

## SLAVIC ETHNORELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES\*

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The interaction between the ethnic and religious structures of mankind, or in other words between the *ethnosphere* and *theosphere* in their conflicting unity, often attracts researchers' interest. It is not difficult to explain that fact. If we start to think about it, we will see, that all the ethnoses we know are related to one or other religion or religions, the influence of which have different scope or power in their ethnical lands. At the same time there is a range of religions, which cover many and different ethnoses. A prominent example are the so called "world religions" – Christianity (and its widespread forms: Catholicism, Eastern Orthodox, Protestantism), Islam (and its branches Sunni and Shi'a), Buddhism. So we may say that there is an almost **universal model of interaction between ethnosphere and theosphere**, which could be summarized by the formula "One ethnos – many religions; one religion – many ethnoses."

The exception of this universal model is *the Jewish ethnos and the Jewish religion*. In the constitution of the Jewish ethnos the religion forms the absolute outset. From that point of view as the religion of the God's elected people, the Jewish confession, could not be a shared by representatives of other ethnoses. In other words the model "one ethnos – one religion" is valid here and it could be considered as an exception for that reason.

If we follow that line further it will become clear that religions just as ethnoses have their own historical life and fate. Every religion builds its own internal position on that topic, in other words a more or less developed theology. Quite naturally there are also external points of view, which may be positive or critical. It is well known that the developed religious systems are obligatory preceded by an archaic religious experience, from which they draw on directly or which they transform. Even the old Jewish religion, which has stated its own absolute outset, was preceded by archaic religious forms. The way it is codified in the Old Testament became the initial foundation, on which secondarily were established the two of the world religions – Christianity and Islam. In its further development

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\* The text is a written version of a lecture on the same topic in my course on *Ethnology of the Slavs*.

Jewish religion keeps the internal connection with the Jewish ethnos, while the Christianity becomes fully open for different ethnoses, allowing them to express freely their ethnical background, while the Islam neglects, if we use a figurative expression, the sense of the ethnical dimension and shows the paramount importance of religious.

To summarize: a line of interaction between the ethnical and religious dimensions is visible. As the religion consolidates people in communities and prescribes the rules for their daily routine, quite logically in mankind's being are established the so cold **ethnoreligious communities**. These are *real people's communities, which have long historical life and specific means for social consolidation*. Bearing in mind this formulation we may suppose that on the ethnic territory of Slavs the development of ethnic and religious processes will lead to the establishment of *Slavic ethnoreligious communities*.

Based on these ideas we may reasonably suggest that in Slav ethnic territories, with the development of ethnic and religious processes, *Slav ethnoreligious communities* are formed.

Along with the ethnical differentiation of the Slavs, which took place in the second part of the I millennium AD, a process of religious differentiation of the primary cults complex develops, which is usually called Old Slavic paganism. This process does not have a homogenous structure on the ethnical territory of the Slavs, but in several places it leads to a phenomenon known as local henotheism.

I am speaking about worshiping of a local deity (raised among the others), who gains the prerogatives of a supreme divinity. On principal in the Slavic mythology this function is occupied by Perun, but in Polabian and Baltic lands, as well as in other places additional hypostases are developed, such as Sventovit, Ruevit, Jarovit, etc. The emergence of autonomous cults of that type (no doubt these are new cults if we account for the name, their development, the provision of priests and the building of a sanctuary in Arkona, Gardz, Retra, etc. – which are supplied with sacred attributes) is a peculiar proof for the efforts of the last Slavic pagan social formations to develop a state religion from their mythological beliefs.

So we may only guess how would have things developed if during the consolidation of Slavic ethnoses Europe has not been covered by a strong Christianization wave, which naturally influences the religious situation among the Slavs. We have to mention that in this case we are talking about a process and not about an isolated phenomenon. The rate of Christianization among the different Slavic ethnoses varies significantly. For example among the Balkan Slavs the period from the first acquaintance with Christianity till its acceptance as a state religion is relatively long. The Slavic ethnoses go through paganism for different periods, on the Balkans this process ends in relatively short time. So it is clear that the status of the pagan cults at the Slavic ethnical territory is one of the most important features of the Christianization process. For example the fragmentariness and the variety of cults among the Slavs in Byzantium by that time in Epirus, Thessaly,

Asia Minor and Thrace, i.e. in the lands that first get in contact with Christianity do not prevent them to oppose against the Christianization for centuries, although they were surrounded by Christian population. By that time the situation among the Polabian Slavs is almost the same, but the religious organization (as mentioned earlier) is at a very high level.

