedoms) overtly used this language by promising security and a better life for all "Bulgarian citizens" rather than all "Bulgarians." In response, the campaign slogan for the nationalist party, Attack, was "Let's Bring Bulgaria back to the Bulgarians!" (i.e. the Orthodox Christian, Bulgarian-speaking majority).

One of the ramifications of this equation of religion with cultural or ethno-national identity is that the question of apostasy or religious conversion is a very sensitive one. Many Bulgarians (and "Bulgarian citizens") believe that to change religious affiliation is to change ethnic and cultural identification. This concept was driven home to me by the Deputy Chief Mufti of all Bulgarian Muslims in an interview I did with him in 2006: "When a Turk converts to Christianity, we do not say that he became a Christian, we say that he became a Bulgarian (*stana Bulgarin*)." Christian Evangelicals from the United States, have also been warned that Bulgarians, "equate being Orthodox [Christian] with being Bulgarian. Proselytism, then, is seen not only as a spiritual concern of the clerics but as an attack on national identity" (Kostov 2000).

American Church of the Nazarene missionaries who worked in Bulgaria in the 1990s further observed that, “many Bulgarians seem unaware that vital Christianity can be authentically Bulgarian. Tragically, some believed the demonic lie that authentic [Nazarene] Christianity would hurt the fabric of Bulgarian society. Today, this makes Bulgaria, according to many observers, among the globe’s most difficult countries to evangelize” (Church of the Nazarene 2002).

This deep resistance to conversion is not only a product of an allegiance to a modern ethnic community or nation state, but it is also linked to a particular collective imagining of Bulgarian history. It is the deployment of these historical narratives, particularly narratives rooted in the Middle Ages that underpin Bulgarians’ ability to have a strong religious identity that can be devoid of spirituality. And these historical narratives are so pervasive, that even for those who do truly believe in the teachings of the Bible or the Qur’an, faith is understood not in terms of individual rights and free choices, but rather as a personally embodied legacy of spiritual communities that have roots in the eighth or ninth century C.E. Briefly exploring these historical narratives will help make sense of why religious groups like the Jehovah’s Witnesses or spiritual communities clustered around new, universalist forms of Islam from Jordan and Saudi Arabia have difficulty being accepted in Bulgarian society.

Again, I admit that other cultures may have strong links between religious and national identity, but Orthodoxy is particularly interesting because these links are embedded in Church dogma. Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind that other Orthodox nations (especially Russia and Greece) have a similar symphonic conception of religion, but this article deals specifically with the Bulgarian case for reasons of space and in order to tease out some of the larger theoretical implications of accepting that Orthodoxy, like Islam, may have a different conception of religion that is worth considering when “we” in the West decide to use religious tolerance as a normative measure of democratic values.

### **Popular imaginings of State and Church in Bulgarian history**

In speaking with Bulgarians about religious allegiances and cultural identities, conversations inevitably veered toward popular understandings of history. Over and over again, I found that many modern day Bulgarians viewed themselves as the living descendants of medieval populations that once inhabited the lands now occupied by the modern Bulgarian state. Unlike the members of the Islamic NGO defending the girls in the headscarf case who defended their desire to cover their heads on the grounds that freedom of conscience is an abstract individual human right guaranteed to them by their state’s democratic constitution, most of the newly devout Bulgarian Muslims following what they called the “true” Islam invoked historical reasons to justify their re-emerging piety. The most common argument that I heard was that today’s adherents to “Saudi” forms of Islam are, in fact, the direct descendents of Arab Muslims who settled in the Balkan Peninsula in the eighth century C.E. The claim to be affiliated with a faith that was represented in Bulgaria over a thousand years earlier was a discursive strategy to legitimize their religiosity in a cultural context that views religion as constitutive of ethnic or

national identity, and therefore only recognizes those religions which can be demonstrably linked to some group of ancient inhabitants in Bulgaria.

For example, a man in the Pomak village of Chepintsi explained to me in 2006 that his fellow villagers were the proto-Muslims of Bulgaria.

“We were Muslims before the Turks,” he said. “After the Prophet – peace be upon him – died, he sent his followers out to spread the true words of God, and some of them came from Arabia and settled here. We were already Muslim before Boris baptized the Slavs in the eighth century. So we were forced to become Christians, and then forced to be Muslims by the Turks, and then forced to become atheists by the communists. But we were Muslims first. We are the true Muslims of Bulgaria.”

