MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS
OF THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA

Docendo discimus
BULGARIAN DIPLOMATIC
INSTITUTE

TOGETHERNESS OF RELIGIONS AND COMMUNITIES IN BULGARIA: DIMENSIONS OF PUBLICITY AND DIPLOMACY WITH UNIVERSAL APPLICABILITY

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Sofia, 2024

The contents of this brochure are the authors' sole responsibility. They do not represent the official positions and views of the Bulgarian Diplomatic Institute, as well as the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Cover Design

The cover design uses the author's painting "Sofia – A Symbol of Unity: The Quadrangle of Religions" by Architect Polina Gerdjikova, daughter of Dr. Pavel Gerdjikov, Righteous Among the Nations, honored by Yad Vashem with two medals for saving Jews during the Holocaust.

Painting concept:

In the heart of Sofia, the prayer houses of four major religions in Bulgaria coexist in close proximity: the Orthodox Cathedral of St. Nedelya, the Catholic Cathedral of St. Joseph, the Sofia Synagogue, and the Banya Bashi Mosque. These sacred sites are compositionally unified by the Monument of Sofia, an allegorical figure symbolising wisdom and glory. The contour of Mount Vitosha visually connects them, while the ancient stone walls of Serdica are subtly suggested beneath their foundations. The symbols of the four religions are depicted and given equal prominence, reflecting their spiritual equality in Bulgaria. Sofia's name derives from the Church of St. Sofia, which means Divine Wisdom. The Edict of Serdica, issued in 311 CE by Emperor Galerius, first recognised Christianity as an equal faith in the Roman Empire. This edict laid the foundation for the idea of peaceful coexistence among religious communities – an idea that has lived on for centuries in the hearts of the people in this land. The painting is inspired by this enduring vision of tolerance and unity.

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Introduction

Angel Orbetsov, Ph.D. and Dimitar Mihaylov, Ph.D.,
Ambassadors-at-large, Ministry of Foreign Affairs

The seminar titled "*Togetherness of Religions and Communities in Bulgaria: Dimensions of Publicity and Diplomacy with Universal Applicability"* was held on October 30, 2024, at the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This event was organised by the MFA's *ad hoc* Unit of Religious Diplomacy and the Bulgarian Diplomatic Institute, following several months of meetings, discussions, and consultations involving religious entities, government institutions, scholars, and intellectuals.

The inspiration for the seminar largely stemmed from Bulgaria's participation in two key meetings of coordinators and specialists on religion-related issues in the EU-27 foreign ministries, which took place in Brussels in January 2023 and February 2024, under the chairmanship of the European External Action Service (EEAS). These meetings underscored the growing significance of religion as a factor in effective diplomacy, politics, and society in 21st-century global affairs.

The seminar highlighted Bulgaria's distinct social environment of tolerance and understanding, characterised by established trust and integrity among various faiths and ethnic groups within a framework of mutual recognition of their identity as parts of a single nation. The contributions of all six major denominations, along with research papers from prominent academics, sought to explore the roots of Bulgaria's tradition of peaceful coexistence and good-neighbourliness among different communities in the country. Additionally, they explored whether the "Bulgarian formula" could be applied internationally to help prevent or resolve ethno-religious conflicts.

Unlike many European countries, where multiculturalism has emerged as a result of rapidly growing migrant populations, Bulgaria has long been home to traditional communities with a deep history of coexistence. This coexistence is marked by centuries of continuous contact, fostering shared customs, joint holiday celebrations, and a strong sense of belonging to a unified whole. In many instances, religious norms and rituals have been exchanged and absorbed, with communities working together in the construction of religious sites. Furthermore, culture and education have also played a key role in bridging gaps between communities. Shared folklore, literary traditions, music, dance, and other cultural elements have provided unifying experiences and symbols. As a result, trust and cooperation have thrived, with people of different ethnicities and faiths forming friendships and even kinship bonds at the individual level.

Certainly, there is no illusion or self-deception that everything has always been harmonious in the Bulgarian lands throughout history, and we do not shy away from acknowledging that interreligious relations have faced challenges. The dominant Orthodox Church has undergone periods of schism, beginning with the rise of the Bogomil gnostic sect in the 10th century and culminating with the dissent of the early 1990s. Ottoman rule (1396-1878) deprived the Bulgarians of statehood for nearly five centuries. Bulgaria was also deeply affected by the

excesses of nationalism and chauvinism during the Balkan Wars (1912-1913) and both World Wars. Under communist rule, which firmly upheld atheism, severe repression was imposed on religious leaders of all denominations during the 1950s. As the regime's collapse drew near, Bulgaria's reputation was further tarnished by the infamous *revival process* (1985-1989), which specifically targeted Muslim Turks by forcibly changing their names.

Despite historic downturns, however, the Bulgarian people, across ethnic and religious groups, have remained steadfast in their inherent wisdom to largely prevent political tensions from spilling over into personal relationships. While political extremism has at times prevailed at the state level, tolerance has persisted within individual relationships. Religious radicalism, proselytism, and fanaticism have not taken root within the religious communities, which advocate a moderate form of Orthodoxy, Hanafi Islam, and Sephardic Judaism.

A unique model of coexistence among communities developed in the Bulgarian lands under Ottoman rule, supported by the *millet* system. The ethos of the Bulgarian National Revival, illuminated by the efforts of Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant clergy alongside secular scholars, was inclusive and open to all ethno-religious groups. The "national catastrophes" of the early 20th century tempered the nationalist and militaristic spirit of the Bulgarian elites. Bulgarians opened their hearts to shelter the stranded Armenians fleeing the Ottoman atrocities of 1915. The Orthodox clergy, among others, led the resistance to the Holocaust in Bulgaria during World War II, playing a crucial role in rescuing Jewish compatriots from Nazi concentration camps.

The *revival process* notwithstanding, Bulgarian Muslims have retained their attachment to the concept of good-neighbourliness. Against the backdrop of recent conflicts in the Balkans, Bulgaria has managed to avoid tensions, preserving the collective memory of peaceful coexistence. In light of the current Middle East crisis, Bulgaria has not witnessed significant manifestations of Antisemitism or Islamophobia, which, regrettably, persist in other European countries.

Interventions and reports presented at the seminar, and included in this brochure, address various aspects of the religious issue, offering observations, expertise and insights.

Metropolitan Antony of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church emphasises the role of moral support and spiritual enlightenment in instilling ethical principles and values. Drawing inspiration from Christian religious texts, he dwells upon the importance of empathy and communication as building blocks for coexistence between communities. He also offers evidence of Bulgarian religious tolerance looking into examples of opposition to Antisemitism and hospitality to Armenian immigrants in our country.

The speech of Vedat Ahmed, Chairman of the Supreme Muslim Council, concentrates on dialogue as the main element contributing to harmony in social life. His retrospective analysis of peaceful cohabitation highlights the importance of sharing a common land. The discourse about upholding interreligious peace and tranquillity is presented in the context of Qur'anic principles and the outstanding

role of religious institutions, with a focus on the Muslim faith and the efforts of Muslim leaders.

The Catholic perspective is reflected in the interventions of bishops Petko Valov and Strahil Kavalenov. The former brings insight into basic terms such as tolerance, fanaticism and radicalism and touches upon the doctrines of the Catholic Church with regard to religious freedom. The latter provides a comprehensive overview of the history of Catholic presence in Bulgaria and the pivotal role of its clergy in maintaining fruitful ties with the Vatican and the Sovereign Order of Malta.

Vice-President of the Bulgarian Evangelical Alliance, Vladimir Raichinov, in co-authorship with Pastor Momchil Petrov, gives prominence to the contribution of the Protestant community to the cultural enrichment, education, and biblical literacy of Bulgarian society. He also pays respect to other religions, while rejecting notions of religious superiority. Noteworthy in his speech is the deciphering of the widely used term *komshuluk*, quasi-synonymous to neighbourliness in a specific context.

Speaking on behalf of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church, Prof. Minasyan focuses on the suffering of the Armenian people and the preservation of their national identity, while also addressing the tolerance and adaptability of Armenian settlers to the Bulgarian environment and their contribution to public life. He pays tribute to the hospitality of the host country vis-à-vis Armenians and reinforces the idea of universal applicability of the Bulgarian model of togetherness, especially with regard to current challenges.

Maxim Delchev, Executive Director of the Organisation of the Jews in Bulgaria *Shalom*, considers the contribution of the Jewish community to peace, tolerance and harmony through the prism of Judaic law on the welfare of the state and other spiritual principles. He immerses the audience in the fabulous realm of Jewish rituals and offers valuable insights on the basic patterns of interaction between Jewish communities and state and municipal authorities in Bulgaria, compared to other countries.

Several researchers further contribute as follows:

Prof. Jordan Peev, the dean of Arabic and Islamic studies in Bulgaria, examines the historical and ongoing relationships between Christians, Muslims, and the state. Over the past six centuries, Bulgaria's political structure has navigated the dynamics between these groups, with power shifting from Muslim to Christian hands. Communities often transcend religious differences by sharing important life events and offering mutual support. However, deeply ingrained prejudices, which Peev terms a “folkloric way of thinking,” persist, hindering broader understanding and harmony.

Assoc. Prof. Ivaylo Naydenov, Dean of the Faculty of Theology at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski,” introduces three key themes – peace, responsibility, and leadership – especially within the context of interreligious dialogue. Peace is examined as both a sacred and a tangible concept, deeply rooted in religious traditions. Responsibility is an essential aspect of human existence. Leadership is explored through the concept of “servant leadership”. The three are interconnected

and should be approached through a dialogue that respects human relationship with God and creation.

Dr. Nikolay Neshev, head of the Bulgarian Forum for Interreligious Dialogue and Partnership (BFIDP), discusses ways to foster interreligious cooperation through dialogue among diverse religious communities. BFIDP addresses current challenges by establishing common ground for societal development. Neshev explores how history, philosophy, theology, and even game theory can be incorporated to build effective frameworks for collaboration. He also examines how AI's potential comes to balance technological advancement with human intelligence and spirituality.

Prof. Simeon Evstatiev, head of the Arabic and Semitic Studies Department at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski," explores the concept of *komshuluk*. Bulgarian society has maintained a delicate balance through respect for religious boundaries and a tacit agreement to refrain from delving into doctrinal differences. Historical parallels with *Al-Andalus* are drawn, yet the Bulgarian model is unique, nurtured through everyday neighbourly interactions that allow religious groups to coexist without extensive theological engagement. The principle of silence – respecting the sacredness of other religions – plays a pivotal role.

Bogdan Patashev, Bulgarian Ambassador to the Holy See (2019-2023), explores the long-standing relationship between the Vatican and Bulgaria. Key figures such as St. Clement of Rome and Saints Cyril and Methodius played a pivotal role in spreading Christianity, and the Vatican has consistently recognised Bulgaria's contributions to preserving Christian traditions. Recent papal visits have underscored Bulgaria's unique position as a bridge between East and West.

Assoc. Prof. Albena Taneva, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski," reflects on the role of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church's Holy Synod during the Holocaust, highlighting its bravery, leadership, and commitment to tolerance. Taneva explores the concept of leadership as the ability to inspire collective action for a common moral cause. The Synod's leadership is seen as a moral stance against the persecution of Jews, a stance shared through events held by the Bulgarian Foreign Ministry, promoting the legacy of religious tolerance as a cornerstone of Bulgarian history.

Prof. Georgeta Nazarska, University of Library Studies and Information Technologies (ULSIT), discusses the evolution of religious pluralism in Bulgaria. ULSIT has established a non-confessional teaching model that includes research on religion, education on world religions, and collaboration with religious communities. The university organises the annual "Harmony in Diversity" Scientific Conference to promote interreligious dialogue and human rights. This approach extends to secondary education and teacher training, underscoring understanding and respecting religious differences.

Kiril P. Kartaloff, Ph.D., D.Sc., Associate Professor of Philosophy of History at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and Lecturer at the Catholic University of Milan, led a debate on the significance and urgency of interreligious dialogue. His intervention advocates for a renewed sense of responsibility, a "theology of religious pluralism," highlighting two paths for humanity: one leading to growth, mutual understanding, and humanisation, and the other toward regression, division, and

conflict. He emphasises the transformative potential of dialogue in building a more inclusive, peaceful, and humanised world.

Georgi Milkov, a renowned journalist and producer of a TV programme on religion, reflects on the journey of *Pencho*, a ship that carried over 500 Jews from various European countries fleeing to Palestine during the WWII. When the ship arrived at the Bulgarian port of Ruse, the passengers were on the verge of starvation. However, local citizens, organised by Metropolitan Michael of Dorostol and Cherven, came to their aid, providing food and support. Ultimately, this story exemplifies Bulgaria's "soft power."

Boyko Vassilev, producer and host of the weekly programme *Panorama* on the Bulgarian National Television, focuses on the concept of moderation as a defining characteristic of the Bulgarian national identity. Moderation, however, spills over into scepticism that differs from the more extreme and assertive national behaviours observed in neighbouring countries. Vasilev contemplates how Bulgaria's history of religious tolerance may stem from a lack of strong belief, potentially contributing to the country's reputation for moderation. He concludes by posing the provocative question whether moderation and tolerance may also reflect a deeper existential struggle with identity and whether it is necessary for contemporary Bulgarians to embrace this *scepsis*.

Opening Speech of Ivan Kondov, Minister of Foreign Affairs

Deeply respected leaders of the main religions in the Republic of Bulgaria,

Representatives of state institutions, non-governmental circles, the academic, research and journalistic communities,

Dear colleagues,

It is my great honour and privilege to open the seminar *Togetherness of religions and communities in Bulgaria: dimensions of publicity and diplomacy with universal applicability.*

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is hosting today for the first time an innovative forum of this nature, which gathers leaders and intellectuals from the main religious communities in Bulgaria, as well as researchers on religion to exchange views on one of the most topical and pressing issues of modern times: living together in peace, understanding and tolerance as an alternative to rivalry and conflicts, which are alarmingly on the rise nowadays at both regional and global levels.

Building on the wisdom of our ancestors, let us attempt to rediscover and make sense of the recipes for harmonious coexistence that have brought together different ethnic and religious communities in our wonderful homeland. Let us try to uncover the secret that has, for centuries, united and consolidated the Bulgarian demographic and social environment in a unique way. Let us identify the seeds of peaceful coexistence and well-being among different peoples that have sprouted in our country to give birth to fertile trees, which today not only delight us with their fruits, but also protect us from the whirlwinds of hatred and confrontation.

While realising the importance of the religious factor in the socio-political, cultural and economic spheres, the team at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is resolved to benefit from it for the good of our country and Bulgarian citizens. We also reflect on whether elements of universal significance could be derived from the Bulgarian model of togetherness, so that countries subjected to erosion and confrontation among different ethnic and religious communities could draw inspiration for solving acute conflicts.

It is my sincere hope that today's seminar will address all these issues. So let me extend my profound gratitude to the six religious communities and the representatives of academia. All expectations are on your valuable contribution to fill with content and enrich with innovative ideas the two panels of the seminar: *Togetherness of religions – the voice of denominations* and *The soft power of togetherness in Bulgaria as a tool of public diplomacy*, as well as the ensuing discussion on interreligious dialogue as a means of understanding.

I deeply believe that today's seminar will serve as the beginning of a lasting partnership to strengthen understanding and tolerance in our homeland. It is also supposed to raise the awareness of our international partners and friends about our *soft power* in the spirit of the humanistic covenants of our national hero Vasil

Levski. In the cherished "*temple of the first freedom*", he bequeathed us "*...to give each one his due*" in equality and understanding.

Finally, I extend heartfelt thanks to the organisers of today's seminar – the Diplomatic Institute and the MFA's Religious Diplomacy Unit, functioning within the purview of the Directorate of Foreign Policy Planning, Information and Coordination.

Thank you for your attention!

Address of Ms. Lyudmila Petkova, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, Chair of the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Integration Issues with the Council of Ministers

Dear Organisers,

Dear Participants and Guests of this Prestigious Forum,

On behalf of the Government of the Republic of Bulgaria and on my personal behalf as Deputy Prime Minister and Chair of the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Integration Issues, I thank you for the opportunity to greet the organisers, participants, and guests of the Seminar *Togetherness of Religions and Communities in Bulgaria: Public Dimensions and Universally Applicable Diplomacy.*

In the intricate world we live in, in a society torn by conflicts – many with ethnic or religious roots, such an important topic demands that diverse points of view be heard.

Today's high forum does exactly that: it brings together and provides a rostrum for dialogue between and among leaders of the largest religious communities within the country: the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and the Muslim Denomination, and the smaller in number but historically significant Catholic, Protestant, Israelite denominations, and the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church, prominent members of the academia, diplomats, renowned public figures and experts.

It is my belief that the event will once again highlight the unique Bulgarian ethno-religious experience and will testify to the proven tolerance of our people. It is tolerance, that has prevented our lands from fighting religious wars for centuries. It is tolerance, that to this day nips emerging ethnic and religious conflicts in the bud. It is tolerance, that did not leave our Armenians to the mercy of fate after their persecution in the Ottoman Empire and saved our Jews and Roma from Nazism during World War II.

I am confident that the Seminar will achieve its main goal, which is to encourage and give publicity to the Bulgarian people's moral virtues and to promote Bulgaria's positive and appealing image internationally, while underscoring its significant contribution in the context of European diversity.

Please accept my best wishes for good luck and success!

Address of Bulgarian Patriarch and Metropolitan of Sofia Daniil

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is well known that the word *religion* (*religio*) is of Latin origin. It is derived from the verb *religare*, which literally means "to reconnect" *(re + ligare)*, i.e. to restore one's relationship with God. In the most general terms, religion is the way in which man relates to God and to others. That is, religion means, above all, communion.

Throughout European history, from the Reformation to the present day, the question of religious tolerance and the guarantee of religious freedom have remained significant challenges for the European West. We dare say that our Holy Orthodox Church has made a particularly valuable contribution in creating and promoting awareness of tolerance, respect for the other's choice, and their right to freely practice and profess their religion. This, for example, accounts for the absence in the Orthodox East of such sad phenomena as religious wars. Our Lord Jesus Christ teaches us: *You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbour and hate your enemy." But I say to you, "Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who insult and persecute you"* (Mt 5:4344). This means that our position as Orthodox Christians and citizens of the Republic of Bulgaria is not simply the passive acceptance of the other and bearing with his otherness and difference from us. We are called not just to tolerate our fellow human beings, but much more – we are called to love them. For us Orthodox Christians, *togetherness* is not tantamount to a passive attitude, but is rather an active position of *care* and *sacrifice*. Togetherness means, above all, genuine care and evangelical love for the other, regardless of their background, colour, political or religious convictions.

With these opening thoughts, we would like to greet the participants in today's seminar. Please accept our benevolent wishes at prayer for a fruitful discussion on this topic, so relevant and significant for our society and for the whole modern world!

Address of Grand Mufti Mustafa Hadzhi

Dear representatives of religious communities,

Dear Madam Deputy Minister,

Dear Director of the Diplomatic Institute,

Representatives of the academic community,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Bismillah ur-Rahman ur-Rahim (In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful). First of all, I would like to express my gratitude to the organisers of this seminar and emphasise that it fills an important void. To my mind, it should have been held a long time ago, and by other events of that sort. Furthermore, I think holding such events should not be confined to the duties of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but should also involve representatives of spiritual leaders and citizens of this country in general, because we all have something to be proud of and something to say to the world.

First of all, let me point out that religion is meant to unite people, rather than divide them. Religion aims to bring to the fore the importance of human life. Islamic law is based on five foundations, and all other principles conform to these foundations. The first one is that Islamic law, which we call *Sharia*, aims to protect the religion of the people. This means that no one has the right to infringe on anyone's conscience or force anyone to accept their own ideology or religion. On this issue, *Allah Ta'ala* says in the *Holy Qur'an: "There is no violence in religion,"* which means that since religion is a form of belief, it cannot be imposed or superficially embraced. If someone wants to uphold their rightness, it is necessary to do everything in their power to prove it scientifically and convincingly.

Secondly, *Sharia* strives to protect human lives and value human health. This means that murder is prohibited; it means that suicide is also prohibited; it also means that encroachment on anyone's life and health is prohibited. In the *Qur'an, Allah Ta'ala says: "Whoever kills one person, it is as if he has killed all mankind, and whoever saves one human life, it is as if he has saved all mankind."* Proceeding from these principles, it is necessary for all of us to realise our role and our duties toward the society in which we live, especially in our time, when blood is shed in many places in the world in the name of religion.

The third foundation on which Islamic law is based is the safeguard of people's honour and dignity. This means that no one has the right to make fun of, ridicule or underestimate anyone, because every single person, without exception, is created in the best form. On this point, *Allah the Almighty* says: *"We created humans in the best form."*

The fourth basis of Islamic law is the protection of the human mind. This means that everything that paralyses the human mind – be it alcohol, drugs, or anything preventing a person from performing their role as a vicegerent of the most sublime in this world – is prohibited. Perhaps, it is necessary to open a parenthesis

here and confess that on this issue we are deeply indebted and accountable to our society, as it unfortunately gives rise to alcoholism and drug addiction.

And in fifth place, human property is inviolable. Everyone has the right to ownership and no one has the right to encroach on anyone's property or take it away from them. In this aspect, I would like to draw attention to one more issue – the words of *Allah the Almighty in the Holy Qur'an: "O people, We have created you from one man and one woman, and We have made you tribes and kindreds, so that you may become acquainted. The best of you is the one who is the most God-loving."* This Qur'anic verse means that, in the end, we all live in this world, and we all eat from this land. This sentiment was well reflected by a Bulgarian poet who wrote: *"We are all children of Mother Earth."* Following this path, it is necessary for all of us in this country to realise our responsibility to society, to our homeland, and to the Bulgarian people. We must make every effort to stop the erosion of the Bulgarian nation, which has existed for centuries and has managed to preserve its traditions and good relations, regardless of religion or ethnicity.

Once again, many thanks to the organisers! I wish success to this seminar and I hope it will not be the last, because, as already stated, we desperately need such events. God bless you!

Address of Georgi Krastev, Director of the Directorate of Religious Affairs with the Council of Ministers

Dear organisers and participants in the seminar "Togetherness of religions and communities in Bulgaria",

On behalf of the Directorate of Religious Affairs and on my own behalf, I would like to express my sincere respect and appreciation for the initiative organised by the Diplomatic Institute at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Your seminar on the interaction between religions and communities in Bulgaria, as well as on the role of publicity and diplomacy in this process, is of utmost importance to our contemporary society.

