

**Kamelia KONSTANTINOVA**

# *Reconciling Denominations:*

## *Ecumenical Developments in Bulgaria*

*We live in a time that is full of contradictory thinking. Our thoughts are like autumn colours. Every minute of our days is red or yellow or orange. The differences in our ways of thinking are often the reason for problems or even conflicts. But perhaps one of our gravest mistakes is that we have forgotten love. Every one of us wants to change the world but if we want to do that, we must have love in our hearts. God is Creator. We as children of God must create, too. We must create love.*

*If we want to create peace, we need to be able to give love. It is difficult to keep our identity in this pluralistic world, when every minute of our days is pierced by globalisation. It is difficult to love, when so often we do not feel loved but even then we can draw inspiration from the greatest Love embodied in Jesus Christ. It is very important to carry Christian love in our hearts and then to try to change the world. And what is love?*

### **APOSTOLIC FATHERS**

My essay is an attempt to show the importance of love for our days. And having many examples we should be able to know how to keep our Christian identity. The Apostolic Fathers are among the best examples. Their words are lingering echoes of those who spoke “as the Spirit gave them utterance.” They are monuments of the power of the Gospel. They were made out of such material as Saint Paul describes when he says, “such were some of you” (1 Corinthians 6, 11).

But without Christ, they might have been worshippers of personified lust and hate, and of every crime. They would have lived for “bread and circus shows.” Yet to the contemporaries of a Juvenal they taught the Decalogue and the Sermon on the Mount. Among enormous bestiality of humankind they reared the secret home; they created the Christian family; they gave new and holy meanings to the names of wives and mothers; they imparted hitherto unknown ideas of human dignity; they infused an atmosphere of benevolence and love; they bestowed the elements of liberty; they sanctified human society by proclaiming the universal sisterhood and brotherhood of redeemed humanity.

As we read the Apostolic Fathers, we comprehend in short what Saint Paul meant when he said prophetically what people were slow to believe, “the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom; and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength...but God has chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, has God chosen, and things which are not, to bring to naught things that are,” (1 Corinthians 1, 25–28).

### **THE CHURCH IN BULGARIA**

The churches and people of Bulgaria are emerging from a complex and difficult period of history. Christianity was introduced to Bulgaria in 864 by Khan (Tsar) BORIS I, with an archbishop appointed from Constantinople. In Macedonia, the city of Ohrid became an active mission centre. Saint CLEMENT of Ohrid, a disciple of missionary

saints CYRIL and METHODIUS, trained a large number of Slavs for the ministry thus preparing the ground for a national church.

The Bulgarian State became very powerful in the X<sup>th</sup> century. In 927 Constantinople recognised the king as Emperor of the Bulgarians and the Archbishop of Preslav as Patriarch of the Bulgarian Church. But the Byzantine Empire gained strength and invaded the Bulgarian Empire in 971, at which time the Patriarch left Preslav and took up residence at Ohrid, Macedonia. The Byzantine Empire conquered Macedonia in 1018, and reduced the patriarchate to the rank of autocephalous archbishopric.

Bulgaria regained its independence in 1186, with the establishment of the second empire based at Turnovo. After lengthy negotiations, the Bulgarian Church recognised the supremacy of the Pope in 1204. But this agreement ended in 1235, when the Bulgarian Emperor made an alliance with the Greeks against the Latin Empire in Constantinople, and the Byzantine patriarch recognised a second Bulgarian Orthodox patriarchate in return.

### **SCHISMS WITHIN THE ORTHODOX CHURCH**

With the beginning of Turkish domination in 1395, the Bulgarian Church lost its autocephalous character and was integrated into the Patriarchate of Constantinople. In 1870 the Ottoman government allowed the reestablishment of a national Bulgarian Church as an autonomous exarchate. Constantinople reacted strongly and declared the Bulgarian Church schismatic in 1872. This rift continued long after Bulgaria became a principality in 1878 and an independent kingdom in 1908.

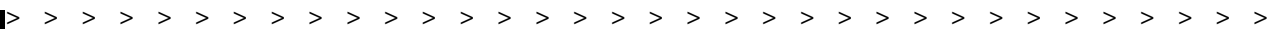
It was only in 1945 that the Ecumenical Patriarchate recognised the Bulgarian Church as autocephalous and ended the schism. The Metropolitan of Sofia assumed the title Patriarch in 1953 and he was recognised as such by Constantinople in 1961. During the period of Communist rule, which began in 1944, the government followed a religious policy similar to that of Soviet Union, and the church was compelled to play a largely passive role in society.

The Bulgarian Orthodox Church has not escaped the turmoil that followed the collapse of the Communist system. In 1991 the new government created a Board of Religious Affairs which began to initiate reforms in the country's religious institutions. In March 1992 it ruled that the 1971 election of Patriarch MAXIM had been illegal because the Communist government had appointed him.