On the other hand we may state that the *attempts for Christianization* of the Slavs by sending of missionaries from Christian countries does not play an important role, as well as the attempts for diplomatic and political (including military) pressure, although it is exclusively intensive in some places. It seems that external interference becomes a factor for Christianization of the Slavs only in cases where stable political obedience was available (for example among the Slovenes in Carinthia) or if the population was conquered (among the Polabian Slavs). The case with the Polabian Slavs is indicative, because it demonstrates how an external interferences on the part of a Christian country rise resistance, consolidates and unites pagan Slavs and instead to accelerate, slows up the Christianization. The rivalry for influence in the newly Christianized territories also acts as a restraint. The same could be stated about the mutual discredit of the two main Christian and religious centers – Rome and Constantinople.

The interference of the state has significant importance for the Christianization of the Slavs – it serves as an instrument of the Slav societies by that time. Practically it were the local kings in these Slavic territory, where an autonomous state organization is established (and they are not so little) who perform the act of conversion.

The reasons for this step could be found in the well justified state experience, the need of stability and emancipation of the new state organizations in the European (already Christian) World by that time. The Christianization of any Slavic state, if we use the stylistics of the present day, is an action of foreign policy. A range of paradoxes also occur here. Bulgarians, who are the first to establish their state, are the last converted to Christianity. But the conversion process develops faster as compared to that in other countries and is completed for 50 – 60 years, i.e. in the IX century Christianity becomes a state religion in our country. Among the Serbs the process starts earlier in the VII century, before the Serbian kingdom is founded, but it is prolonged and heterogeneous compared to that of Bulgarians.

The end of the Christianization in Serbia could be fixed around the second half of IX century, when Christianity was affirmed as a state religion in the Serbian kingdom. In broad outlines in the same time limits the process develops among the Croats. In IX – XI century the Czechs and the Slovaks are Christianized. Their conversion is related mainly to the religious processes in Great Moravia; the development of the new religion continues also within the boundaries of the newly established Czech state and ends around the middle of the XI century. By that time the conversion among the Poles, which started in X century was brought to an end. It is directly related to the processes having taken place in the Czech territories, as well as the conversion (often compulsory) of the Polabian Slavs. In

the quoted time limits (IX – XI c) the Christianization of the Kievan Russ takes place.

So it is clear that we are dealing with a long and complicated process it is not accidental that the *promoters of the new religion* are often canonized by the local church and also it is not accidental that they are representatives of the relevant state elites – Boris Mikhail in Bulgaria, Vaclav and Ludmila in Czech, Vladimir Zetsky in Serbia the sons of king Vladimir – Boris and Gleb in the old Russ, etc. And there is something else. No doubt the question about the autonomous Christian church was extremely important. Notwithstanding from where the Christian religion was accepted – Rome or Constantinople (a fact which defines the form of the clerical organization), every Slavic society logically strives to autocephaly of its church institution, because the confessional dependence often serves as an instrument for political expansion. In broad outlines almost in all places where the autonomous state organization is successfully established and preserved, the fight for autonomous (or at least in some degree) church ends successfully. The lack of autonomous clerical, religious institution is one of the factors for losing state independence.

In this regard I have to discuss briefly the question about the development of the Christian church in the lands of Slavs and the stages of this development. In the initial period during the first decades after the conversion the church activities are focused mainly in the centers of the territories – the capitals, the administrative centers and in the towns. Only in the second stage after the new religion has strengthened its positions in towns started the dissemination of Christianity in the villages. By that time the Christian norms are accepted in all parts of the ethnic territory. Also by that time are established the first, but not prominently delineated evidence for parish organization, which supports the regular contact between believers and clergyman. By the end of the period the church became a fully autonomous and socially prestigious institution; a stratum of educated local clergymen is formed, as a connecting unit between the relevant Slavic society and the European World as a whole.