Bulgaria is an example of tolerance and peaceful coexistence among different religions and ethnicities, and our history has provided ample evidence of dialogue, mutual respect and cooperation as means to achieve stability and prosperity. It is my firm belief that your work and efforts during this seminar will contribute greatly to the promotion of these values and their extension beyond our national borders.

The theme you have chosen is not only topical but also strategic. Public diplomacy, in the context of religions and communities, plays an increasingly important role in building sustainable relationships between different nations and cultures. In a world facing complex political, social and religious challenges, diplomacy serves as a bridge that connects not only states but also people in their quest for understanding, peace and stability.

I am confident that this seminar will open new perspectives for cooperation and initiate fruitful discussions and ideas with lasting significance not only for Bulgaria but also for the international community. Sharing experiences and good practices, as well as raising awareness of the universal principles of tolerance and mutual respect, are key elements for the promotion of peaceful coexistence in the global context.

Let me wish all the participants fruitful and inspiring work during the seminar. May your discussions and ideas serve as a basis for setting up new forms of dialogue that contribute to peace and harmony both in Bulgaria and around the world.

Address of Robert Djerassi, Chairman of the National Council of Religious Communities in Bulgaria

Your Holiness,

Your Eminences,

Your Excellencies,

Dear guests and participants in the seminar,

On behalf of the National Council of Religious Communities in Bulgaria (NCRCB), I have the honour to address you today, as we are gathered here to discuss the topic *Togetherness of Religions and Communities in Bulgaria: Dimensions of Publicity and Diplomacy with Universal Applicability.*

The National Council of Religious Communities in Bulgaria was founded in 2008 as a non-governmental organisation with the purpose of promoting understanding among the different religious communities in our country. We believe that mutual respect and tolerance are key elements for building harmonious coexistence in our diverse society.

In the past years, the NCRCB has proven through its activities that it is an important factor in preserving religious peace in Bulgaria.

Today, more than ever, it is extremely important to focus on fostering dialogue and cooperation between different religious communities. We live in a time of growing tensions and conflicts around the world, often fuelled by extremist ideologies. Therefore, it is crucial that we work together to promote shared values such as peace, justice, and compassion.

As representatives of different religious traditions, we have a collective responsibility to model these values in our interactions with each other and within society as a whole. We would be very glad to use our existing platform in order to share our experiences and best practices for nurturing understanding and cooperation between religious communities.

In addition, we ought to recognise the role that governments play in promoting religious freedom and preventing discrimination. As public figures, you have a unique opportunity to create policies that protect the rights of all citizens, regardless of their faith or belief. We hope that you will use this opportunity to foster an environment where all religious communities can flourish freely and equally.

The maintenance of religious peace in the present political environment requires the joint efforts of the government, religious leaders, and individuals. I believe that this seminar will provide an opportunity to discuss issues such as:

· Promoting religious education;

· Fostering interreligious dialogue;

· Protection of religious freedom;

· Developing a culture of tolerance;

· Cooperation for advancing social causes;

· Mediation and conflict resolution;

· Monitoring and reporting.

By implementing these strategies, we can work to maintain religious peace and stimulate harmonious coexistence in our diverse society.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate my gratitude for the chance to address you today. Let us continue to work together to build a more inclusive and harmonious society where everyone can live according to their religious beliefs without fear of persecution or discrimination.

Thank you, and may God bless our work.

Togetherness of Religions and Communities in Bulgaria: the Role of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church

Western and Central European Metropolitan Bishop Antoniy

Nowadays, we live in an age with no analogue in the past. The divisions in society, the newly emerging military conflicts, and the lack of predictability, once again put on the agenda the primordial questions about the value of the human person, the right to life, the freedom of religious confession. Questions about the interaction of communities and minorities (both religious and ethnic) and their roles in society are again coming to the fore.

Despite the growing public distrust in institutions, the backbone of the democratic state – the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, Bulgarian Patriarchate – according to sociological surveys, continues to enjoy the greatest trust in society. In different studies, it varies between 61% (in 2021)[1] and 43.1% (in 2024)[2], which ranks it first among the most approved institutions in the state. This trust, deriving from the role of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church as a unifying bond and a sort of a bridge between society, state institutions, religions and communities, forms a solid foundation for harmonious coexistence of different ethnicities and denominations.

Bulgarian society is diverse in ethno-religious terms, and this diversity, naturally interwoven in our demographic structure, creates a model of unique atmosphere and togetherness among different communities. In terms of demographics, immediate coexistence (neighbourhood) without explicit boundaries between communities is an important prerequisite for and even necessitates the creation of a sustainable, tolerant model of coexistence. This imperative is pragmatic in its purely household dimension, and not necessarily being deeply rationalised. The desire for full communication with the close-proximity neighbour on a daily basis is fruitful, as it provides a real opportunity to peek into the lifestyle, customs and daily activities of the neighbour, who often belongs to a different ethnicity. Thus, neighbourly relations produce natural bonds and an atmosphere of trust and mutual acceptance.

Dialogue with others dispels fears, educates in respect and tolerance, and becomes a method of mitigating prejudice and bigotry. In addition, interaction at the household level evokes empathy, as it allows for and even encourages the sharing of different religious holidays and customs. That could possibly explain the so-called phenomenon of "transfusion" of norms or customs traditional to one religion into another one. Far from being regarded as a departure from authentic religious traditions and beliefs, this "transfusion" is rather perceived as aspiration for shared experiences and expression of togetherness.

The Church, as an exponent of the Christian religion, projects tolerance

1 61% of the respondents say that they have confidence in BOC, while 20% have no confidence in the Church. The study was financed by the *Open Society Institute – Sofia*, and was conducted in the period 16-23 October, 2021.

2 A survey on the trust in the Church by *Gallup International Balkan* shows 43.1% of trust.

and understanding, cultivates characteristic Bulgarian virtues such as hospitality, solidarity, and diligence, which contribute to the culture of communication and the creation of an atmosphere of respect among different communities. Therefore, its role in shaping values and ideology as an integral part of a person's identity is essential. The Church shapes the culture and the attitude towards the world and the other person, educates in charity and deters hostility, which is the basis for extreme phenomena in society. The moral principles and values that it fosters, such as solidarity, love for one's fellowmen, forgiveness and justice, weave a social and moral framework that promotes the harmonious coexistence of differences and community spirit, and creates a sense of belonging and a shared identity.

The Church's experience spans millennia. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church, in addition to being the state religion during the triumph of the great Bulgarian tsars of the Middle Ages – from the first Bulgarian Christian ruler St. *Knyaz* (Prince) Boris-Mikhail (852-889) to the last one Ivan Sratsimir (1356-1396), successfully preserved and continued to shape the national identity of our people during the period of the subsequent yoke and liquidation of the state, until the Liberation. The Orthodox Church upholds its historical mission as a moral support for our people, leading them to spiritual enlightenment, giving them hope and guidance in days of hardship.

In the modern history of Bulgaria, there are numerous examples of religious leaders, as well as public figures and statesmen, who have clearly and categorically declared their support for various ethnic and religious groups, recognising them as organic parts of the Bulgarian nation.

While referring to the draft Law for Protection of the Nation on November 12, 1940, Metropolitan Bishop Stefan Sofiyski insisted that *"strictly speaking, there is no Jewish issue in Bulgaria"* and that the Jews were *"good, loyal, honest citizens, who enjoy Bulgarian citizenship and uphold it with pride and patriotism...; they are a proof of Bulgarian tolerance before the foreign world, and they emerge as true patriots at the front of the state."*

This is how Christ's words about love for one's fellowmen, regardless of their religion, were fulfilled through the act of condemning this Antisemitic bill by the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. The Holy Synod knew that the bill aimed to legalise evil, i.e. severe repression against the Bulgarian Jews. In this troubled wartime, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church influenced society as a whole and periodically rose up against cases of violence committed by the state authorities against the Jews.

In 1943, the most difficult year for Judaism in Bulgaria, deportations and repressive measures against the Jews were intensified. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church opposed it repeatedly, sharply and openly. Tsar Boris III, influenced by the Holy Synod, rejected the deportation of Jews outside Bulgaria, and in order to save them, arranged their dispatch to labour camps in the countryside. The excuse before Hitler for deportation refusal was that Jews were needed for construction works in the country. In this difficult period, the Holy Synod realised that it could not achieve a complete removal of the racist articles from the *Law for the Protection of the Nation*. Nonetheless, in a number of letters to the state authorities, it called

for mercy, emphasising greater fairness and humanity in the enforcement of legal provisions. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church was the only institution that officially opposed Antisemitism. The Bulgarian bishops did so with the clear awareness that, by doing so, they were fulfilling their Christian duty, keeping the image of Bulgaria clean for the future.

In spiritual terms, our leaders from the recent and distant past have bequeathed us valuable lessons and guidance – how to walk the salvation path through Christian and universal human values. But the deeper meaning of their lesson is that cultural and religious differences are not an obstacle to the promotion of "togetherness" of the various ethno-religious communities.

During the communist period (1944-1989), the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, though repressed by the state authorities with the aim of erasing it as a significant social factor, regained its vitality and, after the dissent of 1989-2009, recovered again to occupy a leading place in Bulgarian society.

In the new era, the Church continues to serve as a corrective to public attitudes and a reliable criterion for truth. Most valuable for the Church is human personality, its *salvation* from sin and death, and the *unity* of people.

For us as Christians, there is no human being who is not our fellowman. This attitude is based on the fact of the incarnation – namely that God became man in the person of Christ. Therefore, all humans are brothers and sisters, bearing the same image of God and sharing the same nature.

The Church's call for unity among people also stems from the high priestly prayer of the Lord Jesus Christ shortly before His crucifixion: *"that they may all be one; as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in Us, that the world may believe that Thou hast sent Me"* (Jn. 17:21). Christ's words transcend all human divisions such as nationalism, political beliefs, religion, race, gender, age, education, and social status.

We can boldly say that the Church is the place where differences are reconciled without depersonalisation. Therefore, the value of human personality, or the more accurate theological formulation – *the sanctity of the human person*, is at the centre of Christianity, and that's why the Church is against every war, every killing, and every persecution of people. Here, we can cite numerous examples of how the Bulgarian Church helped settle nearly 22 000 Armenians in the period between 1894 and 1896 during their persecution and massacre in Western Armenia and European Turkey.

As of today, the war in Ukraine and the military conflict in the Middle East have been added to the universal evils of the 20th century, and the Bulgarian state is once again taking care of the refugees, victims of these military conflicts, while the role of the Church is, through preaching, to encourage society to be sympathetic with those suffering, despite ethnic or religious differences.

Hence, let me end my presentation with a story described in a collection of instructions by Egyptian hermits (3rd – 4th centuries AD), told by St. Macarius of

Egypt, which clearly illustrates the understanding of man as a being of love and communion, who was created to live together with others.

"When I was walking alone through the desert, I found a dead man's skull. When I nudged it with my olive staff, the skull spoke. I asked him: who are you? He answered me: I was a priest of the heathen in those places who served the (Egyptian) idols. And you are the spirit-bearing Macarius. When you kindle a compassionate love for those in hell, and when you pray for them, then they get some consolation. The old man asked him: What consolation are you talking about and what pains? The skull answered him: As far as the sky is from the earth, so deep is the fire below us, immersed in it from the feet to the head. And the most terrible: no one can see anyone face to face, because they are all stuck with their backs to each other. But when you pray for us, then we partly see each other's faces. That's the consolation. The old man wept and said: cursed be the day on which a man was born..."[3]

At first glance, this story presents us with an absurd conversation between a living man and a skull, but if we look more closely, we will see the main source of the tragedy of human life through the revelation of its otherworldly suffering. In this sad story, which ends with the *damnation* of man's lot, we see the description of hell. Hell is not described as unquenchable fire and torture, but as the impossibility to *communicate* with the other, as a state in which a person can be a prisoner of himself, and the greatest comfort in this slavery can be the face of the other person and feeling his proximity.

Indisputably, the value of life is embedded in any other religion formed in human society, as long as it is not replaced by the mask of fanaticism. Religious doctrines and authentic traditions reject violence and intolerance while promoting mutual understanding. For its part, the Church, by vocation, supports and protects the most vulnerable in society, stands on the side of the weak and defenceless, regardless of their religion and nationality.

As for the need for intimacy and full-fledged communication – it is inherent to man. Therefore, it is necessary to know the authentic religious doctrines inherited from our ancestors, as well as the religion of others – to know ourselves first, and then the culture of others. Because understanding the main aspects of different religions enables us to accept and appreciate diversity and helps us to create and affirm a harmonious environment in which everyone, regardless of their cultural and religious differences, is a full member of society.

Thank you for your attention!

3 On the crushing, Ch. 3, 18 // Ancient Patericon. S., 1994, p. 21.

The Muslim Perspective on the Togetherness of Religious Communities in Bulgaria

Vedat S. Ahmed, Chairman of the Supreme Muslim Council of the Muslim Denomination in the Republic of Bulgaria

Good relationships and dialogue between people, a proper tone in public communication, as well as interactions between institutions, public organisations, and communities, have always been of great importance for the prosperous development of humanity. These values are fundamental factors that contribute to harmony and peace on a global scale, all of which are rooted in the smallest unit of society – the individual. In fact, as noted in his famous couplet, the poet Şeyh Gâlib states that the human being is the apple (pupil) of the universe,[1] and it is from this point that one's ability to perceive what is happening around him and what lies ahead depends. Therefore, when an individual becomes aware of himself and his place in both the macro and micro realms, he will choose the path of good relationships and dialogue, which contribute to peaceful coexistence and togetherness. Unfortunately, this is not always the case.

Cooperation, dialogue, peaceful coexistence, and togetherness become even more significant in light of increasing global conflict. Moreover, our country is located in such a geostrategic position that it can be likened to the human heart and its surroundings. For this reason, both in the past and today, we often find ourselves at a stone's throw from conflicts.

A serious analysis of the causes behind the emergence and continuation of societal and international conflicts, both historically and in contemporary terms – whether on a global, regional, or local scale – reveals that religion plays a role in them. However, this role is neither primary nor even secondary. Due to the emotional nature of religion and its widespread influence in society, it contributes to masking reality and thus comes to the forefront as a motive for conflicts. This issue frequently arises in our public discourse as well. Therefore, I believe a more insightful examination of the role of religion in society and its significance for the coexistence of different religions and communities in the Bulgarian context is needed.

The coexistence of different religions and their communities, as well as of ethnic and cultural communities in Bulgaria, has a centuries-old history. Among them is the Muslim community, which has lived in these lands for generations. Despite periods of crisis and challenging situations throughout this long-shared history, it has made a significant contribution to maintaining peace and tranquillity within our borders. During different periods of this coexistence, whether Muslims were in a position of dominance during the Ottoman era, or as a minority in the new Bulgarian state, with few exceptions, they have followed the Qur'anic principle "Peace is good!" – a behaviour that has largely resonated with other religious

1 Şeyh Gâlib. (2013). Divan (N. Okcu, Haz.). Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı Yayınları, p. 228-230.

communities as well. As a result, we can claim that through these good relationships and the observance of certain boundaries, specific to each community, although they lived "parallel" lives, as A. Zhelyazkova notes, a relatively peaceful coexistence has been established between the various structural elements of society. This is the result of the "open cultural identity" of Muslims, which requires efforts for its effective existence.

In the presence of cooperation, unity, mutual assistance, and the sharing of common values in society, while taking into account the specifics of the various components, we can speak of a sense of togetherness that generates responsibility. This achievement is largely a result of mutual understanding and awareness of the shared destiny of different communities, which requires time – something we have had plenty of over the centuries. Additionally, the behaviour of those who shape public consciousness, including religious leaders at various levels and religious institutions, plays an important role. Despite the challenges of time and occasional deviations from dialogue, over the years, they have proven their crucial role in fostering unity, preventing conflicts, and contributing to the development of society.

In the Muslim context, we see that Muslim religious and educational institutions, Islamic leaders, and Muslims striving to follow Islamic norms – despite the challenges they have faced at different stages of the country's development – have upheld dialogue both at the grassroots and institutional levels. They have educated individuals with a broad worldview and, through various means, promoted ideas that strengthen dialogue and reinforce togetherness. This has allowed the Muslim community in Bulgaria to avoid marginalisation and radicalisation, while also proving their loyalty to their homeland. The authority of Muslim religious leaders was recognised even during the formation of the Constituent National Assembly (Bulgaria's first Parliament), with prominent muftis, albeit formally and unsuccessfully, included alongside clergy from other denominations. In pursuit of publicity, Prince Ferdinand made a donation to the poor Muslims through the Sofia mufti Hafız Bilal Effendi during the Christmas holidays in 1894. Later, when the Bulgarian monarch visited the Ottoman Sublime Porte, the same mufti, who was performing some representative duties of the chief mufti at the time – a position that did not yet exist – participated in his delegation as a gesture of diplomacy.

Over the years, the Bulgarian state has recognised the exceptional role of the Muslim Denomination as an institution, and therefore provided it with a broader scope for activities, while also leveraging the institution's authority by including it in international initiatives, through which it presented its positive attitude towards minorities to its neighbours. Even during the totalitarian regime of the communist period, when disgraceful acts were carried out against the Muslim community in Bulgaria, the Bulgarian authorities took advantage of the influence of the Chief Mufti's Office to reduce reactions on the international level.

In more recent times, the role of the Muslim religious institution and

religious leaders has also not been overlooked, although there have been periods of uncertainty regarding their role, which is sometimes a result of international circumstances. The Bulgarian state has provided them with a platform for activity at both the national and international levels, contributing to the formation of positive attitudes within the country, as well as favourable external evaluations regarding the good coexistence in society. One such example is the inclusion of the Chief Mufti Selim Mehmed in the delegation of President Georgi Parvanov during his visits to several Muslim countries. The participation of presidents and prime ministers in *Iftar* events organised by the Chief Mufti's Office during the month of Ramadan, and later the hosting of *Iftar* events by President Rosen Plevneliev, which were later turned into a tradition by President Rumen Radev, has had a particularly strong impact both within the country and beyond. These *Iftar* gatherings are primarily aimed at Muslims, but they also bring together representatives of various religious communities in the country, contributing to dialogue within society and sending a powerful message of unity.

The Muslim denomination has played an active role in fostering good relationships between religious communities, initiating a series of activities involving representatives from other religious communities in Bulgaria. These include public religious and cultural events, participation in joint social and educational initiatives, and visits to the places of worship of other faiths by religious leaders. It is important to emphasise that the Muslim denomination has an active role in the establishment and consolidation of the National Council of Religious Communities in Bulgaria (NCRCB), which is not just a formal organisation with representative functions but also contributes to the mutual understanding and rapprochement of members from different communities. In this regard, positive examples include the Religious Festival in Sofia, the drawing competition "Faith – a Dream for a Better World," and others, in which representatives of the Chief Mufti's Office and members of the Muslim community in our country actively participate.

It is important to note that the Muslim community in Bulgaria has established values based on mutual respect, taking into account the religious and ethno-cultural differences of the communities and respecting the specific boundaries of each one. For decades, perhaps even centuries, Muslims, together with their brothers of other faiths, have participated in joint religious and cultural events, such as prayers for rain. An interesting example in this regard is the well-known Hadjet Bayram occasion in the Sevlievo region, which, in addition to its religious and cultural significance, can also be seen as a celebration of togetherness. This event brings together several thousand Muslims, Christians, and possibly even non-believers on a foothill peak, where the Ottoman "conqueror" Ghazi Baba is buried, who is also a blood brother of Hadji Valko, a prominent Bulgarian Christian. For this event, dozens of Muslims and Christians donate funds for traditional sacrifices (*qurban*) with good feelings and hopes for prosperity.

In this context, to bring additional explanation, I would like to draw attention

to the "magic word" *qurban*,[2] which literally means "coming together" and is a Muslim term with deep religious significance. At the same time, it has entered the language and life of the Bulgarian population of Christian faith and has been accepted not only by the laity but also by the clergy.

The established good-neighbourly relations, nurtured through shared long-term coexistence in our lands, encourage religious communities and their institutions to engage in more active efforts to strengthen peaceful coexistence. Good institutional and inter-leader relations manifest within society, reaching a wider circle of members of the religious communities – both young and old, especially children. As a result, future generations are raised in a spirit of understanding, tolerance, and mutual respect, which are essential for unity and peace.

In conclusion, we can say that the peaceful coexistence of different religious communities in Bulgaria continues to bear good fruit. Despite some shortcomings, which may be inevitable due to the complexity of the matter and some global trends, several researchers point to Bulgaria as "relatively peaceful" and cite it as a successful example of harmony in social life, grounded on mutual respect among different communities and their religious leaders. This value can be presented as a universal example, as humanity today is in great need of such a model. And presenting this example requires trust and collective efforts, supported at the institutional level.

2 The word *qurban* (قربان) in Arabic has its roots in the concept of "nearness" or "closeness." The literal meaning of *qurban* is "a means of drawing near". In Islamic terminology, *qurban* refers to an animal sacrifice, usually performed during the Islamic holiday of *Eid al-Adha*. This sacrifice is done as an act of devotion and to seek nearness to Allah, following the tradition of the Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham) who was willing to sacrifice his son in obedience to God's command. The term *qurban* comes from the Arabic root (q-r-b). This practice and the term have spread beyond the Muslim world, influencing other cultures, including Bulgarian and other non-Muslim societies, where the word has also become associated with religious rituals and sacrifices. The Arabic *qurban* is etymologically related to the Hebrew word *korban* (קָרְבָּן), which also means "sacrifice" or "offering." Both words come from a shared Semitic root meaning "nearness" or "to draw near." In both cases, the concept of a sacrifice or offering is tied to the idea of drawing near to God.

Togetherness of Religions and Communities in Bulgaria: the Catholic Perspective

Monsignor Petko Valov, President of the Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church in Bulgaria

According to the latest census, the Catholic Church in Bulgaria comprises 38,000 people who self-identify as Catholics. Local Catholic bishops in our lands are mentioned as early as the Council of Serdica, held in 343. Within the Bulgarian state, the first Catholic bishop of Sofia was appointed in 1601. Bulgaria's diplomatic relations with the Holy See are maintained at the level of *nunciature*, and the country has been visited twice by Popes of Rome.