Hairaddin Hatim, the Regional Mufti of Smolyan, told a similar story. “Islam in the Rhodope came directly from Arabia, not through Turkey. That is why we follow the Qur’an more correctly than the Turks,” he said in a 2007 interview. When I asked him if the ancient Thracian inhabitants of the Rhodope had been Muslims, he replied, “Why not?” There have also been several books published since the late 1990s that endeavor to establish links between devoutly religious Pomak communities and their alleged Arab ancestors. “I believe that the Pomaks are an Arabic minority that settled in the Rhodope because of Byzantine policies responding to the increased strength of the Slavs to the north,” Mehmed Dorsunski, the author of one such volume, said in a 2003 magazine interview. “Byzantium had a long-term policy of settling Arabs along its northern borders. . . . That is how the Muslim community that lived in the Rhodope in the seventh and eighth centuries was formed” (Dorsunski 2003: 15). The aim of this type of book is to explain the current Islamic resurgence among contemporary Pomaks as the direct result of their being descended from Arabs who lived on the same geographic territory over 1,200 years earlier.

This tendency to use medieval history to explain current Bulgarian attitudes could be found not only among Muslim religious leaders and lay people, but also within the scholarly community. In a 2009 interview with Dr. Zhivko Georgiev, the director of Gallup International in Bulgaria and a respected political analyst, I asked him why his country had such a high rate of atheism and agnosticism. I expected that Georgiev, as a professional sociologist, would tell me about various demographic trends in Bulgarian religiosity. Instead, he opined that Bulgarians’ relative lack of faith was a legacy of Bogomilism, an anti-clerical religious movement which began in the mid-tenth century, about 75 years after King Boris I of Bulgaria had forcibly Christianized the Slavs in 863. Georgiev speculated that Bulgarians have always been independent thinkers, and that their skeptical attitude toward religious authority began in the tenth century and continues to the present day. Here again was an example of an argument that linked the behaviors and beliefs of modern Bulgarians directly to those of Bulgarians living in the Middle Ages.

Conversations such as these led me to press further on the definition of “religion” in the Bulgarian context, and how it might be operating differently than religion in Western Europe. In order to understand why the abstract Western conception of religious rights and liberal notions of religious pluralism might have so little critical purchase in the Bulgarian context, it is instructive to look at the way contemporary Bulgarians are taught about the centuries-long marriage between the Bulgarian state and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC).<sup>8</sup> One obvious place to find these narratives was in popular Bulgarian history books. In particular, the trade books of the historian Bojidar Dimitrov, the Director of the National Museum of History and the host of a popular historical television show, were ubiquitous and consumed by all strata of Bulgarian society (for instance, Dimitrov 2005a, 2005b). From these books and history books written for children, there began to emerge a particular narrative about Bulgarian history and the unique relationship between the State and the Church.

According to these historians, the first Bulgarian state was formally recognized in a treaty with the Byzantines in 681 C.E. (Ibid.). In order to bring cohesion and legitimacy to the rapidly expanding Bulgarian state in a world dominated by Christianity, Boris I officially adopted the religion in the late ninth century in a calculated diplomatic move to consolidate his power by getting recognition from the Patriarch in Constantinople and the Pope in Rome (Gyuzuzelev 2006; Koev and Bakalov 2006). One history text explains that:

Bulgaria’s conversion to Christianity was prompted also by external events. Another unsuccessful war with Byzantium in the autumn of 863 compelled Boris to enter a peace treaty under which Bulgaria...was bound to dissolve its alliance with the German kingdom, and most important of all, to adopt Christianity. Boris believed, even before the treaty that in his age culture went hand in hand with Christianity. Not the bloody sword, nor aggression, but only through a new faith could Bulgaria become Byzantium’s equal (Lalkov and Dragonov 2003: 21).

From the outset, Bulgaria’s embrace of the Christian faith is presented as being far more about politics than spiritual considerations. At the time of Boris’s strategic conversion, Christendom was governed by five autocephalous patriarchates based in Constantinople, Rome, Antioch, Alexandria and Jerusalem. The rise of Islam had compromised the power and influence of the Patriarchs in Asia, and there were increasing tensions between the two European ecclesiastical authorities. Modern Bulgarians are taught that Boris I successfully played the developing rivalry between Constantinople and Rome to his advantage, and in 870 C.E., the Eastern Patriarch granted Boris I an autonomous archbishop subject to Constantinople’s authority (Popov 2004).