In 1992 a schism was provoked in the church by the political authorities in Bulgaria, resulting in the formation of a “provisional” Synod, and later the consecration of a second Patriarch. No other Orthodox church has recognised the legitimacy of this group. Following the schism, the church has experienced complex relations with the authorities. The legal status of the respective synods of the BOC remains ambiguous.

### **CHRISTIAN DENOMINATIONS**

During the whole of Bulgarian history, there emerged problems in the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. Now 85% of



the population is Orthodox Christian, 15% Muslim, 0.8% Jewish, 0.7% Roman Catholic, and 0.5% other. The Orthodox Church in Bulgaria has many problems after the Communist period. Many people do not believe. They are everywhere and distort Christian thinking. For many people who believe it is difficult to understand other Christians, who are not Orthodox, because after Communism there was not too much information about them.

In Bulgaria there are also other denominations. One can find the *Armenian Apostolic Church*, which was introduced to Bulgaria in 1826. Then there is the *Roman Catholic Church*. By the middle of the XVII<sup>th</sup> century, Roman Catholic mission developed considerably in Bulgaria. In the XIX<sup>th</sup> century, some Bulgarian Orthodox considered that union with Rome would be a solution.

Bulgarian Roman Catholics were re-organised in 1926, but under Communist rule, the church was suppressed. Now there are 15,000 Eastern Rite Catholics and 70,000 Latin Rite Catholics. Finally, there are the *Protestant churches* in Bulgaria. The Protestant mission had its beginning in the 1860s. Today there are six main Protestant churches registered in Bulgaria.

**ECUMENICAL SITUATION**

The church and ecumenical situation in Bulgaria since the changes in 1990 is determined by two problems: the schism within the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and the tensions between the minority Evangelical-Protestant Church and the majority Orthodox Church. The schism in the Orthodox Church not only continues but paralyses the Church to the point that She is unable to function normally and even less to respond to the challenges coming from society. There is little hope that a solution would be found in the near future.

Yet if the Orthodox Church was able to overcome the conflict it would not only heal its own division but also open the way for dealing with many other urgent issues, especially inter-church relations and church-state relations. As it is now, it seems that everything is blocked because of the schism.

The relationships between the Evangelical churches and the Orthodox Church continue to be strained, but there are many positive developments as well. Several leaders of the Evangelical churches shared their deep desire for a fraternal and open relationship with the Orthodox Church and their sadness because of the schism. They spoke about their respect for the Orthodox Church. One of them said, “she is also our Mother Church.” There is a National Council of Churches. Besides the above mentioned Orthodox lay movements and the Evangelical Churches the Roman Catholic Church and the Armenian Church are also members of this council.

The developments in Bulgaria point to some interesting considerations in a situation in which institutional church

instruments, whether from within or from outside, have been ineffective. It seems that renewal could come from the lay movements. Their role will be crucial. It is also remarkable that they and the Evangelical churches are working together well.

**MUSLIMS AND JEWS**

*Muslims* form the second largest religious group after Orthodox Christians. The largest part of the Muslim population in Bulgaria is made up of ethnic Turks, who began to settle in Bulgaria after the XIV<sup>th</sup> century and who totalled one million members before 1989. There are also Bulgarians who speak Bulgarian as their mother tongue but whose religion and customs are Islamic. Their number is approximately 250,000.

Secondly, large numbers of Spanish-speaking Sephardic *Jews* settled in the Balkans after being exiled from Spain in the XVI<sup>th</sup> century. Today there remain only around 3000 Jews in Bulgaria, with Sephardim being a larger group than the Ashkenazim. Nearly all of Bulgaria’s Jews, estimated at some 51,000, survived the war. Massive opposition by the King and leading Orthodox Church figures prevented mass deportation by the Axis powers. However the period 1946-56 saw an important exodus to Israel.

**INTERRELIGIOUS CO-OPERATION**

The relationships between Christians in Bulgaria are clear today. What about Muslims and Jews? Often even if there is no official interreligious dialogue the adherents of different religions still manage to live in peace, as they cherish love for each other. It is not possible to live in peace without love. Christians and Muslims comprise nearly half of the world’s population. The nature of the relationship between these two communities is of considerable significance for the welfare of the whole human family.

Significantly, peace is at the heart of both Islam and Christianity. Christians call Jesus the “Prince of Peace.” Their prayers for God’s peace are at the heart of their spirituality. In Islam “as-salaam” is one of the ninety-nine most beautiful names of God. When Muslims meet they greet each other with “as-salaam alaikum”, which means “peace be upon you.” In the face of the deadly threats that confront both humanity and the earth itself today, there is an important contribution which these two faith communities can make: they can work together for social justice, for safeguarding and promoting religious freedom, for resolving conflicts peacefully, for addressing the plight of refugees and displaced people.