Taking stock from the theme of today's seminar, *Togetherness of religious communities in Bulgaria*, I would like to share my sincere opinion that different denominations have coexisted well in the country. We Catholics love our homeland and we have always participated in its protection and building, as well as in the promotion of good-neighbourly relations, which have been typical for the Balkans.

During the Third Bulgarian Kingdom (1908-1946) there were isolated cases of "sabotages" in the construction of Catholic temples by some extreme elements. The worst times, however, were those of the atheistic communist regime, which saw two public trials on charges of espionage result in dozens of convictions, the execution of seven clergymen (including two of the three bishops), and the confiscation all the colleges and hospitals of the church.

Fortunately, all that has been left in the past, and today we can freely profess our faith. Nowadays, discussions about tolerance among religions have become trendsetting. Tracing the meaning of this word in the Latin dictionary reveals its association with verbs like *bear with, endure, refrain from attacking*. Yes, we don't attack each other, we greet each other, we communicate and even create personal friendships with some people, so it is even not enough to talk just about tolerance.

The Latin dictionary also helps to understand the difference between *bigotry* and *radicalism*. The term *bigot* or *fanatic* derives from the word *fanum*, meaning *temple*. Figuratively speaking, it refers to a person enclosed in their own temple, belief, theory or ideology, showing intolerance towards any opinion other than his own. A *radical* (from *radix*, meaning *root*) is a proponent of in-depth changes, which can also have a positive charge, advocating return to the original and pure. For us Christians, this may be exemplified by the mutual love of the early Christians, or it may be related to a stricter observance of the rules of faith neglected in a previous, more lenient period.

With respect to other religions, the Catholic Church has a clearly established doctrine formulated at the Second Vatican Council (1963-1965), recognising the right to freedom of religion, conscience, and speech, motivated by the protection of human dignity. Conciliar documents in this regard include the Declaration on religious liberty *Dignitatis Humanae*, the Declaration on the Church's relationship

with non-Christian religions *Nostra aetate*, and the Decree on ecumenism *Unitatis redintegratio*. This benevolent attitude towards *the other* is the fruit of inner conviction rather than a token of reciprocity.

While referring to the dialogue with other religions in our country, I cannot but single out the role of the *National Council of Religious Communities in Bulgaria,* established in 2008. Thanks to the Council's activities, our contacts have become more direct and personal, and mutual understanding looms large. We are brought together by common themes, such as family relations and care for the needy, and we invite each other to different events. What is at stake here is not theological debates, but rather a search for what humanly unites us – responding together to challenges, to legislative and tax proposals of common concern, etc. This is, of course, a long process and much more remains to be desired.

In conclusion, let me express my deep appreciation of this wonderful initiative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and wish success to the forum.

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Monsignor Strahil Kavalenov, Bishop of the Diocese of Nikopol

The Catholic Church, ever since the Second Vatican Council, has sought dialogue and understanding with other religions. Based on the doctrinal framework adopted at the Council, the Holy See has been making use of two institutions tasked with maintaining dialogue with the various religious communities.

The first one is the *Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity*, which has dialogue with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and the local orthodox churches, including the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, as well as with the Jewish faith community included in its portfolio of responsibilities. The other institution is the *Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue*, which promotes and regulates relations with members of non-Christian religious groups. Interreligious dialogue is implemented through activities such as theological exchange and sharing of spiritual experience. It is based on the shared search for God; by getting to know and learning to respect one another, the various religious communities that partake in the dialogue become more appreciative of human dignity and the spiritual and moral riches of other believers.

For centuries, religious communities in Bulgaria, including Catholics, which are in a minority, have lived together in peace and tolerance. Some of the first Catholic bishops, such as Petar Parchevich, Petar Bogdan, and Philip Stanislavov have left an indelible mark in Bulgarian history. Their actions were always meant to serve the entire Bulgarian people rather than just the Bulgarian Catholics.

After King Ferdinand's ascension to the throne, various Catholic monastic orders founded Catholic schools, with those in Sofia, Plovdiv, and Ruse teaching Italian and French. Their alumni, most of whom were not Catholics, got excellent education, meeting the highest European standards while also being taught to respect universal human values shared by all religions.

Religious communities in Bulgaria stood together in the tragic days of

communist persecution. In that period, there were repressed individuals and victims from all religious denominations, whose spiritual and pastoral activities were severely constrained. That was especially true for us Catholics, given the importance of our connection with Rome and the Holy Father.

In 1990, Bulgaria established diplomatic relations with the Holy See. Thus, the country's centuries-old relationship with the Pope and the Catholic Church was given official status, and Bulgarian Catholics, via the apostolic nuncios, were granted guarantees of support for their religious beliefs and the freedom to express them. In 1994, Bulgaria established diplomatic relations with the Sovereign Military Order of Malta, which, besides being a sovereign entity and a state, is also a Catholic order. Over the years, its vigorous humanitarian and social activities have been an important source of support for Bulgarian Catholics and others in need throughout the country.

Bulgarian embassies to the Holy See and the Sovereign Military Order of Malta have played an important role for Bulgarian Catholics and in establishing of excellent mutual relations over the years.

These friendly relations culminated during the two Papal visits to Bulgaria – by the Holy Pope John Paul II in May 2002 and by the current Pope Francis in May 2019. Pope John Paul II received a heartfelt welcome by Patriarch Maxim and the Holy Synod. He visited the Rila Monastery and spoke with its Hegumen, and he also served a mass in Plovdiv, with regional Metropolitan Arseny sharing the stage. During his visit, Pope John Paul II met with representatives of the Muslim, Protestant, and Jewish communities.

In 2019, Pope Francis was graciously welcomed by Patriarch Neophyte and the Holy Synod. He visited St. Alexander Nevsky Cathedral and was given a tour of the temple by Metropolitan Anthony, head of the Diocese of Western and Central Europe of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. The Holy Father's visit concluded with an event for peace, which was attended by representatives of the religious communities in Bulgaria.

The *National Council of Religious Communities in Bulgaria* is a vivid example of collaboration. It initiated a meeting with the Committee on Religion and Ethics of the Bulgarian Parliament, which resulted in religious temples being exempted from municipal waste disposal fees.

Over the years, religious denominations have managed to intervene in resolving potentially tense situations, such as a conflict between Muslim and Protestant residents of a Roma district in the city of Pazardzhik. Community leaders drafted a joint declaration against the use of religion for political purposes and as an excuse for violence of any type. Under the auspices of the Office of the President, representatives of the various religious groups participate in commemorating the *World Day of Remembrance for Road Traffic Victims*.

Another good example of togetherness is the fact that, in 2014, the Jewish organisation *Shalom* bestowed the prestigious *Shofar award* on the *Caritas* Catholic organisation for ethnic and religious tolerance.

In 2020, a portion of the holy relics of the first Bishop of Serdica, St. Clement of Rome († circa 101 AD), and the first martyr of Serdica, St. Potitus (145-160 AD), arrived in the city of Sofia. They were gifted to Patriarch Neophyte as a token of gratitude by His Holiness Pope Francis after his apostolic journey to Bulgaria. On the Day of Sofia, September 17, the festive ceremony for the transfer of the holy relics from Sofia Metropolitan to St. Sofia Church was attended by representatives of the Catholic Church.

In June 2020, Bulgaria was visited by Cardinal Ayuso, Chairman of the then *Council for Interreligious Dialogue*, who met Grand Mufti Mustafa Hadzhi.

Representatives of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and other religious denominations attended the consecration of two new Bishops of the Bulgarian Catholic Church: Monsignor Rumen Stanev, Auxiliary Bishop of Sofia and Plovdiv, and Monsignor Strahil Kavalenov, Bishop of the Diocese of Nikopol. There are also numerous examples of mutual respect and celebration of festive occasions in the parishes.

On August 25, Grand Mufti Mustafa Hadzhi met with Pope Francis, who was accompanied by the Mayor of Kardzhali, an Orthodox priest from the mostly Muslim city, and the Regional Mufti. They presented to the Pope several joint initiatives and examples of the excellent relationship between the local communities.

In 2024, after the death of Patriarch Neophyte, Pope Francis sent an address of condolence, and Monsignor Hristo Proykov, President of the Conference of Bishops of the Catholic Church, along with other clerics, attended the funeral of His Holiness. Similarly, the consecration of the new Patriarch, His Holiness Danail, was attended by the leadership of the Bulgarian Catholic Church and Cardinal Koch, Chairman of the *Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity*.

Representatives of the Catholic Church have been invited to major festivities and events celebrated by other religious groups such as *Iftar* evenings, the *Hodzhazade Mehmed Muhyiddin Effendi* annual award ceremony for contributions by the Office of the Grand Mufti, *Hannukah* festivities and various other events held by different religious denominations.

In conclusion, it is fair to say that religious communities in Bulgaria work together to protect lives, take care of the poor and downtrodden, and contribute to the development of the Bulgarian society in general. We are united by years of peaceful coexistence, understanding, and collaboration, as well as by a common interest – encouraging our flocks to seek a path to God and grow values shared by all religions and crucially important for today's society.

The Bulgarian Catholic Church is and will continue to be an active participant in the process of mutual collaboration and dialogue, and is ready to take part in and promote future initiatives of common interest.

The Evangelical Community in Bulgaria in the Perspective of Intercultural and Intercommunal Tolerance

Pastor Momchil Petrov and Pastor Vladimir Raichinov,
Vice-President of the Bulgarian Evangelical Alliance

First, allow me to extend my congratulations to the Diplomatic Institute on its 21st anniversary, and personally to its director Mrs. Tanya Mihaylova, for having been awarded the Gold Honorary Badge of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Additionally, if there are any Bessarabian Bulgarians present here today, I would like to warmly congratulate them on yesterday's celebration of the Day of Bessarabian Bulgarians!

Contribution of Evangelical Churches to the Bulgarian National Revival

Having emerged during the Ottoman rule in the 19th century, Protestant missions originally worked to promote the spiritual enlightenment of Bulgarians, in the spirit of the Bulgarian National Revival. To this end, they partnered with the Bulgarian Orthodox Church rather than aiming to promote their own denominations. The initial projects of these missions focused on: (1) Translating the Bible into contemporary Bulgarian; (2) Establishing general education schools, and (3) Publishing periodicals, such as *Zornitsa* newspaper.

1. The translation of the Holy Scriptures into Bulgarian was an extensive project spanning half a century, culminating in the publication of the so-called Constantinople Bible in 1871. At various stages, the project involved Orthodox priests like Neofit Rilski, as well as notable Bulgarian linguists such as Petko R. Slaveykov, Konstantin Fotinov, and Christodul Sechanov. Neofit Rilski's translation of the New Testament became the most published Bulgarian book during the Revival period, while the Constantinople Bible was widely accessible among Bulgarians until the Holy Synod's translation was released 50 years later.

2. Protestant schools in Plovdiv, Stara Zagora, Samokov, and Lovech provided modern secular education to many Orthodox children at a time when the Bulgarian people still lacked its own national institutions. The contribution of Robert College in Constantinople to the development of the first generation of modern Bulgarian politicians and intellectuals has been widely recognised. Renowned Bulgarian ethnographer Prof. Ivan Shishmanov referred to it as the "Alma Mater of the Bulgarian National Revival."

3. The role of the *Zornitsa* newspaper during the Bulgarian Revival should not be overlooked. The newspaper contributed both to spiritual enlightenment and to reporting current events, including updates on the progress of the April Uprising in 1876. It was distributed across all Bulgarian territories, and one of its issues even appears in the novel "Under the Yoke," written by the Patriarch of Bulgarian literature Ivan Vazov.

By the 19th century, there were two organised Evangelical movements in Bulgaria – the Evangelical Methodist Episcopal Church and the Union of Evangelical

Congregational Churches. In the early 20th century, the Union of Evangelical Baptist Churches was also established. This led to the need for a unified body to represent the Protestant community and to foster fraternal and constructive cooperation among Evangelical denominations. Thus, in 1909, the Bulgarian Evangelical Alliance (BEA) was founded.

Separation of Church and State

The BEA is an association comprising thirteen Evangelical denominations and an equal number of non-governmental missions, publishing houses, and ministries. Its Bulgarian title, "United Evangelical Churches" is analogous to what is globally referred to as a "national Evangelical alliance." In this capacity, the BEA is a member of both the European Evangelical Alliance and the World Evangelical Alliance.

The Evangelical community in Bulgaria consists of between seventy and a hundred thousand believers. Despite their significant diversity, there is remarkable unity among them on one significant issue: all Protestant churches in Bulgaria originate from traditions of independent denominations that do not align themselves with state authority. Since the Reformation, the Protestant community has had a fundamental understanding of the need for a clear separation between Church and State.

Historically, this understanding entails a distinction of powers between state and public authorities on the one hand, and church structures on the other. The Church does not seek any form of dominance in public life, while the non-interference of state authorities in church affairs is highly valued. By its nature, the Evangelical-Protestant tradition does not aspire to a privileged status in society.

Evangelical Tolerance and Its Historical Roots

The centre of our capital city Sofia holds a symbolic reputation as a place of religious tolerance, and Evangelicals have always been a part of this cohabitation. The spirit of tolerance, coexistence, and mutual respect is symbolically expressed in the proximity of significant religious buildings: the Orthodox Church of *St. Nedelya*, the Catholic Church of *St. Joseph*, the *Banya Bashi* Mosque, and the *Sofia Synagogue*. In addition, very close to this so-called "Quadrilateral of Tolerance" in Sofia, there are several buildings of importance to Bulgarian Evangelism: *the First Evangelical Church, the First Pentecostal Church*, and *the Evangelical Methodist Episcopal Church*. A major German Evangelical Church was also located in this area, but it was destroyed during the 1944 air bombings.

In a sense, the Evangelical community in Bulgaria is ideologically linked to the rediscovery of tolerance in modern times, with the first steps toward this made through John Locke's *Letter Concerning Toleration* in 1689.

In the 20th century, religious tolerance and respect for religious rights were key focuses in the documents of the 1974 *Lausanne Congress on World Evangelisation* – a landmark event for global Protestantism, and for Bulgarian Evangelicals in particular. This value is also affirmed in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which states: *"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the*

press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

On a more practical, everyday level, the harmonious coexistence between Evangelical Christians and their fellow citizens of different faiths is a renowned aspect of the fabric of our society. Bulgarians have discovered the key to celebrating special occasions together, engaging in dialogue with their neighbours, appreciating the diversity of cultural richness, and showing empathy toward those of other faiths who suffer. For this seminar, I would propose we use the Bulgarian term *komshuluk* ("neighbourliness") to encapsulate the Bulgarian instinct for tolerance in a natural and symbolically rich way.

How is this aspiration for tolerance, foundational to the Evangelical movement, realised within the Bulgarian Evangelical community? To answer this question, we will briefly review the attitude of the Bulgarian Evangelicals toward other religious groups in our country. Protestants in Bulgaria love their homeland and their fellow man. They display the national flag on their balconies during national holidays, cheer for the national rhythmic gymnastics team, and cherish the preservation of the Cyrillic alphabet and Bulgarian culture.

Historical Interaction with the Orthodox Church

The leading and most widespread religious tradition in Bulgaria is Orthodoxy. Historically, from the very moment of its emergence on Bulgarian soil, Protestantism has sought to interact with the Orthodox community. Historical studies confirm that Protestant missionaries did not aim to establish a new religious community among Bulgarians. Their goal initially was to help the local Bulgarian Church fulfil its spiritual ministry. Protestant missionaries wholeheartedly supported the struggles for church independence and enthusiastically shared the joy when, on April 3, 1860, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church was finally separated from the Greek Patriarchate.

From its inception, the Evangelical believers in Bulgaria have laid stable foundations for fruitful interaction. Bulgarian Evangelicals respect Orthodoxy as the guardian of the Christian faith in our land. They celebrate Easter, Christmas, and major Christian holidays according to the Orthodox calendar, and they honour historical Orthodox sanctuaries such as the *Rila Monastery* and the *Church of St. Sophia*.

Tolerance and Solidarity toward the Muslim Community

Regarding the second-largest religious group – Muslims – the Evangelical community does not harbour historical prejudices. As a religious minority, Bulgarian Evangelicals demonstrate solidarity with the rights of Bulgarian Muslims.

Having endured religious persecution and restrictions during the totalitarian era, they are particularly sensitive to the violence inflicted on Bulgarian Muslims during the so-called *revival process* – an attempt of the Bulgarian Communist Party to impose a forced assimilation of the Muslim population (Turks, Pomaks, Tatars, and Roma) in the country.

Bulgarian Evangelicals clearly understand that religious affiliation does not determine loyalty to Bulgarian society. In this regard, Evangelical believers reject

any participation in inciting religious or ethnic phobias. Whether from traditional communities or newcomers, Muslims are seen as our neighbours, whom we love as ourselves. Naturally, there are cases where individuals from the Muslim tradition join an Evangelical community while maintaining their names, culture, cuisine, and self-awareness according to Turkish-Arabic traditions.

On behalf of the BEA, I express gratitude to the leaders of the Muslim Religion for their now traditional invitation for the festive *Iftar* dinner under the patronage of the Presidential Institution. Sharing a meal and engaging in conversations around the table remains one of the most effective ways to foster mutual understanding and reduce tensions.

Interaction with the Jewish Community

The attitude of Evangelical believers toward the Jewish community also deserves attention. Bulgarian Evangelicals are free from the anti-Semitism characteristic of certain European societies. They view Judaism as the guardian of the Holy Scriptures and believe that understanding Jewish beliefs contributes to a deeper understanding of the Bible.

These sympathies were especially evident during World War II, when Evangelical pastors actively and selflessly participated in efforts to rescue Jews.

On behalf of the BEA, I would like to express gratitude to the Jewish community in Bulgaria for extending invitations to the traditional candle-lighting ceremony for the Festival of Lights, *Hanukkah*, and the accompanying concert programme at the Sofia Synagogue on this occasion.

Interaction with the Catholic and Armenian Communities

It is natural for Bulgarian Evangelicals to feel a sense of solidarity with other Christian communities, such as the Catholics and Armenians. Sharing a common faith in Christ, we find many grounds for dialogue, mutual respect, and even collaboration in various cultural or social endeavours.

Bulgarian Protestants are deeply interested in the history of the Armenian people. They have always celebrated the first translation of the Holy Scriptures into Armenian, rejoiced alongside their Armenian neighbours during national holidays, mourned with them during the suffering and genocide in the early 20th century, and supported them in finding their rightful place in Bulgarian society.

Regarding the Catholic community, unlike in many other parts of the world, Bulgarian Evangelicals do not harbour negative feelings toward their Catholic brothers and sisters. Since the *Second Vatican Council*, the Catholic Church has laid the groundwork for interaction with other Christian communities, including Evangelical alliances such as BEA. In our view, this development is of great significance, and we have demonstrated our readiness to accept the extended hand of fellowship.

An example of this mutual respect is the fact that the Bulgarian Evangelical Alliance was among the first communities to send a letter to the Catholic churches in Bulgaria and France just hours after the fire at the *Notre Dame Cathedral* in 2019. In this message, we expressed compassion, moral and spiritual support, as well as

confidence that Christ's Church will always endure, as affirmed by the words of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 16.

Participation in the National Council of Religious Communities in Bulgaria

A significant achievement in interreligious dialogue in our country is the *National Council of Religious Communities in Bulgaria* (NCRCB), established in 2008 with the support of the Directorate of Religious Affairs. From its very inception, the BEA has actively participated in the meetings of the governing board. The opportunity for dialogue, discussions, and mutual understanding within the NCRCB is a source of pride for our nation, as there are few comparable examples elsewhere in Europe.

We are pleased to note that attorney Greta Ganeva is not simply a representative of the BEA but also actively serves as the secretary of the NCRCB. In recent years, the Evangelical community has participated in all initiatives of the NCRCB, including Pope Francis's *Event for Peace*, and the annual *Festival of Religions*, among others.

Conclusion: Theological Foundations for Tolerance

In conclusion, beyond the historical reasons for tolerance between the Evangelical community and other religious groups, there are also theological grounds for this favourable attitude. According to Evangelical theology, the Creator of the world loves every person, regardless of our sinfulness, has made tremendous efforts to redeem us through Christ, and invites us to partake in His covenant. This message humbles us and fills us with gratitude, which lies at the heart of the Evangelical message.

Our identity in Christ encourages us to value every human being and culture. This tolerance does not stem from compromising our faith but from deeply reflecting on its foundations. Let me remind you that just a few weeks ago, on October 5, 2024, around five thousand Evangelical believers gathered in the city of Burgas for a collective prayer for peace in Bulgaria, the Holy Land, and the world.

This value framework inspires Bulgarian Evangelical Christians to adopt an approach of tolerance and respect, but also of solidarity and empathy, toward people of other religious or ethnic communities. Firmly rooted in their convictions and dedicated to the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, they raise future generations with a dignified Evangelical identity and self-sacrificial love for their neighbours.

On behalf of the Governing Board of the Bulgarian Evangelical Alliance, please accept our gratitude for the invitation to participate in this event, extended by the Diplomatic Institute and the Directorate for Foreign Policy Planning, Information, and Coordination of the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This initiative is a serious effort to build upon the foundations laid by those who came before us over the decades. May we prove to be their worthy successors!

We wish success to the seminar and the subsequent steps toward building dialogue, respect, and *komshuluk*.

A People that Takes Root between Church, School and Café, Is a True Treasure

Diocesan Council of the Armenian Apostolic Church in Bulgaria –
Prof. Garabed Minasyan

The Armenians are an ancient people who established their state in 300 BC. For centuries, they have fought against invaders and occupiers – Assyrians, Romans, Byzantines, Parthians, Arabs, and Turks. During these turbulent centuries, they successfully preserved their historical identity and national traditions at all costs.

The adoption of Christianity is one of the most significant events in Armenian history. By embracing the new religion, Armenia developed a nation-specific Christian way of life, becoming part of the Western world. In 301 AD, the Christianised King Tiridates III, baptised by Gregory the Enlightener (Grigor Lusavorich), proclaimed Christianity as the state religion. Armenia thus became the first ever officially declared Christian state.

The creation of the Armenian script in 405 AD became a unifying factor for the Armenian people. The scholarly cleric Mesrop Mashtots developed an Armenian alphabet consisting of 36 letters (later expanded by three more). This innovation, especially when compared to neighbouring countries, made Armenia unique from linguistic and spiritual perspectives alike. The alphabet, which captures many specific consonant sounds, has remained unchanged for 1,700 years.