Bulgarians today are taught the idea that a unique Bulgarian identity was forged in opposition to the Greek dominance of the Orthodox Church through the creation of the Slavic alphabet. Boris sponsored the formation of a new Bulgarian clergy schooled in this new alphabet and liturgy. In 893, he expelled all of the Greek clergy, and the Bulgarian vernacular replaced

Greek as the official Church (and therefore State) language (Zhidovetz 2004). In 927, the Byzantines gave the Bulgarian Church full autocephalous status, making it the first autocephalous patriarchate after the original Pentarchy, and the first Slavic Church – a full 300 years before the Serbian autocephaly and 600 years before the Russian autocephaly (Ganev, Bakalov and Todev 2006). Boris I supposedly understood that his authority and legitimacy were intimately bound up with having an independent Church and a clergy firmly under his control.

In his exploration of ethnicity, religion and politics, the Bulgarian sociologist, Georgi Fotev, overtly roots the modern Bulgarian ethnic identity with the decision to embrace Christianity:

...[T]he act of conversion, the proclaiming of the Christian religion as official religion of the first Bulgarian state, a task that Prince Boris I had set himself, is an exceptional event which, after a dramatic development of consolidation of the Bulgarian state, led to the constitution of a new ethnos – the Bulgarian ethnos... Through the adoption of Christianity Bulgaria determined itself in future as part of Europe and entered the sphere of the emerging European culture” (Fotev 1999: 24-27).

Thus, in both popular and scholarly rendering of Bulgarian history, the adoption of the Christian faith had almost everything to do with political consolidation and the creation of a new Bulgarian ethnic identity out of the mixed populations of Bulgars, Slavs and Thracians that inhabited the lands under Boris’s control. The concept of religion being produced here is one in which faith is understood as a political tool of the state and a constitutive element of ethnic identity, rather than a matter of private spiritual salvation.

This specific understanding of religion as the tool of statecraft is presently taught as one of the defining conflicts between Byzantium and Rome, ultimately leading to the Great Schism of 1054. As mentioned earlier, Byzantium embraced a political and ecumenical philosophy called symphonia, which later came to be known pejoratively as caesaro-papism (which literally means “king-priest,” Geanakopolis 1965). In Western Christendom, Rome espoused the doctrine of ultramontanism whereby the spiritual authority of the Pope took precedent over that of all temporal kings. Because the Roman Pope tried to assert his authority over the four Eastern Patriarchates, the latter broke away, taking the fledgling Bulgarian Church with them (Runciman 1955). Bulgarian history textbooks assert that subsequent Tsars would continue to manipulate both Pope and Patriarch, briefly embracing Catholicism whenever Constantinople tried to re-Hellenize the Bulgarian Church. Gaining or maintaining the autocephalous status of the Bulgarian patriarchate was a primary goal for all Tsars before the Kingdom became part of the Ottoman Empire in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century.

The historiography of the Ottoman period in Bulgaria is the most contested and inconsistent in the popular history books, and tends to be very critical of the Turks and their Islamic Empire on the Balkans. Although some Bulgarians did convert to Islam (this is the

popularly accepted origin theory for the Pomaks), the majority retained their Christian faith (Inalcik 1954, Deringil 2000). It was during this 500-year period that the BOC supposedly became the most important repository of Bulgarian learning, language and literature. Many Bulgarians today believe that Orthodox monks preserved the Bulgarian culture and provided political leadership to the Bulgarian Christians. When the Ecumenical Patriarch tried to Hellenize the Bulgarians by reintroducing a Greek liturgy, the Bulgarian clergy played an even more important role as linguistic dissidents, continuing to perform services in the Slavic language.

One imagining of this remarkable historical continuity between Bulgarians of the Middle Ages and those in the 19<sup>th</sup> century can be found in a popular illustrated history book for children, *Rulers of Bulgaria: Khans, Tsars and Statesmen*. This book presents a view of Bulgarian history that directly links Khan Asparoukh (who defeated the Byzantine army in 680 and established the first Bulgarian state) to Georgi Parvanov (the President of Bulgaria in 2008) as if somehow Parvanov was a direct descendent of Asparoukh. The book, which had already gone into four editions by 2003 and was written by two of Bulgaria's most distinguished professors of history, explains the 500-year leap from Tsar Ivan Shishman in 1395 to Prince Alexander I in 1879 by merely stating: "During five centuries of slavery, the Bulgarians cherished the memory of their regal medieval rulers" (Lalkov and Dragonov 2003: 48).<sup>9</sup> And it was the BOC that kept this memory alive.