If we try to summarize the facts, we may conclude that the Christianization of the Slavs is a targeted strategy of the state elites for the social identification and self value, for place in the emerging ethnopolitical structure of Europe, where the Christian countries play a leading role. A serious *problem emerges* here related to the state elites' choice between the two main Christian religious centers (it is clear that by that time the Christianity as a religion does not have an alternative in Europe). This dilemma to a higher degree could be easily solved in the West parts of Slav population and in the same manner – for the East Slavs. The acceptance of the Christianity by the Roman church, supported by the Empire of the Franks and lately by the Holy Roman Empire and the other West European political powers for the Polish, Czech, Slovaks and Polabian, Baltic Slavs and Carinthia is clearly predetermined by the whole system of the external relations and international contacts. The model is the same, although with a reversed sign if we speak about Kievan Russ where the relations and the contacts with the

Byzantine Empire, supporting the Eastern Orthodox church predetermine the relevant choice. The dilemma before the Serbs and the Croats is much more difficult. In this case, it seems, the geographical position played a decisive role. The closeness of the Serbian ethnic territory to Byzantium, the Christianization of the population, which has already started in these lands before the Serbian kingdom was founded and a range of other reasons, predetermine the Orthodox orientation. Although similar processes develop initially at Croatian territory, lately these lands are influenced by the West a fact, which determines their orientation to Rome. As usual the Bulgarian case is more specific, but at the end the elite of the country makes the most logical step of the time and, to use a figurative expression, puts the last brick of the wall for building the two Christian worlds in Europe – the *Orthodox* and the *Catholic*. It is interesting to note that, with few exceptions, the boundaries and the buffer zones between them pass exactly through the Slavic territories.

In this way around ten centuries ago were established the two *primary and main Slavic ethnoreligious communities* of the Orthodox and Catholic Slavs, called (the two terms are not accepted unconditionally) “**Slavia orthodoxa**” and “**Slavia Catholica**”.<sup>19</sup>

In this regard quite indicative is the example, related to the specific nature of the two types of the Slavic ethnoreligious communities in the time when they were established and consolidated. This period is famous with the efforts for introduction of Slavic worship in the areas of Orthodox and Catholic Slavs. The emphasis on that topic is not accidental, because the Slavic liturgy is one of the significant factors for the development of ethnical autonomy awareness, and more generally – the awareness of Slavic ethnical identity. It is well known that the attempts for introduction of Slavic worship date back to the IX century in Great Moravia and the mission of Cyril and Methodius; other attempts of that kind have also taken place in the Czech territory. All of them ended unsuccessfully because they were made in the Catholic area, where by that time they were simply doomed to failure. The Orthodox Church is much more liberal with regard to ethnicity and language. It allows the development of Slavic liturgy in the Slavic Orthodox World – first among Bulgarians (in IX century), and later on among the Serbs, Russians, etc.

The most important fact for us is that the general process of Christianization in Europe includes also the Slavs and as a result two main ethnoreligious communities are established – the Orthodox and the Catholic Slavs. Frequently the analysis of the discussed topic ends here. The researchers forget that the confessional split of Christianity continues further. A third branch in the Christian religion is formed, which is constituted as a confession later on and may be for

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<sup>19</sup> The Italian scientist Ricardo Piccio distinguishes between the Orthodox and Catholic language, religious and cultural communities and introduces the terms “*Slavia orthodoxa*” and “*Slavia romana*”. See PICCHIO, R. Mjastoto na balgarskata literatura v kulturata na srednovekovna Evropa. In: *Literaturna misal* 1981, č. 8. Although it seems that the term “*Slavia catholica*” is more suitable in this case; it has already been accepted among some scientific circles.

that reason it does not attract the attention of the scientists. I am speaking about Protestantism. It is established as a religious movement in XV – XVI century (naturally in Europe) during the Reformation and unites many autonomous confessional trends, churches and sects, etc. (Lutheranism, Calvinism, Anglicans, Methodism, Baptists, Adventists, etc.) Protestantism is specified by the lack of opposition between the clergy and the laymen, the rejection of the complex cleric hierarchy, the simplification of the religious ritualism, lack of monkhood and a cult of the Holy Virgin, the saints, the angels, reduction of the holy sacraments to two: baptism, holy communion, lack of icons, etc. The main source of the doctrine is the Gospel, for that reason the Protestants are often called Evangelists (as the Greek word for Gospel is *evangelion*). In broad outlines Protestantism is spread in Europe (in Great Britain, the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland and the Scandinavian countries), but also in America and Australia.