Armenians have spread across all civilised parts of the world. Somehow, they naturally integrate wherever they are welcomed. This has also been the case in Bulgaria.

The coexistence of Armenians and Bulgarians dates back centuries. The first records date to the 1st century AD, but reliable data on Armenian migration to the Balkans appear from the 5th century. This was the first wave of migration, spanning from the 1st to the 14th century.

The second wave of migrants arrived in Bulgarian lands during the 16th and 17th centuries, under the Ottoman rule. Armenian migrants built churches, opened parish schools, and engaged in trade and crafts in nearly every city where they settled.

The third wave came to Bulgaria after the massacres against Armenians in Western Armenia orchestrated by Sultan Abdul-Hamid II between 1894 and 1896. It was these “wretched exiles” whom the poet-telegrapher Peyo Yavorov met at the Straldja train station. Their suffering inspired him to compose his immortal elegy *Armenians*.

In 1915, the Armenian Genocide occurred, involving brutal massacres and the forced mass deportation of over 1,000,000 Armenians by the Young Turk authorities. Many Armenians sought refuge in Bulgaria during this time. Bulgaria welcomed them with compassion and tolerance, allowing them to preserve their

religion, culture, and traditions. The liberal Tarnovo Constitution, ahead of its time, affirmed the principles of personal inviolability and freedom of religion.

Initially, Armenians in Bulgaria did not have their own organisational bodies or diocese. Their church affairs were managed by the Armenian Patriarchate in Constantinople (Istanbul) through visiting clergy or diocesan deputies.

The first efforts to establish a unifying institution for Armenians in Bulgaria by founding an independent diocese and appointing a metropolitan began in 1903. On the eve of the First Balkan War (1912), the government granted permission for the creation of an Armenian Diocese in the country. However, various reasons delayed the election of a bishop. By 1924, the Armenian community in Bulgaria had grown significantly due to the influx of refugees, making the need for a representative body to address emerging challenges urgent. On August 10, 1924, a delegate conference convened to resolve issues related to the organisation and management of Armenian communities, and the Diocesan Council adopted the statute of the Armenian Diocese.

The Bulgarian government policies made possible the formation of Armenian communities, church and school boards, spiritual courts, and a Diocesan Council. These organisations operated successfully until 1947-1949. Although many of them were later disbanded, the foundation laid during those years prompted Armenians to consider Bulgaria their homeland and to feel like an integral part of the Bulgarian people.

Far from being hostile and rejecting, Bulgarians welcomed their Armenian immigrants warmly, without prejudice or mistrust, showing innate tolerance for those who are different and especially wronged. Through their non-aggressive integration, the Armenian community skilfully adapted to urban life, creating "cradles" of Armenian culture and spirituality around their churches – centres of Armenian culture, spirituality, literature, education, and enlightenment.

The characteristic Bulgarian sense of empathy for the hardships of a Christian people created conditions for the Armenian community to feel accepted and understood on Bulgarian soil.

Tolerant and broad-minded, Armenians in Bulgaria officially numbered at least 6,500 people at the beginning of the 21st century according to statistical data. Despite their strong sense of community, Armenians are well-integrated, while the big number of mixed marriages contributes to the downward trend of their population, as evidenced by the censuses. Through steadfast faith worthy of the early Christians, the Armenian Diocese in Bulgaria preserves Christian values and ethnic identity. Armenians cannot envision a lasting cultural base without a church. Religious and ethnic consciousness, as well as cultural continuity, are nurtured in towns with larger Armenian populations, where churches serve as focal points.

Today, 13 Orthodox Armenian churches, cultural centres, and libraries preserve faith, traditions, language, and rituals across generations. The oldest one, *Surp Astvadzadzin* in Silistra (1620), stands alongside newer temples, such as *Surp Agop* in Yambol (2017). In 2022, Bulgaria's first Armenian Cathedral, *St. Mary* (*Surp*

Astvadzadzin), was consecrated in Sofia – a fact Armenians take immense pride in and express deep gratitude to all the contributors involved in this construction.

Throughout all these years, the Bulgarian state, represented by the government, regional administrations and municipalities, within the framework of their powers, have supported the construction and maintenance of the churches of the Armenian Diocese – either by allotting land free of charge or by allocating funds.

Currently, the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church's Diocesan Council and the local Church Councils act as a shield against assimilation. Over the years, they have been successfully upholding the Armenian spirit and talent as an integral part of the administrative, public, cultural and artistic life in all regions of Bulgaria. They have done so in a balanced way, without losing the thread of authenticity and national self-awareness.

As far as a century ago, Armenian artisans accepted with love and dedication their mission to earn a living for their families on Bulgarian soil and became some of the best icon painters, tailors, and jewellers. They turned trades into art, reflecting a legacy of high morality, entrepreneurship, professionalism, humaneness, integrity and commitment.

Armenian art and culture are not only an integral part of the vibrant heritage and spiritual preservation of the Armenian community but also hold a significant place in Bulgaria's cultural calendar. Various ensembles, children's creative workshops, sports clubs, and theatrical schools operating across the country serve as hubs for preserving the cultural heritage and memory of the Armenian people. They represent the invisible bond that keeps the community whole, united, and strong.

Public engagement and religious diplomacy between different religious communities in Bulgaria are essential aspects of social harmony. The Armenian community actively participates in interfaith dialogue, fostering peaceful coexistence and mutual understanding. Evidence of this includes regular joint events – prayer meetings or cultural festivals – organised by various religious institutions and attended by representatives of diverse communities.

The Armenian community traditionally maintains active ties with other religious and ethnic groups in the country. Armenian churches often host events that promote interfaith dialogue, including meetings with representatives of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, Muslim leaders, and Jewish communities. This type of diplomatic interaction acts as a bridge for cooperation and understanding within Bulgaria's multicultural identity.

Religious tolerance and togetherness are not merely internal matters. Bulgaria's model of peaceful coexistence of various ethnicities and religions holds universal applicability and can serve as an example for other nations. In a world rife with conflicts rooted in religion and ethnicity, Bulgaria demonstrates that differences can serve as bridges rather than barriers.

Armenians in Bulgaria believe that peaceful coexistence is based on

understanding and respecting different cultures and religions. This principle has universal application and is especially valuable in diplomacy when seeking solutions to global issues like religious intolerance and ethnic conflicts. However, in today's world, significant challenges to this coexistence remain.

Globalisation, migration, and the new social and political realities in the world pose new challenges to the traditional model of coexistence. The Armenian community in Bulgaria faces the ongoing challenge of preserving its identity while actively participating in modern society.

The community's representative bodies – the Diocesan Council of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church and local Church Councils – are tasked with ensuring swift and easy access for every community member to spiritual services, the native language, traditions, customs, and culture through diverse and rich club activities. They put their heart and soul into making the Armenian home and church not just buildings but hubs for communication and community development.

Simultaneously, modern media and social networks also play a role in advancing intercommunity dialogue. In this context, Armenians recognise the need for new forms of religious diplomacy, incorporating greater public visibility and active involvement of the younger generation in interfaith initiatives.

The Armenian community in Bulgaria is not merely part of the country's religious and cultural mosaic. It is an active initiator and participant in establishing a sustainable model for peaceful coexistence and religious tolerance. Bulgaria stands as one of the most vivid examples that religious unity is not a utopia but rather a reality that can serve as a model to emulate. In this context, Armenians believe that through understanding, mutual respect, and active participation in interfaith dialogue, enduring foundations for peace and harmony can be built–not only in Bulgaria but worldwide.

From the perspective of the Armenian community, religious unity in Bulgaria is not just a matter of coexistence but a question of profound mutual respect and understanding.

The Jewish Religious Tradition and the Concept of Tolerance

Maxim Delchev, Executive Director of the Organisation of the Jews in Bulgaria Shalom

An extremely difficult, but important task is to assess and evaluate tolerance and coexistence in a society through the eyes of a religious tradition. For this purpose, it is necessary and important to examine the views of the religious denomination itself by exploring the texts of its holy scriptures, so as to get a clear idea of its understanding of life and coexistence.

Judaism, in its orthodox form, as the leading belief of the Jewish people in the last 2000 years, has simple rules of conduct vis-à-vis the external society. Realising that the life of Jews in the so-called diaspora is destined to adapt to their status of a minority and to their contacts with the outside world, the rabbis from the time of the *Oral Torah* – the *Mishnah* and the *Talmud* – create clear rules that steer people to live together.

The *Talmud* has an entire treatise that elaborates in detail the rules for life and relations between Jews and the surrounding religions, and the possible difficulties that could be caused by differences. However, it would be extremely difficult and beyond the reach of this study to delve into such specifics and situations, while their subsequent comparison within the framework of Bulgarian society would present an even greater challenge.

Therefore, it is worthwhile for me to concentrate on the ethical norms of coexistence expressed by the rabbis in the *Mishnah* collection "Perke Avot," which addresses the foundations of coexistence from a moral rather than situational point of view. It is there in the third chapter, second verse that we can find the following text: *Rabbi Hanina, deputy high priest, said: "Pray for the good of the state* (*in which you live* – translator's note) *because if it does not instil fear in people, they will kill each other..."*

This verse, together with a distinct principle in the same book – *Dinah de Malchuta Dinah*, "the law of the state must be observed as a religious law, even when it contradicts a certain religious norm or ritual" – creates the moral framework in which three basic patterns of action of Jewish communities and municipalities are formed.

The first pattern is the inclusion of specialised prayers and rituals for the benefit of the state. In reality, this is a literal reading of the above principle, and in many European and North American communities, a similar prayer and blessing is pronounced in the national language of the country during each festive ceremony. One of the best examples is the United Synagogues of Great Britain, where in the middle of each service in English the following text is pronounced (I quote with abbreviations): "*May he who gives salvation to kings and power to princes, whose kingdom is forever, bless* [the name of the ruler and his or her family]. *May the Most High King of kings, with His mercy, preserve the life of the king; deliver him from troubles and sorrows...*"

Here it is important to note the comparative ostentation of such a blessing. The very fact that it is in English, and not in Hebrew, shows that its purpose is not so much the religious experience of the community and its members, but also provides the opportunity for an outside observer – the state – to assess the attitude and benevolence of its citizens of Jewish origin.

The second common approach, originating from the state itself, concerns its practice of guaranteeing the representation of Jewish leaders in public life. An example of such a system can be found in our neighbouring Romania, where the chairman of the Jewish community is by law a parliamentarian without being a member of any party represented in Parliament. Here again, we see an example of tolerance and coexistence, but it is still one-sided – from the society toward the community – creating laws and systems to guarantee this coexistence and even, if necessary, enforce it.

The third model, and here we can now turn to Bulgaria, is one that does not rest on a one-sided attitude by either the Jewish community, its leaders and members, or the state and society toward the community. It is about serious bilateral relations at all possible levels – from ordinary people to institutions to leaders in society. The truth is that in Bulgarian synagogues blessings in Bulgarian on behalf of the ruler or the government have occurred quite seldom, and the guaranteed political or administrative representation has likewise been very rare – mainly during the Constituent Assemblies in the Principality of Bulgaria and Eastern Rumelia in 1879, where the Chief Rabbis of Sofia and Plovdiv respectively took part.

This model reveals relationships built over generations rather than being ostentatious and ritualistic. Those relations can be illustrated with numerous examples. Take for instance the lack of "closed Jewish quarters" in large Bulgarian cities. In Sofia, since it was declared the capital of the country, the majority of Jews have lived in the neighbourhoods of Yuchbunar and Konyovitsa, where most of the city's synagogues are located. However, the population in these neighbourhoods is mixed, including Bulgarians, Roma, Armenians, and immigrants from Thrace and Macedonia – Orthodox, Muslims, Catholics, and Protestants.

It is this daily coexistence that creates an opportunity for the interweaving of cultures, common celebrations, and the creation of common songs, traditions, and rituals. One of the great researchers of the folklore and traditions of Bulgarian Jews, Isaac Moscona, argues that most of their rituals, songs, and family traditions have their analogues in other religions.

This third model does not rely on imposition by either side, but rather on genuine coexistence. It also underlies some of the most important events in Bulgarian history, such as the Rescue of the Bulgarian Jews in World War II, but also offers an opportunity for true living together and understanding that goes beyond laws, ethical norms, and principles, and is a model that Bulgaria should be proud of.

An Introduction to the Second Session "The Soft Power of Togetherness in Bulgaria as a Tool of Public Diplomacy"

Jordan Peev, Prof. Emeritus, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" and the College of Europe – Bruges, Laureate of the UNESCO "Sharjah" Award of Arab Culture

This session is dedicated to statements, announcements, discussions, and conclusions on key issues related to ethno-religious diversity in Bulgaria. Bulgaria's political structure is deeply rooted in history. Over the past six centuries, social and religious relations in the country have predominantly unfolded within a "triangle" comprising Christians, Muslims, and state power. The state has operated "above" and "between" the first two groups, as well as other ethno-religious communities, governing and supervising them at the levels of the hamlet, village, town, district, and state. Until 1878, this ruling power was predominantly in Muslim hands, after which it shifted to the Christians. In recent times, a relative division of power between the two groups has become increasingly apparent.

Nowadays, the word *komshuluk* is primarily used to describe the friendly coexistence between the two communities. The word originates from Turkish, and one possible translation into English would be "the spirit of neighbourly kinship."

Moreover, this Turkish word, adopted by the Bulgarians, is related to the concept of the opening passage or the always open door – a small portico in the fence between neighbours. As a life-affirming phenomenon, *komshuluk* is in constant conflict with its dialectical negation, which is also deeply rooted in reality. Vera Mutafchieva[1] defines it as a "folkloric way of thinking." As a prominent writer and historian, she points out that this way of thinking originates somehow in the peripheral nervous system, "somewhere in the spine," and then penetrates the brain, primarily feeding irrational prejudices. These prejudices are fuelled by inherent human aggressiveness, which can lead to violence. This mentality is more prevalent among Christians and is often reinforced by a one-sided memory of the hardships experienced during the Ottoman rule.

However, history shows that, in general, *komshuluk* tends to dull, weaken, and eventually prevail over such folk way of thinking. Even after sharp conflicts between the two communities, it quickly recovers. Over time, it has become a model of coexistence, a *modus vivendi* if you will, where religious and ethnic differences are recognised and respected. Thanks to its broad scope, goodwill toward the "neighbour" naturally fosters respect for their spiritual life and private domain. This mutual respect establishes a cultural model in the relationship between the two communities – one governed by rules and diverse manifestations.

A key example of this is the sharing of significant personal, family, and community events, such as the exchange of greetings and gifts during important religious and family holidays. History abounds with examples of mutual assistance in the construction and repair of mosques and churches. All these manifestations

1 Vera Mutafchieva (1929-2009) – Bulgarian writer and historian.

reflect trust and empathy. While not mandatory, these practices are strongly encouraged for the members of all communities. Their observance is facilitated by the shared dogmatics and moral teachings of the two monotheistic "sister" religions.

Thus, the identity preserved by each community, while distinguishing them, also becomes, in a certain sense, complementary to the other. An elderly Muslim woman aptly explains this phenomenon by saying that Christians (Bulgarians) and Muslims (Turks) are "the same," like "the yolk and the white of the egg." However, it should be remembered that "folkloric thinking" continuously and persistently adds contradictory shades to the concept of *komshuluk*. The former tends to reduce the latter to local occurrences, hindering its broader understanding and application at the national level.

Addressing ways to counteract the harmful effects of this mindset is one of the key topics of the current meeting. These efforts are crucial for strengthening the modern Bulgarian nation, in which Christians, Muslims, and representatives of other religions and ethnicities form an indivisible whole. This inclusiveness also supports Bulgaria's foreign policy and social cohesion.

Dialogue between Religions: a Path to Inner and Outer Peace[1]

Kiril P. Kartaloff, Ph.D., D.Sc., Assoc. Prof. of Philosophy of History,
Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

The contemporary era is distinguished by the unprecedented opportunity for all humans to unite on a planetary and global scale in ways and forms that have no parallel in history.

From this perspective, the current international landscape, especially the European one, is simultaneously brimming with significant opportunities and bristling with formidable threats.

This moment calls upon all of us to rekindle our sense of responsibility so that this opportunity for a global encounter – by patiently weaving together diplomacy, international relations, intercultural and interreligious dialogue – becomes a transformative step towards a new humanism.

In conclusion, humanity stands at a crossroads, with two potential futures before it. The first path is one of growth and integral humanisation, which respects the dignity of the individuals and their fundamental rights, including the right to freedom of conscience and religious freedom. The second, however, is fraught with the increasing risk of regression, steering us toward a "clash of civilisations", deepening discrimination, barbarism and anti-humanism, dramatic experiences over centuries, especially in Europe, until a few decades ago.

It is evident that the most effective response to the challenges of today will arise from an authentic and responsible dialogue between peoples, cultures and religions. This is particularly crucial between religions, which represent a fundamental aspect of diverse cultural identities that shape our world.

In his later years, the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, a seminal figure in the field of modern hermeneutics, articulated the crucial necessity of an authentic dialogue between cultures and religions, one that is predicated on genuine mutual understanding.[2] He recognised that such an exchange holds the power to avert the imminent threat of humanity's self-destruction.

These words, spoken at the close of the 20th century, remain as relevant and inevitable today, given the ongoing military and humanitarian crises, alongside the resurgence of nationalist and sovereigntist ideologies.

In the contemporary era, interreligious dialogue represents one of the most profound and pressing cultural challenges of our time. It is an imperative, fundamental, and urgent task that extends beyond cultural and spiritual concerns, encompassing the spheres of social, political, and international relations.

The role of interreligious dialogue in fostering cultural integration, social inclusion, and reconciliation is growing ever more significant, and at times, even

1 This text builds upon Natalino Valentini's reflections, presented in Brussels on June 27, 2018, at the Seminar on Interreligious Dialogue in International Relations.

2 H.G. Gadamer, interview in *La Stampa*, 31.3.1996.

pivotal. In opposition to all forms of isolation, discrimination, ignorance, indifference, contempt, radicalism, and fundamentalism – the destructive by-products of humanity's cultural and spiritual decline – the most effective means of resistance is the utilisation of soft power through culture and knowledge, fostered by education, mutual understanding, and shared responsibility.

Only through reason – which emerges from dialogue and remains open to recognising differences, while fully acknowledging one's own cultural and religious identity – can the rise of religious radicalism be prevented.

The starting point is the recognition of the fundamental connection between culture(s) and religion(s), even for those with a laic (secular) or non-religious outlook. This represents a significant advance in the anthropology and phenomenology of religion, particularly in the 20th century.

Religions are the innermost aspect of culture, its deepest roots, originating in worship and the relationship between cult and culture. This relationship is postulated by the common vocabulary, with the Latin terms *cultus* and *cultivation* exemplifying this interconnection. The term *cultivation* initially refers to the process of preparing soil for cultivation but it can also be elevated to the level of intellectual research that *cultivates* various fields of knowledge.

The contemporary era is characterised not only by an increase in global religious pluralism, but also, paradoxically, by a significant resurgence of religious influence in the public and political spheres – an unexpected development in light of the "dictatorship of relativism" (as coined by Joseph Ratzinger).

What is the role of religions, especially the major monotheistic traditions, in this new context? What dialogue should be undertaken and strengthened between different religious identities? Is it possible to rediscover together the roots of interreligious dialogue as the basis of civilisation and of a new humanism?

To answer these questions, a convergence must be reached – one that is respectful of the different cultural and religious traditions involved, and that establishes some common foundations for dialogue.

The concept of dialogue is a fundamental aspect of both Western and Middle Eastern culture. However, in the present era, this term is facing a significant risk of becoming devoid of its original meaning and value. This deterioration can be attributed to various factors, including its trivialisation and misuse. Consequently, it has become a mere verbal talisman, devoid of any genuine substance and applicable in only a limited number of contexts.

The 20th century has seen a greater emphasis on discussing the various forms of dialogue compared to previous centuries. This has led to the development of diverse and vigorous perspectives on the subject, including those related to intercultural dialogue, ecumenical dialogue (between different Christian denominations), and interreligious dialogue.

Each of these forms has its own distinctive characteristics, which require careful examination and analysis in order to gain an understanding of their genesis.

Ultimately, however, what is meant by the term *dialogue*? It can be defined as an interpersonal relationship that occurs when there is an acknowledgement of the otherness of the interlocutor on the basis of an already existing premise of encounter, of a deeper rapprochement and union, and of mutual growth and benefit.

It can be argued that the constitutive aspects of dialogue are as follows: authenticity of the relationship, respect for otherness, mutual listening, humility, patience, pursuit of sharing, and even possible communion. This inevitably results in an inner acceptance of truth and goodness, as well as a willingness to improve and even take risks. Every authentic human experience involves a certain degree of risk, which the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin, a forerunner of Romanticism, articulated with great poignancy: "Where risk grows, what saves grows."[3]

It is important to distinguish between dialogue and conventional conversation. Furthermore, it is crucial to differentiate dialogue from rhetorical discourse and, even more so, from gossip or monologue. Authentic dialogue is inherently risky due to its demand for a radical coming into action with oneself. This action involves an existential inquiry, a genuine capacity for listening and attentiveness, and a humility that excludes any self-sufficiency or overconfidence. This leaves space and time for genuine self-disclosure and self-giving, and even the possibility of an intimate communication of intentions. As has been elucidated with remarkable theoretical and existential depth by another German representative, the philosopher of history Siegfried Kracauer: "Following the dialogue, neither of us is the same as before. During the dialogue, something occurs in both of us, and the fruits of the dialogue are generated by this event, by this existential union. The dialogue becomes a coexistence, and the two individuals, mutually exercising maieutic agency, advance in their existence thanks to the other."[4] In the view of Socrates, maieutic is a form of dialogue in which each statement is accompanied by a question, which compels the interlocutor to elaborate on their ideas.

In order to achieve its stated objective, namely to facilitate the process of humanisation in human relations, dialogue must be subjected to a radical process of purification from all forms of oppression, co-optation, omnipotence, and violence. These are the seductive dynamics that lurk and stir in the "underground" of every human being.

It is only on the basis of these premises, through a progressive spiritual cultivation of inner freedom and the unconditional acceptance of the other, that we can attempt to give form and concrete expression to the authentic art of dialogue, capable of generating the fruits of humanity and wisdom. It is only then that we will be able to re-examine the ontological foundations of dialogue. This entails a reappraisal of the Logos as the universal principle that governs the entire universe, the dialogical dimension of existence, and the relationship between Being and the Logos. This latter concept constitutes the core of anthropology and philosophy in the language of much twentieth-century thought and reflection.