Literature and history written by Bulgarian nationalists between 1878 and 1945 reified the idea that being a Bulgarian required allegiance to the BOC. When the Bulgarian communists came to power in 1946, they too valorized the BOC, and despite their commitment to state atheism they continued to produce historical narratives that celebrated Bulgarian Orthodoxy as the savior of the Bulgarian nation-state. Priests and monks became national heroes rather than spiritual leaders. Churches and monasteries became cultural monuments to Bulgaria's history rather than houses of worship. What Bulgarians learned about their country's spiritual history had very little to do with faith and everything to do with national preservation. After the fall of communism in 1989, Bulgarian nationalist parties continued to explicitly link "Bulgarian-ness" with Orthodox Christianity. Finally, the 2002 Law of Religious Denomination, passed by a democratically elected center-right government, reemphasized the special status of the BOC. Article 10, paragraph 1 of the law 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, which, under the name Patriarchy, is the successor of Bulgaria's Exarchate... It is led by the Holy Synod and is represented by the Bulgarian Patriarch who is a Metropolitan of Sofia.

## **Symphony and religious pluralism**

From its very inception, Bulgarians are taught that the BOC has been in a symphonic relationship with the Bulgarian kingdom/state, and that secular leaders have always had authority over the organization and promotion of both temporal and spiritual affairs. But this historical importance of Orthodoxy does not necessarily preclude religious pluralism. Rather, it is widely accepted that throughout most of Bulgarian history (and particularly during the Ottoman period) there were Jews, Catholics, Muslims, Greeks, and Armenians sharing the territory that is now Bulgaria with the Bulgarian Orthodox Christians.

These medieval religious communities are imagined to be an essential component of Bulgarian society. During my fieldwork, Bulgarians were always quick to point out that they have always been tolerant of Muslims, Jews and Catholics. In particular, when I asked questions about religious pluralism, I would often hear, “we saved the Jews” or “what about the Jews?” (This referred to Boris II’s refusal to deport Bulgaria’s Jews to the death camps despite his allegiance with Nazi Germany (Todorov 2003, Bar-Zohar 1998, Chary 1972), a decision that had been instigated and supported by the leaders of the BOC.) One seventeen-year-old explained her country’s historic tolerance of the Jews by referring to “Theodora,” popularly believed to be a Jewish woman who married into the Bulgarian royal family in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and was the mother of Tsar Ivan Shishman, the last great medieval king.<sup>10</sup>

In conversations with more educated Bulgarians, they would point to the long history of religious violence in Western Europe and compare this with the relative sectarian peace in their own county. The candle-lighting lawyer in Sofia once explained in English:

Did we have an Inquisition? No. Did we burn witches? No. Did we send knights off on Crusades to murder infidels in the Holy Land? No. Did Catholics and Protestants murder each other in our streets? No. How can you say Bulgarians are intolerant? How many religious wars were there in Europe? How many in Bulgaria?

Indeed, even though the Bulgarian state has had a symphonic relationship with the BOC, historians have argued that there was relative religious pluralism and tolerance before, during and after the Ottoman Empire in the lands now occupied by the modern Bulgarian state. There was only mild religious persecution under the Byzantine and Bulgarian Empires (Alexander 1977). Eastern Orthodoxy in Bulgaria was and remains a non-proselytizing religion that does not actively seek converts outside of the country. Furthermore, setting aside the “blood tax,” the Ottomans were also relatively tolerant, building their empire on a foundation of religious pluralism despite the fact that Muslims enjoyed greater privileges than the other millets (Gawrych 1983, Karpat 1972). Even during the communist era, despite their strident campaigns against religion, there was a large mosque, a synagogue and an Orthodox church within a 500-meter radius of the main administrative buildings of the Politburo and the Central Committee in the heart of Sofia. In general, the lawyer was not wrong to point out that the kind of sectarian

violence and religious warfare that filled so much of Western European history was relatively unknown in the Bulgarian territories, where Muslims, Jews, Catholics and Orthodox Christians have lived in close proximity for centuries.<sup>11</sup>