For us it is important that the first impetus of Protestantism is connected to the Slavic ethnical territory. After the doctrine of priest Bogomil and the development of the Bulgarian Bogomilian school the Czech Jan Hus was burned at the stake because he formulated the main principles of Protestantism. These principles are systematized and shaped later on by figures, like Luther and Calvin, who constitute Protestantism as a confession, but no doubt its roots lie in Slavic territory. For that reason although Protestantism may seem distant it is deeply and directly related to the World of Slavs. It really exists in the religious being of the Slavs. As primary phenomenon it could be found today mainly in the Czech territory where the Hussite Church and the Churches of the Czech and Moravian brethren developed the ideas of the reformers. As a secondary phenomenon Protestantism could be found on one hand in the dissemination of the famous European Protestant branches in the Slavic lands (almost everywhere there are Reformists, Adventists and Baptists, etc.) and on the other – in the so called Old Catholics (the Mariavite Church) in Poland.

Consequently the centuries after the Reformation lead to the establishment of a new ethnoreligious community in the Slavic ethnical territories, it unites the Protestants and following the up-mentioned model we may call it “**Slavia evangelica**”.<sup>20</sup>

The development of the forth Christian Slavic community is more complicated. It was formed as a result of the Union of Brest, concluded in 1596. The Union Church (called also Greek-Roman Church, Catholic Church practicing Orthodox rituals) was established initially as a union of the Orthodox and the Catholic Church in Poland. The Orthodox Ukrainians and Belarusians recognized the primacy of the Roman pope, while they preserve the Orthodox rituals and the worship in native language. The same model was applied afterwards in other Slavic territories – among Russians, Rusyns, Slovaks, etc. including Bulgaria. The efforts of a number of Bulgarian leaders from the National Revival period to establish a union with the Catholic world are well known. The Roman Church

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<sup>20</sup> The term is mine, but I consider that it correctly reflects the situation.

concludes unions not only with the Orthodox, but also with the Armenian, the Coptic, Maronite Church, etc. All the unions follow one and the same principle—the uniats recognize the primacy of the Roman pope and the dogma of the Catholic Church. On the other hand they preserve their worship, the calendar and traditional features. The Union Church in the Slavic lands highlights the significance of the holy brothers saint Cyril and Methodius. In the rituals the Church-Slavonic language is used mainly. We have to note that in practice there is no integrated church organization, called a Union Church (or Roman-Greek Church). Instead a conglomeration of autocephalic Church organizations in the Orthodox World exists, which (unlike the Orthodox) recognize the primacy of the Roman pope. Today union churches are established in many Slavic countries (including Bulgaria) and their followers form an ethnoreligious community, which we may call **“Slavia uniata”**. In this case, as in the previous, the term is new, it is not widely accepted, but it seems that it describes the situation correctly.

On Slavic ethnical territory not only Christian ethnoreligious communities are founded. The term **“Slavia islamica”**<sup>21</sup> registers the formation (during the late medieval period) of a community, resulting from the spread of the Islam in Europe and in particular through the Slavic lands. It is well known that Islam expansion on our continent is related to the raise of the Ottoman Empire. In this case again we should start our analysis from an earlier point. Mohammed, who in 610 proclaims himself as the unique prophet of Allah, reveals to the Arabians the real supreme goal and sense of their lives. He attracts many followers, around 630 the Muslims take control of Mecca and in the end of the year a significant part of the Arabian Peninsula was united and conquered by the holy power of Mohammed. After his death his adherents strengthened the positions of the caliphate as a specific Islamic theocratic state oriented to invasion and only for one century the Islamic caliphate extends its frontiers from Syria, Palestine, Egypt through Iran, India, West China and Middle Asia, the Caucasian lands, the East provinces of the Byzantine Empire, up to Spain, South France and the Atlantic coast. The Seljuk Turks accept the Islam later on in X – XI century and soon after that (in 1077) the Seljuk Sultanate was formed. Extremely complicated ethnogenetic processes start to develop there. In the end they lead to the establishment of the Turkish ethnos from Turkic, Ogusian and Turkmenian, Mongolian and other ethnic elements. Among the beyliks, organized on family principle, (as clans) the Ottoman gains prominence (called after its founder Osman the First, who lived in XIII – XIV). Soon the formation turns into an autonomous state, which grows fast and becomes the major threat for Byzantium by that time. For two centuries from a comparatively small emirate in the Eastern parts of Asia Minor the Ottoman state, which could already be defined as an empire, extends over Central Europe. It conquers Byzantium and the other medieval Christian countries in the Balkans, and led by the primacy of Islam it imposes its rule over the European ethnoses, formed on that territory, a big part of which belong to

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<sup>21</sup> This term is not widely accepted, but recently it gains popularity.

the South Slavs. Practically in these lands starts a co-existence between two religions, denying each other, between different cultures and social worlds.