3 *Percorsi di vita ecclesiale, tra memoria e profezia*, "Parola e Tempo. Annale dell'Istituto Superiore di Scienze Religiose "Alberto Marvelli", n. 15 (2017-2018), Pazzini Editore, Verucchio (RN), 2019, p. 193.
4 S. Kracauer, *Sull'amicizia*, Genova, 1989, p. 80.

Indeed, it was during the 20th century – a period characterised by the emergence of extreme forms of barbarism, largely driven by opposing totalitarian ideologies – that a sophisticated philosophical, theological and ethical-political conceptualisation of dialogue, shaped and sustained primarily by the major monotheistic religious traditions, paradoxically reached a point of maturity. The 20th century, albeit intermittently, has brought to light with theoretical rigour and ethical coherence the extraordinary potential of dialogue as a constitutive dimension of the self, beginning with the foundational relationship to the *Thou* of the other.

In this context, we are specifically referring to the remarkable reflection developed by Jewish thought (in particular by Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig and Emmanuel Levinas), Orthodox thought (by Lev Lopatin and Pavel Florensky, as well as Sergei Averintsev), Catholic thought and theology (by Ferdinand Ebner and Romano Guardini, as well as Louis Massignon), and so on. Furthermore, Raymond Panicard, traversing the magisterium of the Second Vatican Council, from St. Paul VI to Pope Francis, and encompassing Protestant thought (from Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Emil Brunner to Paul Ricœur), Islamic thought (Mohammed Arkoun, Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri, and Adonis), and numerous other pivotal figures and concepts in 20th-century religious culture.

In the present age, characterised by a widespread religious pluralism that has become the dominant cultural and theological phenomenon of this century, interreligious dialogue cannot abandon the premises outlined above.

The history of religions is inextricably linked to the concept of salvation, as it has always been viewed as a form of divine communication with humanity and a manifestation of God's desire for the salvation of all. From this perspective, a comprehensive and distinct reflection emerges, aiming to delineate a theology of religions and interreligious dialogue.

Attempting genuine dialogue between different religions, and thus between the believers who belong to them, entails moving beyond the conventional and diplomatic niceties of formal relations and appearances to enter into authentic self-representation. This necessitates a fundamental reconsideration of the prevailing relationship between identity and difference, proximity and otherness. It is essential to examine the ways in which the self is reflected in the other, to transition from exteriority to intimacy, and to consider the "face of our interlocutor" as a manifestation of alterity (as formulated by Levinas), with a view to rediscovering the deepest meaning of the person in relationship, of the ethics of responsibility for the other, and to grasping how it is possible today to give form and concreteness to a community of differences – or rather, to a true "community of faces" – on which to base the ethos (spirit, character) of the future.

It is only from such a perspective of risk-taking, which finds nourishment in the clearest spiritual and sapiential (wise) sources of the major monotheistic religious traditions, that an authentic culture of peace and interreligious dialogue can be revived as a prerequisite for ethical consensus between cultures.

However, this requires a fundamental transformation of culture and mentality (*forma mentis*).

In light of the "change of age" that we are currently experiencing in the early years of the third millennium, a profound and radical transformation is imperative. This must begin with the rejection of the myth of Narcissus and the transition from an identity-centric perspective to one that acknowledges and celebrates difference. This shift could potentially pave the way for a convergence of religious differences, avoiding the pitfalls of assimilation and absorptionist accession or syncretic fusion. However, it is crucial to navigate these changes carefully to prevent the emergence of alienation, rejection, and conflict.

This does not entail the negation of one's own identity; rather, it entails a re-discovery of it at a more elevated level of consciousness. This process entails a transformation of the relationship with the other, whereby the other is seen as a manifestation of the self, and difference is regarded as a source of value and enrichment.

Identity and difference can coexist in a relationship of interaction and reciprocity with a view to gradually increasing the exchange of knowledge and responsibility.

The French Islamologist Louis Massignon, influenced by Charles de Foucault, emphasised the importance of a process of decentring the self as a prerequisite for communication. He proposed that, in order to understand another person, one should not attempt to incorporate them into oneself, but rather become their guest.[5] This is because any authentic spirituality is embodied; it has a body and a ground, a history, and a culture.

From this perspective, the defining characteristic of every faith and religion is an enrichment for the other, distinct from him or her. However, the other is also called in turn to connect with it, accept it, welcome it, and recognise and find themselves in it.

The religious history of humanity can and must be interpreted in the context of the dialogue that the Creator has willed to establish with it. The various manifestations and symbols of religion, as described by the empirical, historical, social, psychological, and other sciences, can and should be understood in their deepest sense in light of God's history with humanity and humanity's response to God's call. This call and response provide a framework for understanding the religious history of humanity.

The perception of the absolute transcendence of God – "whom none of men has seen nor can see" (1 Tim. 6:16) – the experience of God approaching man in order to communicate with him and truly establish a relationship of friendship, and the awareness that the whole earth is involved in this process of relationship between God and man, call for an authentic relationship of difference for mutual communion.

5 L. Massignon, *Il soffio dell'islam. La mistica araba e la letteratura occidentale*, Milano 2008, p. 8.

However, this requires, above all, a comprehensive understanding of the diverse religious traditions, a meticulous examination of their mystical and sapiential core tenets, which can then be used to identify the underlying unity that transcends the boundaries of division.

Indeed, interreligious dialogue achieves its true purpose when it becomes a common search for divine truth in its most holistic and comprehensive aspect.

The time has come to develop a new "theology of religious pluralism" (the term was coined by the French Catholic missionary and educator Jacques Dupuis). This entails a fruitful re-discovery of the religious history of humanity, accompanied by a corresponding spirituality. Of particular importance is the need for a different ecumenical and interreligious education and training that exercises careful discernment of the entire religious history of humanity.

It is therefore essential to make a comprehensive and methodical investment in the upbringing and education of the younger generations.

The benefits of interreligious and intercultural dialogue can only be realised in the medium and long term, contingent on an essential prerequisite: the objective and reciprocal acquisition of knowledge pertaining to the various religions.

Such occasions as the present seminar provide concrete opportunities for encounter and dialogue between members of different religious communities. The maxim *docendo discimus* ("by teaching others, we also teach ourselves") undoubtedly applies to such occasions.

The forms of dialogue (and of overcoming mutual prejudices) can take many different meanings and implications, as evidenced by the authoritative documents of the Church. These include dialogue of life, of works, of spirituality, of cognitive and theological exchange, of lived religious experience, and of practical faith.

Undoubtedly, these are paths to be pursued, but they remain largely unrealised. For each of us, they require a revitalised spiritual and cultural awareness, along with the assumption of diverse social and political responsibilities.

This is precisely why there is an urgent need for a structured, systematic, organic, and objective educational framework based on a rigorous epistemological foundation that fosters dialogue between the various religious cultures of Europe.

In Bulgaria, dialogue between religions and communities is progressing in stages, as demonstrated by the efforts of the National Council of Religious Communities, the Bulgarian Forum for Interreligious Dialogue and Partnership, and various other governmental and non-governmental initiatives. While much remains to be achieved, our confidence is rooted in the belief that these are good seeds falling on fertile soil. As it is written in the Gospel of Matthew, "Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop – a hundred, sixty, or thirty times what was sown." (Matthew 13:8)

Peacebuilding, Conscious Responsibility, and Leadership in Interreligious Dialogue

In Commemoration of the Late Blessed Bulgarian Patriarch † Neophyte

Assoc. Prof. Ivaylo Naydenov, Ph.D., Dean of the Faculty of Theology, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"

I am prompted to choose this topic mainly by three realities of special significance in both personal and public life, particularly in the context of a possible interreligious dialogue: peace, responsibility, and leadership.

Peace is the most relevant issue today; responsibility represents an awareness of the mission of the religious person, and the question of leadership as guidance is fitting, especially in a gathering of religious leaders, whom I have the honour of addressing here and now.

Peace is not an abstraction; it is tangible. It is the blessed fullness of life. It pertains not only to the individual but also to the community in which one lives, encompassing both material and spiritual blessings and values. In the Old Testament, the word "peace" appears approximately 400 times, and in the New Testament about 90 times. Depending on the genre of the books, it can signify anything from the absence of war to well-being and a greeting of prosperity. It pertains to past times, to the present, and to an eschatological perspective.[1] Today, we predominantly speak of peace as the absence of war, rather than as prosperity.

Peace is a sacred, universally religious tradition and a state of harmony between God and humanity, between the Creator and creation. It is a state of coexistence according to the will and love of the Absolute God. He is the source and giver of peace in the Holy Scripture: "*You establish peace for us*" (Isa 26:12); He is the "*Reconciler*" (Gen 49:10); the "*Lord, God of peace*" (Rom 15:33); the "*God of love and peace*" (2 Cor 13:11); and the peace granted by the Creator is so great that it "*surpasses all understanding*" (Phil 4:7). This harmony is revealed in the Old Testament through various ritual formulas in the form of sacrifices: *"sin offering," "guilt offering," "peace offering,"* or *"thanksgiving peace offering."* All these are replaced by the Eucharistic sacrament bequeathed by Christ, understood as "thanksgiving" for the restored reconciliation between humanity and God. This is the gifted peace we are called to safeguard and nurture, which grants us the chance to be God's own, for Christ has bequeathed to us: "*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God*" (Matt 5:9).

Peace and Justice

There exists an essential unity between "peace" and "justice," with justice

1 *Theologisches Hanswoerterbuch zum Alten Testament*, (Hg.) von Ernst Jenni, Claus Westermann. Kaiser Verlag München / Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1994, S. 922.

grounded in a sense of fairness and correct practical action – justice or adjudication.[2] The harmony between these two aspects in a person's life is described by the prophet Isaiah as a "*path to peace*" (Isa 59:8) and is perceived as an ideal state: "*Mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed*" (Ps 85:10). Notably, the biblical text never pairs "war" and "justice," which prompts reflection on whether it is appropriate to speak of a just war.

Peace and Tolerance

The concept of *Weltethos* (Global Ethic) emerged as a vision that could only be realised through peace among religions and dialogue between them. The T*owards a Global Ethic: An Initial Declaration*, a commendable and symbolic initiative, was adopted and signed by representatives of 125 religions in 1993. It outlines non-violence, solidarity, tolerance, and equality as the pillars of dialogue.

Tolerance is not merely a restraint on aggression or the desire to impose the "other," but essentially is a state of humility, continual abiding in peace and a persistent pursuit of it. Though not at the forefront of the categories mentioned in the declaration above, tolerance is of particular value for Christians as an opportunity to express personal freedom while respecting the freedom of others. This is something that can be observed in the joint initiatives of various religious communities in Bulgaria.

Our **responsibility** is intertwined with a sense of mission and the effort toward its realisation. What should we do? *"Adam, where are you?"* (Gen 3:9). Questions whose answers were given to us millennia ago in the simplest way, through the words of the prophet Micah: *"He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?"* (Mic 6:8).

Created as a micro-creator and the crown of creation, humanity is responsible for the world. Alongside peace, which we must pursue, Adam's descendants are called to care for creation – a duty that grows ever more urgent as modern societies show an increasing detachment from compassion and respect. Man is therefore regarded as a steward, a term related to the concept of the household and the responsibility of managing it.

In this spirit, in 1989, Ecumenical Patriarch Demetrios I proclaimed September 1 to be the start of the liturgical new year, a Day of Prayer for God's Creation. In 2015, Pope Francis extended this meaning to the Roman Catholic Church. The period from September 1 to October 4, the day when Catholics celebrate the feast of Saint Francis of Assisi, the patron of ecology, is observed as the *Season of Creation.*

On this occasion this year, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew said: "It has been thirty-five years since the Holy and Sacred Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate designated September 1 as a Day of Prayer for the Protection of the Environment. This gracious initiative has had great impact and has borne abundant fruit. The

2 Цонев, Йордан. Човек и общество в *Старозаветното откровение*. Институт „Библия-култура-диалог", София, 2014 [Tsonev, Yordan. *Man and society in the Old Testament revelation.* Bible-Culture-Dialogue Institute, Sofia, 2014], p. 115.

multifaceted environmental activities of the Holy Great Church of Christ today focus on the phenomenon of climate change – or rather, the climate crisis – that has caused a *planetary emergency*."

Following their leaders, supported by the World Council of Churches, Christians around the world view this time as an integral part of their annual calendar, filling it with meaningful initiatives committed to preserving Creation – a priority we should also consider for our homeland.

All that has been mentioned thus far requires **leaders** – people who are gifted, grace-bearing, and radiate love. Leadership in the Church of Christ is founded on hierarchical order and the authority of the priesthood, which should be ensured by spiritual maturity and good preparation.[3] For Christians, Jesus Christ is undoubtedly the model of leadership, and the emergence of the right person is part of God's providence for the world, as articulated by Jesus ben Sirach: *"The power over the earth is in the hand of the Lord, and in due time He will raise up a needed person upon it"* (Sir 10:4).

Today we often talk about "formal leadership", which can be misleading. There is a difference between the authority derived from the importance of the institution one represents and the authority of a leader through the manifestation of spiritual rank and personal example. Attaining the highest position in a religious community does not, in itself, confer or guarantee the authority of leadership.

In this context, the term "servant leadership" may be more fitting when discussing a religious leader, especially if we view leadership as a responsibility of guidance and management, oriented toward serving the community rather than pursuing personal goals. In secular life, the principles of this kind of leadership include empathy, respect, trust, mentorship, and support. The essence is much the same when we speak of "servant leadership" in the spirit of Gospel wisdom: *"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; among you it shall not be so. Instead, whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave, just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many"* (Matt 20:25-28).

The Bulgarian Church offers a worthy example and an invaluable teacher in the image of the leader Saint John of Rila. In his Testament, he advises: *"Choose leaders for yourselves and appoint those whom God reveals to you, namely, men esteemed by all in spiritual deeds, surpassing others in wisdom, spiritual discernment, and years, to lead the flock entrusted to them in a well-pleasing manner in the meadows of piety and Christ's life-giving commandments. For such individuals, confirmation should be sought more from God than from one's own opinion."*

Less than a year ago, we lost our spiritual leader, a patriarch in the truest sense: Patriarch Neophyte. Shortly after his election as Patriarch of the Bulgarian

3 Наум, Струмишки митрополит. *Роля и функция на религиозния ръководител в Православната църква.* В: Интеррелигиозният диалог в европейска перспектива – сборник, София, 2010 [Naum, Metropolitan of Strumitsa. *Role and function of the religious leader in the Orthodox Church*. In: Interreligious dialogue in a European perspective – collection, Sofia, 2010], p. 17.

Church, he was invited to speak at the Scientific Conference on Leadership Issues (2013) on the topic *National Security: Clergy and Leadership* at the National Military Historical Museum. His address, in my humble opinion, serves as a compass for anyone entrusted with the responsibility of governance and leadership. His Holiness said: *"True leadership is found in seeing one's role as a ministry entrusted by God to serve others, focusing not on personal gain but on the well-being and growth of those under their care. A leader must always be available, ready to serve. God appoints a leader not to satisfy personal ambitions and goals, but to serve the good of those over whom he is placed as a leader. With this in mind, we should always consider leadership a great responsibility and only as a calling."*

The deep love and respect shown at his farewell spoke volumes, proving that the Patriarch's words were not mere gestures but true principles guiding his life and leadership. May he rest in peace!

The benefit of examining these three ideas in the context of religious unity lies in their importance, applicability, and universality. No matter how we arrange them – in sequence, by relevance, or by commitment – they are always a reflection of our human relationship with God and His Creation, achievable through a willing and conscious dialogue. As the saying goes: *"The walls that people build do not reach God, and when viewed from His perspective, they are merely lines. In those lines, or walls, well-intentioned people build "neighbourliness."*

Bulgarian Forum for Interreligious Dialogue and Partnership: Authentic Religiousness and Responsible Science

Nikolay Neshev, Ph.D., Chairman of the Management Board
of the Bulgarian Forum for Interreligious Dialogue and Partnership

1. Establishment and cause

The Bulgarian Forum for Interreligious Dialogue and Partnership (BFIDP) was established in 2018 in anticipation of pivotal times. It brings together university professors, researchers, and members of registered religious communities in Bulgaria, including those from Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism, as well as like-minded people from diverse backgrounds, both within Bulgaria and internationally. Together, we are committed to fostering, sustaining, and enriching constructive interreligious coexistence through dialogue and collaboration on issues of importance to both religious communities and society as a whole. This mission represents a contemporary continuation of Bulgaria's long-standing tradition of peaceful interreligious coexistence and mutual support in challenging times. It focuses on finding common ground for development and preparing for the challenges that lie ahead.

2. Pluralistic academic spirit and authentic religiousness

The key to the success of BFIDP lies in the combination of a pluralistic academic spirit and authentic religiousness. For a university to function at its full potential, it must support a broad spectrum of natural sciences and humanities, as well as carry out interdisciplinary research. The true academic spirit demands that these fields be regarded, respected, and applied as equals. This approach enables us to effectively translate the acquired habits of academic interaction, collegiality, and interdisciplinarity into the realm of interreligious dialogue and partnership.

Authentic religiousness requires deep understanding and continuous practice of one's own religion in daily life. Drawing an analogy with the academic spirit described earlier, our work together as people of different religious beliefs can be seen as a form of spiritual interdisciplinarity, also based on mutual acceptance, respect, and equality. This is why we do not spend time comparing or attempting to merge the various religions. In such a way of perception, our natural platform for cooperation aims at achievements for the benefit of society. Thus, science serves as a tool for research and practical development, while religion provides meaning and motivation.

In close collaboration with the Directorate of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Bulgaria and the University of Library Studies and Information Technologies in Sofia, we organise conferences, programmes, training sessions, and projects in a highly beneficial, modern, and innovative manner, grounded in universal human values.

3. Communication style

The communication style of BFIDP is based on the dialogical method of David Joseph Bohm – one of the outstanding figures in 20th-century theoretical physics, who contributed unconventional ideas to the quantum theory, neuropsychology, and the philosophy of mind. Following his understanding of the nature of reality and consciousness as a single, coherent whole that is constantly changing, he formulated the following principles for conducting a unifying dialogue:

· Focusing not on a specific goal, but on unfolding and revealing a deep collective meaning;

· Building increasing trust, without imposing consensus or avoiding conflicts;

· No participant or group of participants can dominate the others;

· Collaborative achievement of high-level creativity and insights.

The proper application of these principles initially required frequent, systematic training, which in our case lasted about a year. After this period, our dialogue evolved into an ongoing, informal process. This shift allows us to work with minimal planning, while simultaneously seeking or receiving various opportunities and preparing for their realisation. Although the inherent turbulence of life occasionally obstructs some of our intentions, we strive to redirect our energy and resources toward more favourable directions.

4. Profound dimensions of cooperation

The mention of cooperation often garners attention and paves the way for future relationships, but turning it into a reality requires deep knowledge and management of multiple factors. The interdisciplinary approach of BFIDP, encompassing history, philosophy, psychology, theology, and mathematics (particularly game theory) enabled us to grasp the nuances of communication and identify effective pathways for achieving sustainable cooperation.

First and foremost, we gained a clear understanding that between compromise – the most common outcome in politics, business, and interpersonal relations – and lasting, sustainable cooperation, there are many transitional states. Stakeholders must navigate these gradually, with a high level of awareness, creativity, and patience. Paradoxically, the more developed the cooperation gets – even with the highest degree of trust – the more vulnerable it becomes to unpredictable external factors or unconscious gaps in its organisation.

An essential way to overcome this vulnerability is through authentic religiousness, which places eternal laws, principles, and values above transient human laws, principles, and values. This perspective allows us to seize opportunities for potential cooperation that, in business or politics, might be seen as too risky. It could be utilised with the clear understanding that no outcome can be guaranteed, given the ever-changing world and the inherent weaknesses of human nature. However, the primary motivating factor remains the development of relationships and the willingness to provide assistance in both joyful and challenging times.

5. Navigating the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic, though often predicted in science fiction literature and cinema, has dealt a surprising and devastating blow to humanity. It forcefully highlighted the need to reassess which human rights are firmly established and which will still need to be defended. Long-repeated patterns of thought and behaviour in everyday life, business, and politics suddenly became ineffective, and even dangerous. For the first time in modern history, humanity was confronted with unpredictable processes that posed a potential threat to its very existence and survival.

From the very beginning of the pandemic, BFIDP actively gathered and shared credible scientific information about the unfolding threat. Thus, we were able to relatively quickly gain a clear understanding of the situation both in Bulgaria and globally, and also to recognise the crucial role of authentic religiousness in overcoming various dangers when combined with scientifically based methods. It turned out that, in addition to contracting the virus, people were also at risk of developing fear, selfishness, and alienation – factors that diminish immune response and can lead to long-term psychological disorders. Also, from a purely medical perspective, patients with lung damage and higher levels of fear experienced more severe respiratory failure, requiring faster intervention with oxygen therapy, which in turn increased the risk of mortality.

Therefore, overcoming fear, selfishness, and alienation through the power of authentic religiousness proved to have an immediate, life-saving effect. This was also demonstrated by a colleague of ours who, as a patient in the COVID ward of the Multiprofile Hospital for Active Treatment and Emergency Medicine "N.I.Pirogov" in Sofia, accelerated his recovery through the power of faith. At the same time, he provided spiritual and psychological support to other patients and medical staff. Subsequently, the insights gained from this experience were shared with a broad range of specialists.

6. Attitude towards artificial intelligence

The rapid integration of artificial intelligence into all areas of life has presented us with the task of evaluating its benefits and risks while developing a constructive perspective to share with those around us from both a scientific and a spiritual standpoint. As we all work with various types of textual and digital information, we recognise that artificial intelligence is a powerful and potentially indispensable tool for processing large amounts of data, thus saving valuable time. However, if AI continues to gradually take over more aspects of users' mental activities, such as logic, memory, written communication, creativity, etc., then it would lead to a general decline in natural intelligence and foster harmful addiction.

At first glance, a suitable alternative might be the development of augmented intelligence, which complements rather than replaces human intelligence, and this is definitely preferable. People would then hypothetically have access to an increasing amount of information, albeit aggregated, to make increasingly important decisions. But *a priori* there is no guarantee that the human brain is evolutionarily equipped to

function on such a scale. Therefore, we believe that the awareness and exploration of ever-deeper spiritual dimensions of the human personality, combined with the use of augmented intelligence tools, can provide the capabilities and motivation needed to face the ever-growing challenges of the future.