This relative tolerance for established religious minorities could be explained by (rather than in spite of) the unique symphonic relationship between State and Church. For some temporal leaders, the superiority of one religious dogma over another may not be a very compelling reason to go to war or to create the conditions of internal strife and rebellion within your territories. Wars are costly and risky if you lose, and religious persecution creates divisiveness and the possibility of sectarian violence.<sup>12</sup> Some level of religious tolerance and pluralism, even if there is an official religion of the Empire (Orthodox Christianity in Byzantium and in Bulgaria and Islam for the Ottomans) might better serve the interests of elites who profit from trade and taxation. On the other hand, leaders vying for the favor of God and the Pope in Rome might be more willing to commit their resources, for instance, to liberating the Holy Land from the infidels.

If one believes the U.S. government, the Council of Europe or the European Court of Human Rights, state churches should be more conducive to intolerance than to pluralism. But what if having an established national religion (or a conception of religion that equates proclaimed faith with ethnic identity) makes a country more, rather than less, “tolerant” of *established* religious minorities?

### **Symphonic secularism**

This interpenetration of religion as being linked with imperial/national identity and kingdom/state sovereignty means that Orthodox societies and Bulgarian society in particular might have arrived at a kind of secularism by a very different path than either the Western countries or their former colonial subjects, and therefore may have a different relationship to religious pluralism and tolerance than is expected of “modern democratic states.” Symphonic secularism in Bulgaria includes a constitutionally enshrined traditional church as well as government regulation of religious activities in the country. This encompasses the government’s power to dissolve churches considered a threat to public order and national security, or who violate or compromise the rights of others, as defined and adjudicated upon by the state. “Religion” in this context is not merely individual belief in the private sphere (a la John Locke) but a public declaration of affiliation with historically, culturally, and linguistically constituted groups.<sup>13</sup> This religion is embodied within the material infrastructure of established denominations, including the houses of worship, the clergies, the holy sites, the holy texts translated into the local vernacular, the powerfully evocative iconographies of spiritual leaders, saints, prophets and God even when these material embodiments are no longer conduits to divine knowledge. More importantly, religion either explicitly or implicitly includes a dogma that subsumes the spiritual authority of the BOC (or any other spiritual leadership) beneath the rule of temporal leaders.

This symphonic tendency can also be found among Bulgaria's religious minorities. For instance, the majority of Bulgaria's Turkish Muslim community view Islam as a cultural identity rather than a spiritual commitment, as best exemplified by the openly declared atheism of Ahmed Dougan, the political leader of Bulgaria's Turkish political party (Palchev 2002). Even the Jewish community does not seem to have a problem with the symphonic relationship between the Bulgarian state and the BOC. When the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe passed a resolution in 2004 openly criticizing the 2002 Law on Religious Denominations, it did not fail to note that Bulgaria's Jews did not oppose the law (Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe 2004).

In this context, religion is understood as a tool through which Tsars, Sultans, politburos or prime ministers have consolidated their power over ethnically or linguistically diverse populations, by promoting national identity through a church (or a mosque or synagogue) that instills loyalty to the state as part of its ecumenical dogma while also granting autonomy to other religiously defined communities. But religion is more than just a public institution that facilitates the production of the nation, because it also legitimizes the ultimate authority of the temporal leader over the community by producing subjects that believe that religious power and authority have been and should always be secondary to that of the state. A certain kind of religious pluralism may therefore be possible for religions that also act as containers for the preservation of the history and culture of the living descendents of ancient peoples, and whose theologies can accept the primacy of temporal imperatives over spiritual ones. Public manifestations of religion may be acceptable for most of the older denominations; Jews, Muslims, Catholics and Orthodox Christians are able to live together in peace as long as their practice of religion (whether in the public or private sphere) does not challenge the primacy of the monarch/government by placing religious laws or customs above the interests of the kingdom/empire/nation-state. This is admittedly a very limited form of religious freedom by Western standards, but it is far from the supposedly undemocratic intolerance presumed inherent in symphonic societies by the U.S. or the European Court of Human Rights.