We have to bear in mind that unlike the pagan beliefs, which are naturally localized and autonomous, in contrast to the Jewish religion, which is ethnically focused, just like Christianity the Islam is open to all people, regardless of the relations, connecting them to one or another community.

In contrast to Christianity in Islam the domination of the sacred is expressed much more strongly and firmly and a clearly expressed orientation to integrity follows from that. The real community is in the same time a religious community. For that reason although Islam ignores all the principles, important for the ethnical formation, practically some of the external conditions of the up-mentioned religious integration have a powerful impact on ethnic assimilation. Processes of that kind start among the Slavic population on the Balkans. It is well known that the Ottoman Empire is founded as a multi ethnic state where along with the Muslims, there are Christian or other ethnoses, who are relatively, detached. When the Balkan provinces were conquered by the Empire Ottoman-turkic, colonists set off to the Balkans in order to provide the needed support of the new social, political and military order. As a result the homogenous nature of the local population is modified and the ethnical and confessional structure is changed. In the first stage (XV – XVI century) the transformations are not significant, but in the next (XVII – XVIII century) a considerable increase of the Muslims is observed, related to the Islamization of the local population. In this period all the forms of political, economical, social and cultural discrimination of the Christian subjects in the Empire are strengthened. The political and social conditions provoke active conversion to the leading religion without direct violent actions. To say it in other words the huge amount of cases of Islam conversion results not from a direct compulsion, but from continuous indirect pressure, which stimulates the process and changes the confessional structure of the Slavic population. At some places and in some time periods by that time massive and cruel actions for forcible Islamization took place, as we all know well from our own history.

To summarize, the forms and the methods of Islamization of the Slavs in the Ottoman Empire are different; they are determined by the general political, social and economic state of the country. For that reason the intensity of the Islamization processes during the centuries of slavery varies and is influenced by different factors. In the end the Islamization could be analyzed as a central phenomenon (a part of the Empires concept for organization and consolidation of power), but also as a more general process, determined by the military ideology of Islam and the theoretical principles on which the state is built.

In this case it is important that the Islamization covers all social strata – from the local feudal aristocracy through the people who live in the towns to the rural masses. In the towns the process starts earlier and it is more intensive than in the villages. The specific nature and the dynamics in different areas of the South Slavic ethnical lands also varies, which is determined by different factors – the extension of the Ottoman colonization, the place of the relevant province in the



boundaries of the Empire, the flexible state policy and even the geopolitical factor, the inclination in the Muslims ideology to syncretic forms, the adaptability of the local Christian beliefs to the Islam, etc.

To summarize: the important fact is that the Islam put its foot on the Balkans and in particular among the South Slavs. Regardless of the success in the Islamization and the assimilation of the conquered population the unity of the Muslims in these lands remains a fiction and the idea for the Islamization of the Balkans proves impossible. Although the establishment of a new ethnoreligious community on the territory of the South Slavs among Bulgarians, Serbs and Croats called *Slavia islamica* proves fully possible.

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## РЕЗЮМЕ

### Славянски етнорелигиозни общности

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Текстът се занимава с взаимодействията между етничната и религиозната структура на човечеството, или с други думи – между етносферата и теосферата. Формулира се наличието на етнорелигиозни общности, включително на славянските етнически територии, като реални човешки обединения, имащи дълъг исторически живот и притежаващи специфични механизми за общностно единение. Разглеждат се както процесите на християнизация, така и на ислямизация на славянско население в Европа. На тази основа се анализира създаването и битието на етнорелигиозните общности на право-

славните славяни (назована SLAVIA ORTHODOXA), на католическите славяни (назована SLAVIA CATHOLICA), на славяните протестанти (назована SLAVIA EVANGELICA), на славяните униати (назована SLAVIA UNIATA) и на славяните мюсюлмани (назована SLAVIA ISLAMICA).