7. Multilayered approach to sustainable peace

Speaking and writing about peace in our time often risks evoking a sense of an (almost) impossible mission. However, BFIDP realises that peace is much more than the absence of war. Between peace and war, there are many intermediate states, shaped by thoughts, words, and actions accumulated over time. Reasoning by analogy, the "layers" formed by inadequate assessments of the overall situation, self-serving aspirations, and actions taken to fulfil them give rise to increasing instability, which at some virtually unpredictable moment may trigger an "earthquake" – a conflict whose intensity can range widely in values, from a mild shock to an all-encompassing annihilating war.

This analogy provides a workable approach to achieving sustainable peace through the constant and methodical release of the accumulated stresses in the various "layers" of destabilising factors. In purely practical terms, we have adopted the following guidelines for our future activities:

· Leading as many people as possible to comprehensive awareness of social and natural processes;

· Provision of education combining knowledge, skills, and practical humanism;

· Ensuring continuity between generations;

· Development and affirmation of non-materialistic values.

With sincere wishes for peace and everlasting achievement,

BFIDP Team

Identity, Tolerance, and Boundaries: the Bulgarian Experience

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The Bulgarian experience of coexistence between Christians and Muslims is often described with the term *komshuluk* – "(good) neighbourliness", or "the spirit of neighbourly kinship". As is well known, the term, according to the renowned social psychologist Ivan Hadjiyski (1907-1944), refers to the small gates in internal fences, which turn the yards in villages and small settlements into a system of "connected vessels." Since the late 20th century, many have proclaimed the existence of a "Bulgarian model," which includes the mention of the efforts of some members of the Bulgarian elite to save the Bulgarian Jews during the Holocaust.

However, does all this mean that the Bulgarian experience is unique, and does it follow a model of complete equality between the religious communities, embracing them as expressions of the same truth – much like the spirit of the *Parable of the Three Rings* as told by Boccaccio (1313-1375) in *Novella III* of *The Decameron*? In this parable, Saladin, portrayed as the Sultan of Babylon, challenges the Jew Melchizedek with the question: "Which of the three faiths is the true one – the Jewish, the Saracen, or the Christian?" Melchizedek responds by recounting the story of a father who had three sons. Because he loved them equally, he could not decide to whom to bequeath his ring. So, the father made two more rings identical to the first, and thus it was never clear which son possessed the original ring.

In Bulgaria, past and present, however, societal relations are more complex, as evidenced in the 20th century by phenomena such as the so called revival process that aimed to assimilate Muslims. Nevertheless, unlike the Western Balkans, after the collapse of State Communism in 1989, Bulgaria successfully established a model characterised by the predominance of tolerance in the coexistence of ethnic and religious communities. What, then, is the root of this Bulgarian moderation? How do ethno-religious communities maintain the boundaries of their collective identities while managing to avoid the sharp clashes and bloody conflicts that have marked the modern history of neighbouring countries following the dissolution of Yugoslavia?

Bulgaria and the Western Balkans share a common pattern: the significant role of religious identity. This role was revived in a similar way after 1989 when the influx of religious emissaries and evangelisers from various denominations did not lead to the emergence of a "free market of religions" typical of the West. Instead, the majority of those rediscovering religion in the Balkans returned to "traditional" religions, thereby reaffirming their collective identities. Western observers are often confused by the high percentage of Bulgarians who identify as Orthodox Christians (76 percent of the population). Even without being regular church-goers, they emphasise the importance of their belonging to the Orthodox Christian community, foregrounding the religious component of their identity

without necessarily being devout. This phenomenon is described in contemporary religious studies as "belonging without believing," in contrast with the Western model of "believing without belonging."

Is the Bulgarian model truly so unique? History offers other examples often cited as models, such as the well-known Convivencia[1] in Al-Andalus – Muslim Spain between the 8th and 15th centuries – where Jews, Christians, and Muslims are said to have coexisted harmoniously. However, the concept of Convivencia itself is contested. Some contemporary historians, including Darío Fernández-Morera, sharply criticise the "myth of the Andalusian paradise" (in his 2016 book of the same name) and the thesis of prevailing religious tolerance in Al-Andalus.

Even though authors like Morera may lean toward the opposite extreme, the idea of "Andalusianism"[2] is indeed a product of a retrospective vision of history (as all visions of history inevitably are), projecting aspects of our contemporary experience – sometimes even wishful thinking – onto the past. In this sense, the concept of Convivencia is also the result of a "historical therapy" conducted in modern Spain. A similar process occurred in Bulgaria after 1989, albeit in a different way, regarding our Ottoman past, including due to the revival process.

Whether we speak of Bulgarian *komshuluk* or Spanish Convivencia, the phenomenon in question is similar: a social and cultural transcendence of dogmatic intransigence and incompatibility. In this process, the boundaries of collective identity appear more blurred and flexible, allowing representatives of two doctrinally incompatible religions to establish a form of coexistence characterised by mutual understanding and good neighbourliness across various aspects of social and cultural life. This phenomenon suggests a model of tolerance that preserves the boundaries of collective identities.

In the case of the so-called Bulgarian model, which in some respects is also shared by other Balkan nations, the phenomenon is based on three key principles. The *first principle* involves the development and establishment of socially ritualised reciprocity in the relationships between religious communities in everyday life, transcending the dominant social hierarchy of the particular historical moment and context. The *second principle* requires a shared social awareness of the risks associated with destabilising this established model. Lastly, and no less significantly, the *third principle* is that of silence, imposed by the boundaries of religious identity.

Examples from the *komshuluk* system, scrutinised by ethnologist Tsvetana Georgieva (1937-2022), illustrate these principles.[3] She shares stories of Bulgarian refugees from Eastern Thrace who, in 1913, managed to escape the repressions of the Turkish army by fleeing through the *komshuluk* fences with the help of their Muslim neighbours. During the *revival process*, when Muslims secretly observed

1 *La Convivencia* (Spanish) – coexistence, living together. The term was introduced by cultural historian Américo Castro (1885-1972) to describe the tolerant coexistence of Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Al-Andalus.

2 Spanish *Andalusismo*.

3 See Цветана Георгиева. *Системата на комшулука*. [Tsvetana Georgieva. *The System of komshuluk*], 2010, https://hermesbg.org/tr/nova-biblioteka/kniga-12/221-sistemata-na-komshuluka.html

the tradition of *qurban* (ritual sacrifice), they would hide the sacrificial meat with their Christian neighbours, who would pass it through the *komshuluk* after the Communist authorities conducted "refrigerator checks."

The formalised symmetry in the *komshuluk* system, as Tsvetana Georgieva put it, is also reflected in the symmetry of the "peak expressions of identity" of each group – such as the exchange of gifts (eggs or baklava) and the sharing of personal holidays. Invitations cannot be ignored, because that would disrupt the balance of relationships ("If you don't have money, you might not attend your cousin's wedding, but for the wedding of your Turkish neighbour, you would borrow money and go").

Residents of Gela, a village in the Smolyan region, recount a story of reciprocal behaviour from the Muslims during the return of the *bashi-bazouk* after the suppression of the 1876 April Uprising. From the high slopes of the Rhodope Mountains, the people of Gela saw that the *bashi-bazouk*, recruited from purely Muslim villages, were entering the village of Shiroka Laka, and they heard the screams of women there. Fearing the same fate, the Christians decided not to wait for them to come to their village. All the women and children fled – the Christian men were not at home, as they were working in the Aegean region. However, the fleeing Christian women left their homes and belongings behind. To protect the houses of their Christian neighbours, local Muslim women divided into groups, with several going to each house, soaking their *sai* (traditional garments)[4] and spreading them in the yards. Whenever a *bashi-bazouk* entered one of the houses, the Muslim women would scream that they were attacking true believers. The houses could not be distinguished from one another because they all looked similar. The Muslim women said to each other: "Now the Christians will be saved, but when they return and find their homes looted and burned, what will they do?" So, they decided to organise in this way to protect their Christian neighbours and safeguard their property.[5]

Last but not least, the socially ritualised reciprocity and the desire for the sustainability of the model of coexistence between Christians and Muslims in the Bulgarian lands, and in countries with predominantly Orthodox population in general, are combined with the principle of silence. After the first centuries following the rise of Islam in the 7th century, when reciprocal suspicion and disdain prevailed in the polemic between Christians and Muslims, thinkers like St. Gregory Palamas (1296-1357), who debated with Muslim religious scholars under Ottoman captivity, introduced a new, eschatological dimension to the dialogue. Without suppressing the points of conflict, it became possible to seek peaceful coexistence between the

4 *Saya* (pl. *sai*) was a traditional garment worn by Muslim women in the Rhodope Mountains. In other regions, such as Kyustendil and Sandanski-Petrich, the word refers primarily to a Christian women's costume.

5 The memories of living participants in these events were recorded by the Smolyan historians Maria Manolova (d. 1996) and Manol Manolov (d. 1982) preparing their monograph [*The Village of Shiroka Laka and its Surrounding Villages and Neighbourhoods in the Shiroka Laka Region: History, Ethnographic and Folklore Features*], 1986, State Archive, Smolyan, fund 1356, inventory 1, archival unit 415 – manuscript. The story from the village of Gela, as shared above, was relayed to me by theologian and historian Ass. Prof. Stefan Ilchevski (personal communication, October 29, 2024), who was informed of it by Maria Manolova as part of her notes.

representatives of the two religions – a stance that, from then on, largely remained valid in the relationship of the Byzantines and Orthodox Christians towards Islam, as on the Day of Judgment, everyone – including Muslims – could turn to Christ.[6]

The Byzantine experience suggests that tolerance between religious communities is possible when the boundaries between them are clearly demarcated. Hence the principle of silence, which stems from the differing views of religion in the Eastern and Western European traditions. In the Eastern European tradition, coexistence and tolerance between Jews, Christians, and Muslims are possible when the religious mysteries of the other are respected with silence – the spiritual core of the other is not subject to communication, and it is precisely the absence of communication that makes tolerance possible.[7]

The small gates of the *komshuluk* system are indeed a small part of an otherwise clearly demarcated massive dividing line – a wall that can only be crossed at a specific point and for a specific, short-term, practical purpose. After all, is it true, and what does it tell us, based on Vera Mutafchieva's observation,[8] that in the Balkans, unlike in Al-Andalus, the dialogue between the three monotheistic religions is conducted not in the higher cultural strata, but at the everyday level?

These observations on the Eastern European tradition, where dialogue is more about *komshuluk* than lofty theological discussions about the doctrinal core of religions, are also valid for the Middle East. Here, too, reciprocally, under a century-long Islamic dominance, public debates or prolonged literary polemics on issues concerning the spiritual cores of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam were not the norm. In the Middle East, "dialogue" was more about daily life and neighbourly communication between Jews, Christians, and Muslims, while discussions on the essence of faith were postponed – for the believers, they would take place on the Day of Judgment, and for the non-believers, never.

Where we retrospectively project the existence of an inspiring intellectual dialogue in the higher cultural layers, as in the case of Andalusian Convivencia, the coexistence between Jews, Christians, and Muslims ended ignominiously even before the Reconquista of 1492. In 1392, for example, in Castile and Aragon, pogroms by the Catholic population against Jews erupted, and later Muslims and Jews were expelled from Iberia.

The moderation characteristic of the predominantly tolerant relations between Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the Bulgarian lands suggests a far more complex model. In this model, *komshuluk* is an important metaphor that must be preserved in our historical memory. It represents a sustainable social model of interreligious relations with variations in the Middle East and the Balkans, and therefore it is not solely formed by the Eastern Christian tradition but also by Islam.

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6 Смилен Марков. *Срещата на Византия с исляма – конфликтни позиции и нива на взаимно разбиране* [Smilen Markov. *The encounter of Byzantium with Islam – conflicting positions and levels of mutual understanding*], Hristiyanstvo i kultura 1 (68), 2012, p. 95-104.

7 Георги Каприев. *Диалогът между религиите и стойността на мълчанието* [Georgi Kapriev. *The dialogue between religions and the value of silence*], ibid., p. 105-113.

8 Personal communication with Vera Mutafchieva, Sofia, 2000.

This sustainability arises from the ritualised reciprocity in the social communication between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. It leads to the model discussed here, which is exposed to the danger of periodic imbalances through excesses (such as the Batak massacre, the *revival process*, etc.), followed by attempts at its restoration – albeit in a different form. However, the principle of silence on the essential issues of faith always remains valid, safeguarding the communal boundaries, which are not subject to situational renegotiation.

Assessments of the Holy See for the Coexistence of Religions and Communities in Bulgaria – Duty and Responsibility

Bogdan Patashev, Head of International Activities Department at the Ministry of Culture, Bulgarian Ambassador to the Holy See (2019-2023)

My proposal is to examine the topic of unity among religions and communities in Bulgaria through the perspective of one of the oldest international institutions – the Holy See, in particular through the statements of its representatives.

To appreciate the depth of the Vatican's knowledge and longstanding engagement with Bulgaria – both currently and historically – I will revisit the ancient ties between the Holy See and the people of our lands. Subsequently, I will outline the Holy See's activities on the contemporary international stage. Finally, I will highlight assessments shared by the Holy See's representatives about Bulgaria and Bulgarian society, reflecting the coexistence of religions and communities within the country.

The connection between our lands and the Holy See dates back to ancient times, to the early days of Christianity. Saint Clement, the third successor of St. Peter, set out as a missionary East of Rome, eventually reaching the Crimean Peninsula, where he died as a martyr. According to ancient chronicles, Saint Clement stayed in Serdica (the historical name of Sofia, now Bulgaria's capital), where he founded and led the first Christian community. Thus, Saint Clement became the first Bishop of Serdica, making him, in a sense, the predecessor of the Metropolitan of Sofia and the Bulgarian Patriarch.[1]

Many iconic figures from early Christianity serve as a bridge between our lands and the Holy See, embodying a living memory of the enduring strength and depth of our relationship. A particularly special memory for Bulgarians encompasses the holy brothers Cyril and Methodius and their disciples, who, after discovering the relics of St. Clement during the Khazar mission in Crimea, took them to Rome as they were seeking the consecration of the Slavonic alphabet and of the Church books translations to aid in the evangelisation of the Slavic peoples.

History shows that the new alphabet was not universally accepted among the peoples of Central Europe; in fact, it was persecuted. However, it found refuge in Bulgaria, from where it spread north and east. After blessing the mission of Cyril and Methodius in the 9th century, the Holy See repeatedly reaffirmed, through Papal documents, its blessing of the new alphabet for the Slavs and insisted on the continuity of the efforts to incorporate the new language in the Church.

This sequence of Papal documents also recalls the role of Bulgaria in

1 The late Bulgarian Patriarch Neophyte referred to that issue in a message of thanks to Pope Francis on the occasion of welcoming the relics of St. Clement: *"It is a great blessing for our Bulgarian Orthodox Church ... to receive a particle of the holy relics of the Venerable Pope Clement, founder of the church in Serdica and its first bishop, as a spiritual bridge between the Church of Bulgaria and the Church of Rome."* Sofia, 16 September 2019, Saint Sophia Church.

preserving the new alphabet and spreading Christianity among other nations.[2] For example, Pope Benedict XVI said: *"It was to the merit of these disciples that it was possible to survive the crisis unleashed after the death of Methodius on 6 April 885: persecuted and imprisoned, some of them were sold as slaves and taken to Venice where they were redeemed by a Constantinopolitan official who allowed them to return to the countries of the Slavonic Balkans. Welcomed in Bulgaria, they were able to continue the mission that Methodius had begun and to disseminate the Gospel in the "Land of the Rus"."*[3]

The only Slavic pope to date, St. John Paul II, expressed this eloquently during his Apostolic Visit to Bulgaria in 2002: *"Through their disciples, the mission of Cyril and Methodius was marvellously consolidated in Bulgaria. Here, thanks to Saint Clement of Ohrid, dynamic centres of monastic life were founded, and here the Cyrillic alphabet greatly developed. From here also Christianity spread to other lands, until it reached, via nearby Romania, the ancient Kievan Rus', and then spread towards Moscow and other regions eastward."*[4]

"*Bulgaria* – says in another occasion Pope John Paul II – *received the Gospel thanks to the preaching of Saints Cyril and Methodius, and down the centuries that seed planted in fertile soil has produced abundant fruits of Christian witness and holiness."*[5]

Regarding those distant times, Popes have described Bulgaria as a *fertile soil* or a *refuge.* While these few quotes do not allow us to draw definitive conclusions about the dominant attitudes of Bulgarians a thousand years ago, they could serve as a litmus test that reflects openness and receptiveness to the new and the different – an outlook that should be preserved and shared with others.

Four centuries ago, in 1622, the Holy See created a Congregation called *De Propaganda Fide* to support Christians in the East, who were completely isolated due to various geopolitical circumstances. With the help of missionaries, young Bulgarians from Chiprovtsi began studying in Rome, and exactly 400 years ago, in 1624, the first Catholic school opened in Bulgaria. Since then, the archives of *Propaganda Fide* have preserved numerous testimonies about the life and customs of Bulgarians, tracking the coexistence of communities and religions in our lands from that era to the present day.

Apart from the Christian-missionary aspect of Rome's relations with our lands, a series of Bulgarian kings from the First (681-1018), Second (1185-1396), and Third (1908-1946) Bulgarian Kingdoms engaged in negotiations, exchanged messengers, and corresponded with the Holy See. These interactions have contributed to a deep mutual acquaintance. Noteworthy examples include Pope Nicholas I's responses to

2 Cfr. Pope LEO XIII, Encyclical Epistle GRANDE MUNUS (30 September 1880); Pope PIUS XI, Epistula QUOD S. CYRILLUM (13 February 1928); Pope JOHN XXIII, Apostolic Letter MAGNIFICI EVENTUS (11 May 1963); Pope PAUL VI, Apostolic Epistle ANTIQUAE NOBILITATIS (2 February 1969); Pope JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter EGREGIAE VIRTUTIS (31 December 1980), Encyclical Letter SLAVORUM APOSTOLI (2 June 1985).

3 Pope Benedict XVI, General audience, Saint Peter's Square, Rome, Wednesday, 17 June 2009.

4 Pope John Paul II, Palace of Culture, Sofia (24 May 2002).

5 Pope John Paul II, St. Alexander Nevsky Square, Sofia (23 May 2002).

the inquiries of the Bulgarians, led by Prince Boris in 866 (*Responsa Nicolai ad consulta Bulgarorum*) regarding the conversion of the Bulgarian people. Another example is the Concordat prepared during the reign of Tsar Ferdinand I. Unfortunately, this Concordat remained unsigned due to the outbreak of the First World War and the subsequent abdication of the monarch in 1918.

I highlight these key moments in history as an illustration of how the relationship between Bulgaria and the Holy See has preserved systematic observation of life in the Bulgarian lands since the 9th century.

Why, in the context of the ongoing discussions on the unity of religions and communities in Bulgaria, do I consider the Holy See's assessment of Bulgarian society's development? In the last century, the Holy See has positioned itself within the complex network of international relations, primarily as a staunch defender of religious freedoms and the protection of human dignity across all stages of life, including its social and economic dimensions. The Holy See acts as a kind of small but globally respected human rights observatory.

At the international level, the Holy See is fully recognised as a subject of international law. Its international legal capacity derives from its character as a member of the international community, endowed with its own original authority, which does not derive from any other subject of international law. This uniqueness is further reinforced by its active participation in nearly all UN agencies, as well as in both bilateral and multilateral diplomacy. In the context of today's discussion, the Holy See's most significant contribution lies in the promotion and protection of human rights at all levels. The Holy See remains independent of any economic interests, military alliances, or regional dependencies.

It is also important to note that when the eloquence of the positions expressed by the Holy See proves insufficient or fails to bring about the desired changes, its leaders often turn to significant gestures, or symbolic celebrations and commemorations.

The world witnessed such a significant gesture in Bulgaria during Pope Francis's visit in 2019. Typically, every Papal visit includes standard official protocol and religious appearances, such as meetings with official authorities, religious leaders, and the local Catholic community, as well as the celebration of Catholic services for the faithful in the visited country.

In Bulgaria, Pope Francis sought to include an extraordinary event dedicated to world peace, to be held in collaboration with him and the representatives of the local religious communities. This event was envisioned as a prayer gathering of various religions, held at a very specific location in Sofia, symbolising peace and coexistence among faiths. This gathering, proposed at the end of Pope Francis's visit to Bulgaria, was distinct from the protocol meeting with religious leaders held on the first day, in front of the Patriarchal Cathedral of "St. Alexander Nevsky."

The prayer for peace with the religious leaders proposed by the Holy See took place in the emblematic centre of the city of Sofia and Pope Francis stated, among other things: *"Our celebration of peace takes place on the ruins of ancient*

Serdica, here in Sofia, the heart of Bulgaria. From here, we can see the places of worship of the different Churches and religious Confessions: Saint Nedelya of our Orthodox brothers and sisters, Saint Joseph of us Catholics, the synagogue of our older brothers, the Jews, the mosque of our Muslim brothers and sisters and, closer to us, the Armenian church.

For many centuries, the Bulgarians of Sofia belonging to different cultural and religious groups gathered in this place for meetings and discussions. May this symbolic place become a witness to peace. Tonight, our voices blend in expressing our ardent desire for peace. Let there be peace on earth ..."[6]

The choice of the message in the logo of the Papal visit to Bulgaria, *"Pacem in terries"*[7] was also a special indication of the Vatican's attitude toward our country and its potential arising from the coexistence of religions and communities.