The old religions are also accepted because they are seen as the repositories for the culture of these communities, and although Bulgarians have always feared the irredentist ambitions of Turkey (especially after the partition of Cyprus in 1974), even Islam is embraced as an integral part of society. Despite latent Islamophobia and a deep-seated hatred toward the Ottoman past, the post-1989 era did not see violent ethno-religious confrontations such as those in neighboring Yugoslavia, nor was there a renewed persecution of the Turkish minority. Similarly, many of Bulgaria's Muslims accept that they will always be "Bulgarian citizens" rather than "Bulgarians" because they embrace the same concept of religion as the Orthodox Christian majority. The majority of Bulgaria's Muslims (whether Turkish, Pomak or Romani) have traditionally shared the symphonic conception of religion, similar as it is to the Ottoman instrumentalization of Islam under the millet system. It is only members of new Muslim groups, such as the young Muslims returning from Jordan, who believe that spiritual matters should be separate from and take precedence over temporal affairs, and are therefore willing to deploy the (ironically) Western

liberal language of religious “rights.”

Orthodox societies like Bulgaria may be less tolerant of relatively new religions such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses that have appeared in the country since 1989. They are not seen as being rooted in a particular culture, and therefore lack the essential quality of a religion to be the vessel that preserves the past for the living descendents of ancient peoples. If the new religions are associated with a culture, it is generally with that of the United States, a country with few historical links to Bulgaria. A brief examination of the International Religious Freedom Reports for the country (which also report on societal abuses and discrimination) demonstrate that Bulgarians are tolerant toward the established religions, and only discriminate against new religious groups or newer, more fundamentalist movements within the established ones. For instance, the 2008 International Religious Freedoms Report for Bulgaria noted the following “restriction on religious freedoms” which focused almost exclusively on newly imported American religions:

On April 9, 2008, the City of Burgas sent a letter to all Burgas schools instructing them to warn students to be alert to the mobilizing of nontraditional religious groups such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Evangelical Pentecostal Churches, which the city described as the most prominent and dangerous sects. In the letter, authorities claimed that these groups attracted followers through manipulation, offers of money, clothing and food, as well as free movie screenings. They further maintained that the activity of these groups threatened the unity of the Bulgarian nation and exposed it to religious confrontation (US Department of State 2008).

The Bulgarian government was criticized for not allowing non-traditional Muslim groups to officially register as a religious denomination. In the case of the Ahmadis, however, it was the Chief Mufti of all Bulgarian Muslims himself who advised the Bulgarian court not to allow the registration of the “Ahmadiyya Muslim Community” (US Department of State 2007). The U.S. report noted that, “The Muftiship seemingly would not consent to any outside group registering as Muslims. The Directorate’s expert statement held that registration of the Ahmadis would ‘lead to the rise and institutionalization of a very serious dissent in the Muslim community,’ and to the spread of an interpretation of Islam that is not traditional in the country.” Although the Ahmadis planned to file a complaint against Bulgaria at the ECHR in Strasbourg, it is important to note that the government was acting on the advice of the official leadership of Bulgaria’s Muslim community.

What unites these disparate groups beyond their “nontraditional-ness” is the fact that many claim a global community of believers and support a doctrine wherein their religion is not rooted in any one nation or culture. Their concept of religion supersedes culture and attempts to unite a world-wide community of the faithful under one supranational religious authority (such as is Olivier Roy’s (2004) concept of de-ethnicized “Globalized Islam”). In these cases,

obedience to religious authorities (such as the Watchtower Society in New York) or to religious texts (such as the Qur'an) is supposed to trump devotion to the nation-state. This can be viewed as the assertion of a form of ultramontanism that many Bulgarians believe to be at odds with their own millennium-old symphonic tradition. Suspicion will accompany any faith that places religious authority above the interests of the state, and Bulgarians may always have a tendency to view these religions as literal threats to national security and public interests. More specifically, Bulgarians will be suspicious of groups of believers who are not tied to a cultural identity and whose faith trumps devotion to the state. Such groups of believers, viewed from the perspective of local history and culture, will not fall under the Bulgarian concept of *religion*, and will thus not be worthy of the full freedom of religion that is applicable to "genuine" religions. Again, from the Western point of view this will always be seen as a form of religious intolerance, but it is important to point out that this is because the dominant conception of religion in Western discourses is one which privileges private faith practiced in the private sphere. Just as Asad (1993, 2003, 2006) has convincingly shown that modern secularization projects devalue the Islamic conception of religion that necessitates the public practice of faith, I want to ask what other conceptions of religion are being devalued and delegitimized by the Western conception of faith embedded in international religious rights discourses. This reification of religion as a private relationship with divine forces that should be kept private allows bodies such as the ECHR to both uphold headscarf bans in Turkey and Switzerland while simultaneously criticizing Orthodox countries for interfering too much in the internal working of domestic religious communities.

