

Budilová, Lenka J. and Marek Jakoubek. *Bulgarian Protestants and the Czech Village of Voyvodovo*. Sofia: New Bulgarian University, 2017. Pp. 144. ISBN 978-954-535-000-9.

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The book *Bulgarian Protestants and the Czech Village of Voyvodovo* is the most recent academic publication by the seasoned Czech anthropologists Lenka Budilová and Marek Jakoubek. As they mention in the Introduction of the book, they have devoted the last twenty years to research on the topic of Czech immigrants in Bulgaria, and specifically on the north Bulgarian village of Voyvodovo. The book consists of only a small section of their extensive research, and it comes after a long sequence of other papers dedicated to the studies of identity, migration, kinship and marriage, to mention some topics, among the Voyvodovo Czechs. This particular study is focused on a topic which the authors “never used as the main focus of investigation”(p. 9), yet they clearly felt the need to bridge the gap – in the various aspects of the Protestant faith and its historical development in the Bulgarian environment, with a focus on the Czech village of Voyvodovo.

The book is made up of two thematically and methodologically distinct parts: the first seven chapters concentrate on Bulgarian Protestantism in general, while the remaining four chapters are devoted to the village of Voyvodovo and its Czech Protestant community. While the second part of the study includes the findings of the authors’ anthropological research both in Voyvodovo and in southern Moravian region in the Czech Republic, the first part of the book is more descriptive and analytical. Both of these parts, however, are worth a close reading for the richness of a well-structured narrative as well as an example of a high-quality anthropological research.

The authors commence the narrative on the presence of Protestantism on Bulgarian soil with a short essay depicting the historical importance of the publication of the Bible in the Bulgarian language, and they continue by delving more deeply into the historical overview of the position of the Bulgarian Orthodox church within the Ottoman Empire. This method proves very effective as it allows for a complex understanding of the attitudes of Bulgarian Christians towards the Protestant missions from the English-speaking countries (namely the USA) as well as the various phenomena at play here (the rise of Bulgarian nationalism, the creation of a new Bulgarian identity and the view of Protestantism as a political movement).

The notion of identity continues to be at the core of the narrative in the following chapters, which provide a more profound view on the Protestant missionary activities in Southern and Northern Bulgaria, respectively. While keeping up with the chronologically narrated outline, the authors engage in further analysis of the Bulgarian acceptance and rejection of the endeavors of the foreign missionaries. These are viewed as “teachers and not as preachers” (p. 31) while the local converts are looked upon as “traitors” (p. 30) who primarily sought to become “English or American citizens” and thus hoped to be “exempt from paying taxes in Bulgaria” (p. 28). The overall view of the Protestant missions as alien by the mainstream Bulgarian public on one side and the disillusionment mixed with hostility towards the missionaries on the other side are some of the reasons the authors cite as plausible explanations of the failure of the Protestant missions to evangelize the Bulgarian majority, which eventually resulted in the end of the Protestant mission in Bulgaria altogether.

Turning to the second part of the book, the reader quickly understands the reason for the previous in-depth analysis of the struggle of the foreign Protestant missions and their religious endeavors: Voyvodovo is very soon to be introduced as the largest Protestant (Methodist) congregation in Bulgaria. This is where the text transforms from a theoretical (albeit very well and thoroughly presented) study into a “report from the field” with the primary sources being the former inhabitants of Voyvodovo, living, at the time of the research, in southern Moravia. The chapter entitled “The history of Voyvodovo religiousness” appears to be the core of the research here. It takes the reader through the religious development within the Voyvodovo community, including its split into the “upper” and “lower” congregations while investigating the reasons and outcomes of the split. The authors comment on the ways religious discord shaped the relationships in the village while attempting to reconstruct the religious differences behind the discord and the split.

This reconstruction is very thoroughly done in the last chapter of the book where the authors’ quest for understanding the dogmatic differences between the “upper” and “lower” congregations is conducted, once again, by collection of knowledge from their informants. The reconstruction of the religious battle that once shook the Voyvodovo community is not a simple task, as the authors honestly admit in their discussion of the methodology—this is due to the lack of secondary literature as well as the difficulty “to speak in this area of some past *facts* of the Voyvodovo faith, as what the Voyvodovo faith was is significantly determined by what it *is* today” (p. 98). The authors are to be given credit not only for their attempt to do so despite the setbacks and obstacles, but also for the outcome of their research, which resulted in a very fine, balanced outline of the main differences of the two

congregations, citing understanding of the terms “faith” and “believer,” as well as the comprehension of and approach to public confession, baptism and personal salvation as the main principles to be considered. This chapter is, in many ways, the climax of the whole study while at the same time being the most original and innovative one. Given the context of the research, the complexity of the researched problem and the scope of the attempt to paint a complex picture of Voyvodovo and its Protestantism, the reader is most likely to conclude along with the authors that the “goal has been fulfilled” (p. 112).

In conclusion, Budilová’s and Jakoubek’s *Bulgarian Protestants and the Czech Village of Voyvodovo* is a fine anthropological piece, written in a clear and understandable academic language and at the same time thoughtfully structured and logically organized. While its topic is relevant mainly to Bulgarian and Czech readers, the broader scope of concepts such as identity and religiosity discussed (and especially the manner they are being treated here) positions *Bulgarian Protestants* among the quality anthropological studies of the recent years.