The messages during the visit of Pope Francis in 2019 were directed in this manner: "I am happy to be here in Bulgaria, a place of encounter between many cultures and civilisations, a bridge between Eastern and Southern Europe, an open door to the Near East, and a land of ancient Christian roots that nourish its vocation to foster encounter both in the region and in the international community. Here diversity, combined with respect for distinctive identities, is viewed as an opportunity, a source of enrichment, and not as a source of conflict."[8]

These sentiments echoed those of Pope John Paul II said during his visit to Bulgaria in 2002: *"Bulgaria, with its geographical position, is a kind of bridge between Eastern and Western Europe – almost like a spiritual crossroads – a land of meetings and mutual understanding. Here are concentrated the human and cultural values of different continents and areas, which have found acceptance and respect. I would like to publicly honour this traditional hospitality of the Bulgarian people, recalling more especially their outstanding merits in saving thousands of Jews during the Second World War."*[9]

A few months before his visit to Bulgaria, in February 2019, Pope Francis travelled to Abu Dhabi to sign a Document of Human Fraternity between Christians and Muslims. In Bulgaria, quoting from this document, he also stated: "... *"the firm conviction that authentic teachings of religions invite us to remain rooted in the values of peace; to defend the values of mutual understanding, human fraternity, and harmonious coexistence" (Document on Human Fraternity, Abu Dhabi, 4 February 2019). Let us profit from the hospitality of the Bulgarian people so that every religion, called to foster harmony and concord, can contribute to the growth of a culture and an environment of complete respect for the human person and his or her dignity, by establishing vital links between different civilisations, sensibilities and traditions, and by rejecting every form of violence and coercion...*

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6 Pope Francis, *Prayer for Peace presided at by the Holy Father in the presence of Leaders of the various Religious Confessions in Bulgaria*, Nezavisimost sq., Sofia, 6 May 2019.

7 From the Encyclical Letter PACEM IN TERRIES of Pope John XXIII, who lived in Bulgaria for nearly 10 years (1925-1934).

8 Pope Francis, *Meeting with the Authorities, with Civil Society and the Diplomatic Corps*, Sofia, 5 May 2019.

9 Pope John Paul II, St. Alexander Nevsky sq, Sofia, 23 May 2002.

Your country has always distinguished itself as a bridge between East and West, capable of favouring encounter between the different cultures, ethnic groups, civilisations and religions that for centuries have lived here in peace."[10]

Pope Francis's messages in Bulgaria, from one of the world's most respected contemporary leaders, underscored the importance of focusing on positive, yet often fragile and vulnerable, models and practices – ones that deserve to be shared and safeguarded. His influence highlights the Holy See's commitment to these values worldwide, presenting Bulgaria as an example of potential peaceful coexistence among communities and religions, exemplifying the encouragement of awareness and responsibility.

I wish to conclude this reflection with Pope Francis's words delivered in Sofia to the Bulgarian people and the international community during his traditional Sunday noon address. This message, broadcast globally every Sunday, is anticipated not only by Catholics around the world but also by international analysts. These words portray Bulgaria as a nation capable of fostering significant changes within the global religious landscape. For us Bulgarians, these words should be read and embraced with a sense of duty and responsibility:

"In the history of the Church, also here in Bulgaria, there have been many pastors outstanding for the holiness of their lives. Among them, I readily recall my predecessor, whom you call "the Bulgarian saint", Pope John XXIII, a holy pastor whose memory is particularly honoured in this land, where he lived from 1925 to 1934. Here he learned to esteem the traditions of the Eastern Church and built friendly relationships with the other religious confessions. His diplomatic and pastoral experience in Bulgaria left so deep a mark on his pastor's heart that he was led to promote in the Church the prospect of ecumenical dialogue, which received a notable impulse in the Second Vatican Council, which he himself wished to convene. In a certain sense, we can thank this land for the sage and inspired intuition of "good Pope John".

In pursuing this ecumenical journey, I will shortly have the joy of greeting the representatives of various religious confessions of Bulgaria, which, while an Orthodox country, is a crossroads where various religious expressions encounter one another and engage in dialogue. The very welcome presence in this meeting of representatives of these different communities is a sign of the desire of all to pursue the increasingly necessary journey towards "the culture of dialogue as a path; mutual cooperation as the code of conduct; reciprocal understanding as the method and standard"."[11]

10 Pope Francis, *Meeting with the Authorities, with Civil Society and the Diplomatic Corps*, Sofia, 5 May 2019.

11 Pope Francis, *REGINA COELI*, Saint Alexander Nevsky sq., Sofia, 5 May 2019.

Diplomatic Meanings of Moral Acts: the Leadership of Religious Tolerance

Assoc. Prof. Albena Taneva, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"

As early as the 17th century, the philosopher John Locke said in his famous *Letter on Toleration* that toleration was the main characteristic of the True Church. During the years of the Holocaust, the only Christian institution to actively oppose the political repression against Jews and seek change to protect them was the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church.

The documentary evidence supporting the Church's position is extensive.[1] It includes dozens of written decisions addressed to the official authorities, as well as detailed minutes of their meetings, where they sought effective measures to protect the Jews.[2] This evidence not only reflects their position but also their active resistance to deportation attempts. The significance of this documentary heritage can be described as a moral pillar of tolerance.

The topic of this paper revolves around two key concepts: tolerance and leadership. Each of these terms carries multiple meanings, both in theoretical contexts and in everyday usage. Therefore, a brief conceptual clarification is provided.

1. On leadership

The spontaneous use of the concept of leadership is typically associated with some kind of hierarchy, dominance, or influence based on strong personal qualities.[3] However, what truly distinguishes an individual as a leader is the ability to engage others in collective action toward a common moral goal. The presence of a problem is a prerequisite for the emergence of such relationships.

What distinguishes leadership interaction is the initiative of an individual or group to communicate messages and take actions that resonate with those involved, enabling them to work together to achieve a common goal. In leadership theory, this relates to its inherent capacity to transform a situation for the better.[4]

The leadership role of the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC) during WWII lies in its active stance of protecting society from moral failure and defending the Jews against the official policy of persecution.

2. On tolerance

Resisting attempts to limit rights constitutes an act of tolerance. But is it reasonable and sufficient to explain this manifestation of tolerance solely as a behaviour driven by a feeling of tolerance as an attitude?

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1 https://jews.archives.bg/2-%D0%97%D0%90_%D0%94%D0%90%D0%90.

2 Documentary collection *The Power of Civil Society in a Time of Genocide* (2005).

3 Taneva, A. *Towards Leadership as Applied Concept* in: Public Policy.bg, Vol. 11/Number 1/April 2020, https://www.ejpp.eu/index.php/ejpp/article/view/348/805.

4 Burns, J. *Leadership*, 1978; Bass, B. *Leadership and Performance Beyond Expectations*, 1985; Rost, J. *Leadership for the Twenty-First Century*, New York, 1991.

As is well known, the Holy Synod was not the only figures and organisations in Bulgaria to oppose the government's repressive policy. Their stance was shaped by the conscious, individual choices of each metropolitan, which were then transformed into institutional decisions. The Synod maintained a consistent policy of pressuring the government to end the persecution and restore normalcy. Each time they were confronted with new acts of repression by the authorities towards the Jewish community, their response was to defend the Jews and resist the repression.

But how can we conclude that their position was motivated by some form of tolerance? In the simplest terms, we can answer using their own words. The following excerpts present the clear statements of the metropolitans of the Holy Synod of the BOC from the years of the World War II, which unambiguously express their position, their understanding of tolerance, and the motivations behind their actions in defence of the persecuted Jews.

It is important to note that the position and actions of the Holy Synod of the BOC are documented in the written minutes of all their meetings during this period. From November 1940 to June 1943, the bishops discussed the content of the policy toward Jews in Bulgaria and the methods of their protection in 25 separate meetings. The complete texts of these protocols have been published in a documentary collection, along with explanatory notes on the events and their context.[5]

3. In the Metropolitans' own words

Here is what was said at their meetings in 1940 when they discussed their position and in 1943 when they discussed how to oppose the deportations:

• *"...Bulgarian Jewry must not fall in despair. We must not forget that the Bulgarian Jewry, integrating itself in the Bulgarian nation ever since the first days after Bulgaria's liberation and sharing with its Bulgarian brothers all the joys and sorrows brought upon the country, still has many friends among the Bulgarian people, who would never want to hurt the dignity or damage the rights of the Bulgarian Jewry. Even today, these good friends of ours are loudly and clearly voicing their disapproval of the proposed restrictions and they will keep voicing it in the future wherever and whenever they can."*[6]

• Metropolitan Stefan of Sofia: *"Strictly speaking, no Jewish question exists in Bulgaria. ... The Bill is a legal and moral disaster and it must undergo fundamental changes."*

• Metropolitan Michael of Dorostol and Cherven: *"Our nation – small and underprivileged – has always distinguished itself with its* ***tolerance*** *towards other nationalities and has lived up to its goals in the name of justice and humanity..."*

• *"In the name of these evangelical principles, we must also do something about*

5 *The Power of Civil Society ...*

6 Circular Letter of the All-member Meeting of the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (November 1940) on the letter received from the Central Consistory of Jews regarding the plight of the Jews in the country and the forthcoming entering in the National Assembly of the Bill for the Defence of the Nation.

the national minorities in our country. Jews in Bulgaria have never done anything against our national interests. On the contrary, they have supplied us with proof of their commendable patriotism during times of war, for instance, when many have given their lives while fulfilling their duty to the fatherland. With regard to generosity, they are the most generous. We owe them fair and proper treatment. It is the duty of the Church to advocate for such treatment in front of the appropriate government officials."

• Metropolitan Kiril of Plovdiv: *"The question of our attitude towards the Jews is clear. We are Christians, and as prelates of the Holy Bulgarian Church, we cannot refrain from keeping true to the Holy Gospel and the Christian Doctrine of equal standing of all humans in the eyes of God, regardless of their origin, race, or culture. Therefore, we must defend the Jews, primarily those who are Christians, but also those who are not."*

• Metropolitan Stefan of Sofia: *"The most beautiful thing in the history of our nation is its tolerance, its hospitality and its forbearance of all, who lived amongst us, whether they have been residents or guests in our midst. This quality – **our tolerance** – the Bulgarian people demonstrated towards the poor Armenian people, who found a safe and friendly refuge in Bulgaria after the slaughter in Constantinople, an act, which to this day holds high regard in the eyes of the humane world. At international conferences we have been praised for our tolerance towards all minorities.... And to this day, the Bulgarian people, in an overwhelming majority, do not have bad intentions towards the Jews."*

• Decision signed by all**:** *"Measures against Jews, as a national minority, are to be excluded from the Bill for the Protection of the Nation. In this way, we will not only defend our nation, but also preserve our good reputation as a fair, tolerant and freedom loving people."*

• Expression of tolerance based on the Holy books: *"There is no difference between the Jew and the Greek: for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him"* (Romans 10: 12). As it would otherwise betray itself, Christ's Church cannot back away from this doctrine of equality of all humans in the eyes of God, regardless of their nationality or class origin, regardless of their position in society, regardless of their giftedness, merits, gender or age.

• March, 1943. Metropolitan Eulogiy of Sliven: *"I would like to add to what I have already said that we should make the fate of the Jews a matter of our conscience and of a good pastor's heart. We, the Metropolitans, most appreciably sense the pulse of the people because we are among them. We can tell that the majority of people do not approve of the Government's activities against the Jewish minority. They feel that only the Church has the ability to do something to ease the burden of these suffering people, and indeed we do. We are bound by the Gospel to stand up for the Jewish minority and to protect them. We have to demand two things: first, that all Jews born in Bulgaria will not to be deported from the country; secondly, that all converted Jews will not to be deported from the country, or even disturbed. We have to require the invalidation of all restrictions currently imposed on the converted Jews. I think*

that what the Metropolitan of Plovdiv has done was his duty and that we should be prepared to do the same. By acting in defence of the Jewish minority we also respond to the yearnings and aspirations of the Bulgarian people. We cannot remain deaf to the voice of people, of good loyal Christians asking for protection of the Jewish minority; otherwise, we would be betraying ourselves."

• Metropolitan Joseph of Varna: *"The reason why I think we have to tell the Bulgarian Government that instead of protecting the nation, the Law tarnishes the reputation of the Bulgarian people as* ***tolerant*** *and just people. Because of the observations you and I have made of the ways the law works and because of its degeneration, so to say, I think we should ask the Government to amend it – with regard to all the Jews."*

The Holy Synod of the BOC, as the governing body of the institution, expressed its official opinion in a letter, as follows: *"This provision sharply contradicts the Christian teaching that before God and for His grace, taught in St. Sacraments, there is no difference between a Jew and a Greek, because one and the same is the Lord of all... The Church of Christ cannot give way without changing itself from this teaching about the equality of all men before God, regardless of their nationality or class origin, regardless of their position in society, regardless of their gifts, merits, gender and age..."*

The policy of persecution against Jews as a religious minority represents, among other things, a direct challenge to the very foundations of society. Opposing this persecution is not only a defence of the Jewish community but also a defence of society as a whole. It is an expression of personal choice, responsibility, and risk. This is precisely what distinguishes the actions of the Holy Synod – they made that *choice*.

Any act of defending the persecuted, when opposed by official policy, is among the highest expressions of humanity. In this context, the Holy Synod of the BOC exemplifies leadership in religious tolerance.

This act, in its time, was intended to protect those who were persecuted. Its legacy holds great moral significance for future generations. The exhibition I curated in 2009, titled "The Power of Civil Society", tells the story of the fate of the Jews in Bulgaria during the Holocaust, it has been presented in over 80 countries worldwide, from 2009 to 2022, through joint events organised by the State Cultural Institute of the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in collaboration with the Embassies of Israel, Jewish communities, and various institutions across different countries.

Sharing this narrative serves as a form of public diplomacy, conveying messages from the tragic pages of the past. It emphasises that the choice to defend a society's moral principles is a responsibility for everyone. This is precisely the role played by the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church during the years of the Second World War: to act as a moral leader for humanity.

Academic Institutions and the Affirmation of Religious Pluralism in Bulgaria

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Religious pluralism

Theory defines religious pluralism as both a process of managing and increasing religious diversity, as well as a framework for understanding the place of diverse religious views within a society. It involves respecting and accepting the religious identities of others – those who follow different faiths – and recognising the right to religious difference. As a cultural concept, religious pluralism reflects a shared understanding of how different religious communities relate to one another and to the nation as a whole. Its goal is to overcome discrimination, reduce social distances, and challenge stereotypes.

Over the past 35 years, Bulgarian society has made a difficult transition from state atheism to religious pluralism; the tradition of religious monopoly and oligopoly has been gradually overcome to lay the foundation of real religious pluralism.

Historically, regardless of political regimes, social turmoil, or religious policies, the development of a religiously pluralistic society in Bulgaria has been rooted in the region's long-standing tradition of multi-religiosity, characteristic of Southeast Europe since antiquity. This pluralism has been reinforced by a deep familiarity with the religious "Other" – experienced personally within family, neighbourhood, and professional circles, and reflected in the interactions between the Abrahamic faiths and their syncretic practices and beliefs.

It is connected with sustainable, historically formed, and time-bound connections and networks of coexistence between small social groups. It treads upon common experiences and interaction at the micro-social level and with responses to common dangers and challenges. Religious pluralism in Bulgaria today is guaranteed by the democratic principles enshrined in the Constitution (1991) and supported by both state institutions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). It is further encouraged by religious and spiritual communities. A political, normative, institutional, and socio-cultural framework has been established to ensure its continued existence.

Universities and scientific institutes are integral components of both the institutional and socio-cultural framework. Internally, three distinct directions are formed within these institutions, each comprising three levels, through which they work to promote religious pluralism. Their vertical and horizontal operations contribute not only to the overall strengthening of pluralism but also to its specific development within the socio-cultural framework.

The three macro-level directions include: First, scientific study of religion from the standpoint of theology, and through the approaches of other fields such as

history, philosophy, sociology, psychology, pedagogy, and anthropology, affirms the significance and value of religion and its communities. Second, education (or training) in and about religion contributes to the formation of collective consciousness and religious identities. Third, the socialisation of academic institutions, knowledge, and activities occurs through maintaining connections with religious and spiritual communities, thereby strengthening the fabric of civil society.

At the meso-level, scientific research is carried out through qualitative and quantitative studies. Education (or training) is made possible through the application of teaching methods, pedagogical approaches, activities, and the implementation of educational models. Socialisation at the meso-level is manifested through a series of inter-institutional interactions between academic institutions and religious communities, including joint initiatives (events, exhibitions, concerts, book launches, etc.), shared fora (conferences, workshops, etc.), collaborative projects, and the offering of training courses as well as bachelor's and master's programmes.

At the micro-level, the first direction becomes visible through the conduct, testing and popularisation of scientific research on religion, the second one is evident in the formation of knowledge, skills, competences and attitudes of students towards religious processes and phenomena. The third direction is based on interpersonal communication (meetings, joint memberships in NGOs) and the involvement of religious figures as experts (e.g. reviewers, guest speakers, lecturers, trainers, editorial board members, and authors / co-authors).

The ULSIT experience

An illustration of the theoretical framework outlined above can be found in an example from a Bulgarian university: the University of Library Studies and Information Technologies in Sofia (ULSIT), where in 2004 a non-confessional teaching model was established, tested, and implemented. Over the last 20 years, several bachelor's degrees and master's programmes have been introduced in it *(Cultural Heritage, Cultural Tourism, Archives and Documentary, National Security and Cultural Heritage, Protection of Cultural Heritage, Development of Community Centres, Cultural Institutions,* etc.*)*, which required designing of educational courses providing knowledge about religion, world religions, religious communities in Bulgaria, Orthodox cultural heritage, pilgrimage tourism, etc.

The teaching model was developed based on best practices from the USA and Western Europe. It was consulted by leading specialists from the universities at Augsburg, Münster, Vienna, Bologna and Graz, and discussed within the European Forum for Teachers of Religious Education.

At the macro-level, the non-confessional teaching model is based on the own scientific research conducted by the religion lecturers at ULSIT in the field of religious studies, religious anthropology, history and sociology of religion, and teaching religion. Their work covered the history of traditional religious and spiritual communities in Bulgaria, including new religious movements, as well as the preservation of religious cultural heritage and values.

At the meso-level, the teaching model includes: a group of academic disciplines

at bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees; development and publication of thematic textbooks and teaching aids (4 textbooks, 1 dictionary, 3 teaching methodology books, 2 educational digital platforms); use of interactive teaching methods with special emphasis on fieldwork in Bulgaria and abroad, where students visit temples, places of worship, sacred sites, cemeteries, and archives, libraries, museums, festivals, rituals, concerts, etc., carry out observations, conduct interviews and surveys with clergy and pilgrims, with an emphasis on inviting guest speakers, combining educational and project activities, integrating ICT and web resources into education, organising student fora, and implementing student publications; as well as fostering extensive interaction with religious and spiritual communities, who are invited as guest speakers, presenters, hosts, trainers, mentors, etc.

At the micro-level, the teaching model of the ULSIT includes student-student, student-teacher and student-religious community relations, which help recognise religious differences and foster respect for them.

Based on the praxeological and documentary approach, the ULSIT teaching model aims to implement multiple and wide-ranging communication acts that lead to the accumulation of personal experience by students, to complement their knowledge, to the formation of skills for observation, comparison, critical thinking and communication, to create competences and attitudes, and to change existing negative religious stereotypes and long social distances.

The described model was adapted for the secondary education and was used in the additional professional qualification of teachers in Islam and Non-confessional education conducted by the ULSIT between 2018 and 2021.

An essential element of ULSIT's efforts to implement and develop interreligious dialogue, which simultaneously contributes to the sustainability of the teaching model, is the *Harmony in Diversity* Scientific Conference. It is held annually on 10 December – International Human Rights Day – and places religious rights and freedoms within the broader framework of human and civil rights. It examines these rights in their diverse social, cultural, historical, and spatial contexts.

Founded in 2014 and based on the initiative of the Directorate of Religious Affairs with the Council of Ministers, the Commission for Protection against Discrimination, and the National Council of Religious Communities, the Conference has received ongoing support over the years from ULSIT and the Bulgarian Forum for Interreligious Dialogue and Partnership, and works closely with "Religions for Peace – Europe." Every year, scholars, experts, and religious leaders from the country and abroad participate in it with papers and engage in discussions on religious freedoms, religious pluralism, and inter-religious dialogue. They explore these topics in connection with human dignity and citizenship, talk about their support or suppression by the authorities, their promotion through ideologies, their escalation into clashes and wars, their ability to build transcultural, multi-religious, inter-ethnic and cross-social dialogues or their often-practiced tabooing, banning, limiting, ghettoising or quarantining. The conference is a space for dialogue – for the exchange of ideas and for the clash of opinions, for the birth of new initiatives

and projects, for connecting with like-minded people, and for presenting religious diversity. The ongoing series with an international editorial board, sustainable themes and a permanent circle of authors, as well as exhibitions, performances and documentaries are promoting this dialogue.

Conclusion

The "togetherness" of the religious communities in Bulgaria, both now and in the future, depends on whether and how the young generations – Generation Z and Alpha – will learn about the traditions of long-lasting peaceful religious coexistence, how they will accept them as role models and transfer them as a cultural tradition.

The religion education of the ULSIT students usually typically begins with Max Müller's thought: *"He who knows one [religion], knows none."* It highlights the importance of a contextual understanding of religion – approaching it with respect, attention, and reverence, while also embracing reflection, criticism, and interpretation.

Based on our own experience, we are convinced that Bulgarian secular academic institutions can play a key role in recognising religious diversity, preserving the cultural heritage and values of religious communities, and fostering critical reflection on religious syncretism and continuity. These institutions can succeed in this mission not only by presenting and analysing religious coexistence and good neighbourliness but also by engaging students with living representatives of these communities.

Such interactions could "immunise" students against the potential future temptation to hate or ridicule religious differences. On the contrary, students are more likely to remember the individuals they have met in churchyards, places of worship, or at religious festivals; the priests, pastors, rabbis, and monks with whom they have conversed; the believers they have interviewed; and the people they have visited, sharing meals, dancing, singing, etc.

The work of secular academic institutions in the religious "social field" can also be successful when university people – professors and students, become part of communities of co-thinkers in the field of religious dialogue. In this context, Müller's thought could be paraphrased as follows: *"He who knows more than one religion knows truly himself, his rights and his human limits."*

The Rescue of Jews in World War II: a Case Study

Georgi Milkov, Special Correspondent, "24 Hours" Newspaper

All of us remember that when, just over a decade ago, an extremely dramatic terrorist act occurred at the Sarafovo Airport close to the city of Burgas, the media, not only in Bulgaria, but internationally, put forward a narrative. The name of Bulgaria then became associated with the label *soft target*. We were called a *soft target*, or rather it sounds more like *easy target* in Bulgarian: someone who could easily be hit and affected. That is why I am glad that today, through this event and this truly incredible gathering, our common denominator will highlight something different at the forefront – *soft power*, meaning Bulgaria's attractive and alluring *soft power*. This is actually what contrasts with the current dramatic clash. I have chosen to share a personal story – one that is not entirely private, yet is of great significance. It relates to an issue that we enjoy talking about, and I think we even take pride in and often bring to the forefront – the rescue of the Bulgarian Jews.