In the case of the Jehovah's Witnesses refusing to have blood transfusions, the state determined that it should be medical doctors (who are state employees in Bulgaria) and not religious authorities who determine the necessary treatment to save an individual's life. The rights of children and incapacitated spouses should not be violated on spiritual grounds. More importantly, the religious ban on blood transfusions is a Jehovah's Witnesses dogma produced by a spiritual authority based in New York City, a spiritual authority that has no history in the Balkans and no cultural connection with the Bulgarian nation.

In the case of the two Muslim girls and the Islamic NGO that represented them, they were arguing that the religious dogma of the Qur'an should take precedence over the state's commitments to uphold gender equality or to maintain the secular nature of the public education system. Selvi Shakirov, the young Pomak who argued the headscarf case in front of the anti-discrimination commission, explicitly deployed the discourse of liberal individual rights:

The headscarf for the woman in Islam is not a religious symbol; it is a religious dogma. And when a girl, a woman is convinced of the essence of the Islamic religion, she makes the decision to put on such clothing with desire and conviction. And this right should not be denied to this individual whoever she is.... [This is] the personal freedom of the individual to choose for himself, to decide what is good, and when he is convinced [of what is good], to be given this

freedom (Commission for Protection against Discrimination 2006).

What this language of liberal rights and individual choice occludes, however, is the extent to which the interpretation of the Qur'an which requires women to cover their heads at all times is seen as being an interpretation that is foreign to Bulgaria. Bulgarian Muslims have a wide variety of established practices regarding the headscarf (Neuburger 2005). Shakirov and the girls were asserting that their interpretation of the Qur'an was the correct one, and that "true" Muslims should not be prevented from following its prescriptions once they individually accepted this "truth." But the Chief Mufti of all Bulgarian Muslims did not support the Islamic NGO in this case, because most Muslims believe in a specifically Bulgarian form of Islam (Ghodsee 2009), an interpretation of the religion that assures that spiritual imperatives remain secondary to temporal ones. By trying to turn the tables on this established symphonic hierarchy, the Islamic NGO pitted itself not only against the Eastern Orthodox majority but also against the larger Bulgarian Muslim community.

## **Conclusion**

Although both of these cases will be viewed by many in the West as instances of religious intolerance, the point I have tried to make is that the Orthodox Bulgarians are being intolerant in different ways and for different reasons than one might expect given existing Western criticisms of them. Bulgaria's supposed intolerance is not intolerance of all non-Orthodox Christian religions, but rather intolerance of spiritual communities that define religion in a certain way, a way that privileges a Western conception of private faith to be practiced in the private sphere. Understandings of religion that require believers to pledge allegiance to a spiritual authority that does not work in symphony with the state will be considered suspect in the local context.

Talal Asad and others have aggressively questioned the definition of religion that underpins modern hegemonic understandings of secularism. In rejecting certain Enlightenment discourses and privileging the importance of the local historical context, Asad has produced a valuable lens through which to view the Muslim world today and the need to make room for public displays of piety and conceptions of religion which include more than mere individual faith practiced in the private sphere. I have tried to extend this contextualization of different notions of religion beyond the post-colonial world to include alternative trajectories of Christianity outside of Western Europe. Might not other societies outside of the post-colonial context also resist, or at least try to regulate, the imposition of the same Catholic/Protestant definition of religion as private and individual faith, particularly if this definition of religion underpins certain normative prescriptions of "tolerance" and "religious rights," which are enforced by Western institutions such as the European Court of Human Rights?

Just as the West imposes certain cultural ideals on the Muslim world through its particular conception of religion, organizations such as the ECHR and the Council of Europe deploy that same liberal conception of religion when determining whether countries like Bulgaria

are “tolerant.” My purpose is neither to challenge nor defend Bulgaria’s historically-bound understanding of religion, but only to point out that universalist discourses of “religious rights” and “religious freedoms” are themselves the product of specific Western definitions of religion, and that it is not only the Muslim world that has been judged and found lacking for its resistance to normative prescriptions that link modern democracy with the privatization of faith.