Why did I say I had chosen a personal case? Because this is not the story of the rescue of the Bulgarian Jews, but rather a more cosmopolitan story, though it may appear as a personal case. By the first half of last century, perhaps one of the most active Zionist organisations involved in sending Jews to Palestine was the *Betar* Movement.[1] It had missions in various European countries, but it was especially active in Czechoslovakia. Between 1937 and 1940, the *Betar* Movement in Czechoslovakia organised 13 missions to transport Jews to Palestine.

The specific case I am referring to is from 1939, when the Movement decided to transport about 500 German, Czech, and Slovak Jews on a single ship. The ship was quite old. It had been built in 1907 in Glasgow and had been named *Sukran*. Meanwhile, it had been bought by Italians and had served their interests for a long time under the name *Stefan*, but when the Movement purchased it specifically for this mission, the old owners insisted that the name be changed. One of the buyers was a Bulgarian Jew, Ruben Solomon Franco, who emerged as a key figure in this mission. He became the ship's godfather, but stopped short of naming it *Ruben, Solomon*, or *Franco*. Instead, he chose *Pencho*, which was actually his nickname in the Jewish quarter of Sofia.

The *Pencho* ship was supposed to depart from Bratislava in 1940 with 407 Czech, Slovak, and German Jews on board. It was to travel once along the Danube and stop at the Romanian port of Sulina on the Black Sea, where the passengers would transfer to another ship that would take them to the *Promised Land*. On the ship, of course, some modifications were made – a wooden extension was added to accommodate more than 500 people. Naturally, it looked very different from the way it had looked when it had been originally built. So, even some of the people boarding it, who certainly had very little choice, were somewhat sarcastic about it, one of them even calling it "a parody of a submarine."

1 A revisionist Zionist youth movement founded in 1923 (also spelled *Beitar*).

Tragically, this description would later prove prophetic. Nonetheless, the passengers departed from Bratislava in May 1940. The ship made stops along the way in Mohacs, Hungary, then in Serbia, and loaded more Jews on board, bringing the total number to over 500. The ship departed under the Bulgarian flag. Now, imagine this entire situation, because it truly was a cosmopolitan ship. Built in Glasgow, owned by Italians, traveling under the Bulgarian flag, with Jews from different countries on board, passing through various territories. In the end, all these people were traveling with a joint Paraguayan visa and were supposed to be taken to Palestine, which, however, was controlled by British troops. It was a truly cosmopolitan scene, for better or for worse. The Bulgarian flag was issued in January 1940 by the Bulgarian legation in Bucharest, with a five-month permit.

The ship reached the Iron Gates in Serbia, where a technical issue prevented it from passing, and in practice, it was stuck for two months, which ate up two months of the time designated by the permit. When the ship finally continued and reached Bulgarian territorial waters near Vidin, the military authorities removed the Bulgarian flag because the permit had expired. Because of an unfortunate turn of events, the ship was even not allowed to dock. So, these heroes of ours, the passengers I mentioned earlier, continued their journey along the Danube without a flag and reached Ruse, where the ship had completely exhausted its resources, nearly run out of fuel, and the situation regarding food, supplies, and water on board was also critical.

And here came a moment when a real disaster struck. These over 500 people were suffering on board that "parody of a submarine" – to use the sarcastic description. When they arrived in Ruse, they raised the Red Cross flag and wrote the word "hunger" on white banners in different languages, so it could be seen from both shores of the river. One of these refugees died on board. We can say that the births and deaths on board, as much as it may seem metaphorical or exaggerated, were heard from both shores, because on the still water they are easy to hear. As I was born and raised in the city of Vidin, and grew up on the Danube, I can assure you that sometimes you can hear what people are saying on the other shore.

So, the groans and wails of these people, their agony and suffering on board this stranded ship, could be heard clearly from both sides of the river. Three of the young people, and there were many young people among those over 500 Jews, including some of the leaders of the youth Zionist organisations in Czechoslovakia, jumped into the water and swam to the Bulgarian shore, where they actually found the right person. They met Metropolitan Michael of Dorostol and Cherven, who at that time was also the Honorary Chairman of the local Red Cross. He happened to be the figure they needed in this situation, and indeed, the one who was ready to help. With his authority and spiritual strength, this bishop managed to organise various volunteer organisations, especially the Red Cross in Ruse, but also kind-hearted ordinary citizens, who started gathering supplies. They baked bread, made Easter cakes, collected fruits, vegetables – in one word, did everything they could.

There was a problem, of course, because of the German military presence at

the port, and the Germans would not allow these supplies to reach the ship. But there came a courageous Bulgarian woman, who quickly got on a boat and spoke up: "I will go to the ship, and you do whatever you want." The name of this brave woman was Tonka Prosenichkova – a well-known figure, granddaughter of Baba Tonka,[2] with a tragic fate after 1944. She set off with the boat, delivered part of the supplies to the ship, and then more people began to join this operation. The boatmen from Ruse brought whatever had been gathered by various organisations, such as *Dobrodetel* (the "Virtue Society") – one of the youth organisations involved in this mission, which also collected aid. The factory owner and industrialist Dimitar Burov, upon learning about these people in distress, ordered the purchase of all the supplied food and covered the costs. People loaded carts with food, and then the boatmen from Ruse brought it to the ship. In fact, the community of Ruse, under the leadership of Metropolitan Michael of Dorostol and Cherven, saved the passengers on board the ship from starvation.

As you can see, the fate of the *Pencho* ship is very interesting, and this is not the end of the suffering of its passengers, because the ship finally managed to continue its journey and reached Sulina. However, the sea vessel that was supposed to take them further had already departed. Although *Pencho* was not suitable for sailing in sea waters, this "parody of a submarine" set off into the waters of the Black Sea, successfully passing through the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles. But upon entering the Mediterranean Sea, it eventually crashed onto a Greek island, where, fortunately, everyone survived. The passengers stayed on the island for about ten days while receiving help from an Italian boat, which took them to a refugee camp in Italy – Sardinia, if I am not mistaken – where they were eventually liberated by American or British forces after the end of the war.

In all, this journey lasted five years. In those five years, these poor souls finally reached the *Promised Land*, which was both literally and figuratively promised to them. Today, in the city of Natanya, there is a monument and a model of the infamous *Pencho*. Its passengers, who survived so many hardships, never forgot the rescue from starvation that they owed to the people of Ruse. And, of course, that case became one of the examples of philanthropy, and that's something I had to mention when I described the cosmopolitan nature of the ship. But actually, the most important aspect was that the refugees met humanity.

Metropolitan Michael of Dorostol and Cherven would become the Dean of the Holy Synod in 1948-1949 – a very difficult period. The 11 bishops in the Holy Synod were those who had spoken and would continue to speak more thoroughly about the role of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, because this is something that no one can deny. In fact, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church was the only institution that maintained a consistent policy throughout these years. It was not at all incidental, and not just a matter of helping once or twice. At the most difficult moments in

2 Tonka Obretenova (c. 1812-1893), widely known as Baba Tonka, gave birth to seven children (five sons and two daughters), all of whom participated in the Bulgarian revolutionary movement against the Ottoman Empire. She herself lent major support to the Ruse Revolutionary Committee, established by her son Nikola Obretenov, and sheltered a number of revolutionary leaders.

1940, 1941, 1942, and 1943, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and the Holy Synod with these 11 bishops had a very clear position of helping the Jews.

The role of the Church has been clarified, well documented, and revealed in several books. Let me mention the book *Valor and Punishment* by Prof. Vili Lilkov and Hristo Hristov, and also the works of Prof. Momchil Methodiev, Albena Taneva and Vanya Gezenko, who have put in a great deal of effort in researching the protocols of the Holy Synod. This whole picture radiates dignity and humanity. What lies at the heart of these powerful words, and why we are gathered here today, is the *soft power*. This is something that can truly make us proud, but it should also make us responsible before the memory of our ancestors, and remind us that those heroic acts have to be cherished. They cannot just remain in the documents and archives, or be confined to some beautiful messages. They must be carried with us, with each and every one of us, so that they endure for the future generations.

An Optimistic Theory on Bulgarian *Scepsis*

Boyko Vassilev, Producer and Presenter of "Panorama",
Bulgarian National Television

The topic that we are discussing today is exceptionally interesting and of great importance. In my view, the soul of a foreign policy is understanding our inner world – who we are and why we are the way we are. I will attempt to present an *apologia* with an unexpected ending and pose an inconvenient question at the end, as befits my profession as journalist.

The *apologia* centres on Bulgarian moderation. Everyone has had a thinker from whom they have learned. When I was in a tender age, I learned from the late Toncho Zhechev[1], and I am truly grateful that life brought me to him. We had several conversations, several interviews, before he passed away. At the time, he was deeply interested in the war of 1999, when the bombing was under way, and former Yugoslavia was tearing apart with the events around Kosovo. It was precisely Toncho Zhechev, who introduced the Bulgarian public to an exceptionally interesting work that concerns us as Bulgarians, namely *"Byzantinism & Slavism"* by Konstantin Leontiev[2]. As is widely known, Leontiev worked in your (diplomatic) field as well; besides being a great philosopher, he was also a diplomat, serving at *the Sublime Porte* (the Ottoman Empire), and his task was to observe the struggles of the Bulgarian church, particularly the emergence of the Bulgarian nation and the Bulgarian Exarchate. Famously, he was opposed to these developments. In *"Byzantinism & Slavism"*, anyone can refer to his arguments.

Leontiev believes that Bulgarians are a people incapable of dreaming big dreams or aspiring to great things. He thinks that Bulgarians are unable to grasp a grand idea, such as the *Megali* Idea – η Μεγάλη Ιδέα, the idea of a unified church – a unified empire, the idea of resurrecting what everyone, including him, wrongly calls Byzantium. As Professor Evstatiev just mentioned -- and this is also a topic of mine – Byzantium is widely known as a term coined by Hieronymus Wolf in the 16th century.[3] Thus, a great German historian, with such a great misunderstanding, introduced a twist into the entire historical narrative. However, let me return to Leontiev. He literally writes the following about the Bulgarians: "One of the most backward of all the other Slavic peoples, that are the most dangerous to us; a people that has nothing constructive but only harbours one great denial."

By the way, the topic of denial is also one of my favourites. In 1934, at least

1 Toncho Zhechev (1929-2000) was a Bulgarian writer, humanist, and literary critic, who left a lasting impact on the Bulgarian national culture with his work *The Bulgarian Easter or the Bulgarian Passion.* He was an interpreter of Bulgarian spiritual heritage and the essence of Bulgarian identity.

2 Konstantin Nikolayevich Leontiev (1831-1891) was a conservative Russian philosopher, who supported stronger cultural connections between Russia and the East, opposing what he saw as the harmful effects of the West's egalitarian, utilitarian, and revolutionary ideologies.

3 Hieronymus Wolf (1516-1580) was a German historian and humanist of the 16th century, best known for establishing a system of Roman historiography that later became the standard approach in medieval Byzantine historical studies.

three authors published works on Bulgarian denial. I'll summarise briefly here since for me, especially interesting is the essay by Petar Mutafchiev[4], titled *"The Spirit of Denial in Bulgarian History, on St. Ivan Rilski,[5] and Pop Bogomil"*[6] – a famous essay. But to return once again to Leontiev – he views Bulgarians as a rational people, which, for him, is a negative trait. They look to the West – even worse, they are liberals – even much worse for him, they are not just rational, but excessively so. He suspects something quite intriguing: he argues that they lack true faith and genuine religiosity in the proper sense of the word.

Now, it is easy to take all the negatives of Leontiev's views and turn them into positives. This is where my part of the apologia comes in, and this apologia is further reinforced by Toncho Zhechev, who explains how great the Bulgarian spirit of moderation, rationality, and scepsis actually is. I can testify, having observed it in the Balkans, that it is distinctly different from those to the west of us. It is even different from the so-called *Dinaric type,*[7] because we do not resemble the Serbs, Croats, or Bosnians, despite having many similarities. Fundamentally, in our ability to avoid extremes, we are quite different from them, which has both positive and negative aspects. Perhaps, we will never tear each other apart to the extent they did, but we may never reach their artistic heights either. There are probably others more qualified to address this, but my *apologia* – and this is a powerful tool in shaping Bulgaria's image abroad – highlights this moderation, *scepsis*, and restraint. Toncho Zhechev and his circle of thinkers used the term "basin mentality," meaning that Bulgaria is neither a mountain nor a lowland, but a basin. And a basin always involves compromise. And in this compromise, Bulgarian *scepsis* should be regarded as an exceptionally positive trait.

Taking into account the myth of Odysseus, Toncho Zhechev talks about how our journey is also a return, meaning it always completes a full circle. Zhechev was exceptionally honest, conservative in a decent sense, and a believer in these core values. Let me use the word "believer" here, as I don't like the word "religious" when referring to truly devout people. In my opinion, he was on the right path. Sometimes, I joke that the image of the Serb in the Bulgarian collective consciousness seemingly reflects the darker subconscience of our fellow Bulgarian, who always wants to be something but is afraid to take the step toward it. He wants to be extreme, he wants to curse, he wants to engage in conflicts, and he wants to rebel. But somehow, this

4 Professor Petar Mutafchiev (1883-1943), a Bulgarian historian and researcher.

5 Saint John of Rila, also known as Ivan of Rila (876-946) was the first Bulgarian hermit. He was venerated as a saint during his lifetime. His followers established numerous churches in his honour, including the renowned Rila Monastery. Today, he is celebrated as the patron saint of Bulgaria and one of the most significant saints in the Bulgarian Orthodox Church.

6 Bogomil was a Bulgarian priest from the 10th century, associated with the founding of the Bogomil movement. The Bogomils were dualists or Gnostics, believing in a distinction between the world within the body and the world outside of it. They rejected the use of the Christian cross and did not build churches, as they held their own bodies in reverence, viewing them as temples.

7 The Dinaric Alps, also known as the Dinarides, are a mountain range extending from Italy in the northwest, through Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, and Kosovo, reaching as far as Albania in the southeast. In 19th – century anthropology, there is talk of a "Dinaric" type and even a "character" that often includes qualities such as impulsiveness, extremes, and even violence. Contemporary science does not share such theories.

scepsis, moderation, and rationality always pull him back, thank goodness! The question is: how can we fall in love with our own moderation without letting it turn to compromise? How do we learn to love it, not just sell it for some foreign policy goal, but make it a desired state-of-mind for ourselves?

Because, look at what another thinker from the same period writes, the one I began with. Ilija Garašanin[8] writes the famous *Načertanije*, which is the national doctrine of the Serbs. By the way, this is quite an interesting text, and there is a theory that it was actually written by Poles, with Garašanin merely signing it, as it clearly reflects a geopolitical distrust of Russia. However, the things Garašanin writes about Bulgaria are very interesting. I'll share the most important point, the one that stands out to me, and I quote literally: "The Bulgarians are the largest Slavic tribe remaining in Turkey, who have the least faith in their own strength." This is what Garašanin says in the *Načertanije*. There are also two other observations he makes about Bulgarians, which are not particularly flattering, but I will omit them.

My question, as uncomfortable as it may be, is how we can fall in love with what the rest of the world views as compromise, mediocrity, or narrow-mindedness – call it whatever you like. No one appreciates moderation – neither in love, nor in relationships, nor in the media. We, in the media, do not like moderation, and this is our fault. However, for me, this moderation, *scepsis*, and rationality are great qualities of the Bulgarian people, of Bulgarians in general, and – in a broader sense – everything that Bulgarians do. We will eventually come to appreciate this moderation and understand what it has given us and how far it has brought us.

Now comes the hard part: We can only fall in love with this moderation if we answer the inconvenient question hinted at by Leontiev. I'll phrase it like this: Could it be that our moderation and religious tolerance, which we've discussed so far, are entirely the product of our distrust or lack of faith, or even a complete absence of faith? Is it possible that our lack of strong belief is the reason for our tolerance, so unexpected in this region? To take it a step further, consider the following: For us and our claimed superstition, Joseph Bradati,[9] writing in the 17th century, observed, "I travelled through many lands, but nowhere did I find as many magicians, fairies, and wandering spirits as in our Bulgarian land."

If he were alive today, witnessing how people visit fortune-tellers and imams[10], and engage in various forms of superstition, how faith is replaced by superstition, which ultimately means unbelief, he would have understood that there is always a major downside to any positive aspect. Just as our *scepsis* has brought us much, so

8 Ilija Garašanin (1812-1874) was a Serbian politician who served twice as Prime Minister of Serbia – in 1852-1853 and again in 1861-1867. He is considered the first Serbian pro-Yugoslavia statesman, advocating for a united Yugoslav state that would remain independent from both Russia and Austria. Garašanin was one of the most influential Serbian politicians of the 19th century.

9 Joseph Bradati (circa 1714 – circa 1789) was a Bulgarian intellectual, damaskiner, and founder of a literary movement centred at the Rila Monastery. He gathered and translated manuscripts, as well as composed his own works, contributing to the development of 18th-century Bulgarian literature. His writings covered both religious and secular topics, emphasising the importance of Christian moral purity.

10 Contrary to the strict monotheistic teachings of Islam, some imams in Bulgaria, though relatively rare, attempt to predict the future and engage in superstitious practices.

too has our deficit of faith – this real inability to leap into the unknown, to embrace faith without consideration, without making a rational judgment – taken a great deal from us. And that's why we must ask ourselves the uncomfortable question, at least in this context, and reflect on whether this superstition, this lack of faith, might be the reason for the Bulgarian pessimism, as well as for the spirit of negation I mentioned earlier, which was discussed by Leontiev, Petar Mutafchiev, Nayden Sheitanov, Yanko Yanev, and several other thinkers from the 1930s in different ways and for different reasons. Otherwise, our discussion will remain incomplete.

Those here who work with matters of faith and with believers and people of faith have certainly encountered a lot of distrust, superstition, and the substitution of genuine rituals with pseudo-rituals. They know how deeply these phenomena are rooted in Bulgaria. That's why I simply pose this question – I'm not sure if there's a remedy for it, but I put it in this way so that it can be heard and recorded here, and so that those who have already pondered this question know they are not alone in asking it. Thank you.

Epilogue

Dimitar Mihaylov, Ph.D., Ambassador-at-large, Ministry of Foreign Affairs

The ideas of Boyko Vassilev and the other seminar participants resonated in our minds like an echo, rich with many tones and nuances. How can we express, in a straightforward way, free from clichés, propaganda or ideological bias, the concept of Bulgarian tolerance, *convivencia*, and *komshuluk*? How can we convey the wisdom of our predecessors, from all faiths and ethnicities, regarding the human-centred values of our deep-rooted humanism? How can we present a broader perspective in which everyone – regardless of nationality or religion – is a neighbour, a friend, and when necessary, a brother, because while the kin may live a long way of, the neighbour is always just a stone's throw away?

We then wondered whether these ideas could be valuable to our partners and friends in European countries facing challenges in achieving social harmony with newly arrived refugee and immigrant communities. Is the Bulgarian experience unique, or does it have applicability – if not universally, at least in certain aspects? Could Bulgaria's experience contribute to social harmony in the European context, and if so, how?

These questions served as the foundation for organising the seminar and compiling its main ideas into this collection of essays. Additionally, several other ideas emerged during the seminar and its subsequent discussions. Here are a few of them:

It is clear that during the period of Ottoman rule, often symbolically referred to in Bulgaria as the "Ottoman yoke" (14th – 19th century), a multiethnic and multireligious society took shape. The Ottoman Empire governed through the millet system, which granted religious communities a degree of self-rule and allowed them to preserve their authentic traditions.

Bulgarian culture is deeply rooted in enduring values such as hospitality, respect for others, and mutual support. At the local level, people of diverse religious backgrounds often share customs, holidays, and everyday joys. These occasions, closely linked to nature, agriculture, and family, foster a sense of unity and common values among different religious communities.

During the National Revival period and the struggle for liberation from Ottoman rule, various ethnic and religious communities in Bulgaria often united in their efforts. A notable example of this solidarity is the participation of Bulgarian Muslims, Christians, and Jews in revolutionary movements. The shared vision was to create a society of equals where all citizens would enjoy equal rights and bear equal responsibilities. These struggles were inspired by the movement for emancipation and freedom in Europe in 1848, also known as the "Spring of the People."

Despite the numerous tragic and painful events experienced by Bulgarians and other communities living in Bulgarian lands throughout the centuries, none

have left a lasting psychological trauma or scar that would foster feelings of anger, hatred, vengeance, or irredentism. As Professor Jordan Peev, the leading expert in Bulgarian Arabic and Islamic studies, observes: “In our case, dramatic events may flare up quickly, but they also fade away quickly.”

Furthermore, during its first visit to South-Eastern Europe, the Carnegie Commission gathered documents and interviewed witnesses for the *Carnegie Report on the Causes and Conduct of the Balkan Wars 1912-1913.* The Commission found that some Bulgarian intellectuals displayed a sense of self-criticism, which underscored the idea that all Balkan nations involved in the wars, including the Bulgarians, bore responsibility for the tragic outcome. The reason is that the defeats in the wars of 1912-1913 had predisposed the Bulgarian intellectuals to critical thinking.

One could argue that, in modern history, Bulgaria’s *hubris* manifested relatively early compared to other Balkan nations – and so, too, did its *nemesis*. Historically, Bulgaria remained largely free from religious radicalism or significant conflicts rooted in religion. Even during turbulent periods, such as the so-called *revival process* in the 20th century, society did not develop lasting animosity. Contemporary events have taught the Bulgarians that chauvinism, extremism, and ideological fanaticism are dead ends, inevitably leading to national tragedies.

The works of the renowned Bulgarian writer Yordan Radichkov are deeply infused with elements that reflect the mystical aspects of the Bulgarian psyche. His writings feature rich symbolism, mythological motifs, and profound questions about the relationship between humanity and nature. Radichkov creates a world where reality and mythology seamlessly intertwine, with characters existing at the intersection of both realms. In this world, mythological figures and events are not confined to the distant past; they remain alive in the present. This applies to anyone who resides on Bulgarian soil, regardless of ethnicity or religion.

We will conclude with the words of Vasil Levski, Bulgaria’s national hero and a staunch advocate for equality among people, regardless of faith or ethnicity. Toward the end of the Ottoman period, Levski famously said: “Deeds, not words, are now needed! Every person should be equal to another, regardless of faith or ethnicity, and live as a brother to his neighbours.”

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