Of course, this case study is limited to but one Orthodox country, and it is essential to expand this analysis beyond Bulgaria to include other symphonic countries such as Russia, Greece, Romania, Serbia and possibly even Turkey. Obviously this task is beyond the scope of one article, and it has merely been my goal to engage the critical scholarship on secularism with evidence from the country that I know best from my previous research. Clearly, this is a field in which much more research remains to be done.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ultramontanism refers to one who is “beyond the mountains.” For most of Europe, the Pope was beyond the Alps in Italy.

<sup>2</sup> When choosing a new Patriarch (the highest spiritual authority in the Orthodox Church), for instance, the leadership of Bulgarian Church traditionally submitted a list of three names to the Tsar, and it was the Tsar that appointed the Patriarch for life (see, for instance: Butsev 2009).

<sup>3</sup> The author would like to thank the IREX, ACLS, NCEEER, Wilson Center, and the Institute for Advanced Study for generously supporting this research.

<sup>4</sup> This minority, at between 13 and 15 % of the population, constitutes the largest Muslim minority population in any European Union member state, and is unique in that it is not made up of recent immigrants or their children.

<sup>5</sup> In Mahmood’s (2006) rich study of the women’s mosque movement in Egypt, she demonstrates how Western preoccupations with liberalism, self-hood, and agency mask the ways in which embodied religious practices can result in self-actualization for women.

<sup>6</sup> Beginning in the 1990s, Bulgaria had three public Islamic high schools in Shumen, Ruse and Momchilgrad.

<sup>7</sup> I am grateful to Maria Todorova and Valerie Hoffman at the University of Illinois – Urbana Champaign for pointing out that many Jewish and Italian men and women have a similar conception of their religion as a cultural rather than spiritual identity. In fact, many ethnic groups have some link between religious identity and national identity, but the key in the Bulgarian case is that the foundational moment of Bulgarian national identity is explicitly constructed as being linked to the foundation of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church.

<sup>8</sup> I recognize that the “facts” of Bulgarian history and the history of the important role of the BOC are hotly contested. Indeed, much of what is accepted as history was consciously

constructed during the Bulgarian Revival period in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as the country was trying to extricate itself from a declining Ottoman Empire and stake a claim to its own independence, or by Bulgarian historians during the communist era, which were deliberately trying to construct closer historical ties with the Slavic Orthodox Russians (Neuburger 1997). Despite this caveat, what is important for the purposes of this article is what most contemporary Bulgarians *believe* to be the history of their state and church, even if the production of this history was and continues to be informed by specific nationalist ideologies. (See: Skendi 1975, 1976; Pundeff 1961; Gavev, Bakalov and Todev 2006)

<sup>9</sup> Milcho Lalkov and Dragomir Draganov, *Rulers of Bulgaria*. Sofia: Kibea Publishing Company, 2003, p. 48. In this popular view of Bulgarian history, the country merely ceased to exist for 500 years and nothing that happened during that era of “slavery” can be legitimately included as part of the country’s own past, despite the evidence that some Bulgarians prospered during the Ottoman era, and that the Ottoman millet system did much to preserve Byzantine symphoneia for its Christian subjects (Vyronis 1969-1970).

<sup>10</sup> “Sarah-Theodora” was the second wife of Tsar Ivan Alexander Assen who lived in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>11</sup> This is not to say that there were no instances of ethnic persecution. The Pomaks were subjected to multiple assimilation campaigns both before and during communism, which forced them to change their names and discard outward symbols of their religion. Interestingly, however, the pre-war *Rodina* movement focused on making Islam more Bulgarian rather than on eradicating the religion altogether. *Rodina* translated the first Qur’ans into the Bulgarian language and were primarily opposed to “Turkish” influences on Islam rather than to the religion of Islam per se. The communists were also heavy-handed in their assimilation campaigns against the Turks of Bulgaria. Between 1950-1951, 140,000 were expelled to Turkey and again in 1989, upwards of 400,000 fled from the country. But even here, the Turks were targeted more for ethnic rather than religious reasons (they did not speak Bulgarian and were imagined as a “fifth” column for NATO-allied Turkey’s irredentist ambitions in the Balkans). Furthermore, the expulsions were extremely unpopular among the ethnic Bulgarians, and helped to hasten the demise of communism. (See: Eminov 1997, Neuberger 2005)

<sup>12</sup> There are always, of course, notable exceptions, Tudjman in Croatia and Milosevic in Yugoslavia being the most obvious in the Balkans.

<sup>13</sup> Thanks to Joan Scott for pointing out that the Church of England works in a similar way.

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