Most Christians today live out lives in actual community with people who may be committed to faiths and ideologies other than their own. They live in families sometimes of mixed faiths and ideologies. They live as neighbours in the same town and village. They need to build their relationships expressing mutual human care and searching for mutual understanding. This sort of dialogue is very



practical, concerned with the problems of modern life: the social, political, ecological, and above all the ordinary and familiar.

**THE WAY OF DIALOGUE**

Dialogue has to be described, experienced and developed as a lifestyle. As human beings we learned to speak. We talk, chatter, give and receive information, and have discussions – all this is not yet dialogue. Now and then, it happens that a deeper encounter arises out of our talking and our relationships, and an opening up of each, in more than intellectual terms, to the concerns of the other.

This is experienced by families and friends, and by those who share the same faiths or ideologies, but we are particularly concerned with the dialogue that reaches across differences of faith, ideology and culture, even where the partners in dialogue do not agree on important central aspects of human life.

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Dialogue can be recognised as a welcoming way of obedience to the commandment of the Decalogue, “you shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.” Dialogue helps us not to disfigure the image of our neighbours of different faiths and ideologies. It has been the experience of many Christians that this dialogue is indeed possible on the basis of a mutual trust and a respectful the integrity of each participant’s identity.

Dialogue, therefore, is a fundamental part of Christian service within community. In dialogue Christians actively respond to the command to, “love God and your neighbour as yourself.” As an expression of love, engagement in dialogue testifies to the experienced in Christ. With God’s love in our hearts we shall keep our identity in the pluralistic world and shall have peaceful dialogue with other faiths.

**Suggested Reading**

- BEHR-SIGEL Elisabeth, *The Place of the Heart*. California, 1992.
- LEMOPOULOS George, *You Shall be My Witnesses*. Caterini, 1995.
- LOSSKY Vladimir, *In the Image and Likeness of God*. New York, 1979.
- ROBERSON Ronald, *The Eastern Christian Churches*. Roma, 1995.
- SUNG Bum Yun, *Ethics East and West*. Seoul, 1947.
- YANNARAS Christos, *The Freedom of Morality*. New York, 1984.

**Nienke PRUIKSMA**

*Reconciliation and History: Psalm 103*

*Archbishop Desmond TUTU of South Africa writes in his book “No Future without Forgiveness”: “...my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in theirs (those we do not share a background with, who may even oppress us - NP). We belong in a bundle of life. We say ‘a person is a person through other people’. It is not ‘I think therefore I am’. It says rather: ‘I am human because I belong’. I participate, I share.” The chapter from which this quote is copied, describes a third way to deal with the trauma of a divided past: the way of Truth and Reconciliation, the way that was chosen in South Africa to start coming to terms with the legacy of apartheid. I will use the example of South Africa during this article several times as a reference for how in our time we can try and work reconciliation. Reconciliation is needed there where relations have gone awry – be it between people or between people and God – and realities are shattered.*

**ABOUT PSALM 103**

This Psalm is among those Psalms that are labelled as “hymns or descriptive praises” (N. K. GOTTWALD), as it begins and ends with blessing God. The body of the psalm cites “general and longstanding aspects of God’s goodness and power”. The verses above are the so-called body of Psalm 103 – I have left out the traditional opening and ending as they are less specific. Feel free to grab your own Bible and read the whole of the Psalm though, it always pays off to read the whole text, instead of some isolated verses.

Verse 6 tells us how God will act on behalf of those who cannot act for themselves, as God did for Israel when they were slaves in Egypt (verse 7). In verses 8 to 10 the psalmist tells us of God’s ways, how God relates to people, to then show us in comparative terms in verses 9-13 how they apply to people who fear God. Verse 14 is a prelude

to 15 and 16, showing that God knows of the temporary character of people’s lives. This temporariness is then emphasised by the everlastingness of God’s love in verse 14 – again the love for those who fear God, keep the covenant and remember the commandments.

**ON THE TEXT OF PSALM 103**

The Psalm uses quite some concepts that can give us a clearer idea of what reconciliation is all about, I will pick up some of them below. In verse 6 we find the word “oppressed”. Oppression is one of the main situations where reconciliation is most clearly needed. Where one person is more equal than the other, relationships go lopsided, and people cannot live to their full potential anymore – there is first of all a need for liberation (see the reference in verse 7 to Moses, referring to the Exodus of the people of Israel from Egypt), but what comes after that? To go back to South Africa, this meant that after Nelson MANDELA and many others who fought the apartheid regime were freed and free elections, that brought a landslide victory for the ANC, had been held, still things were not right. One of the first acts of the new parliament and government under president Mandela was to write a new constitution, which had an annex for the foundation of a *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (TRC). Members from this Commission came from all different groups in society: black, white, coloured, Indian, women, men, Muslims, Christians, Jews, pagans, lawyers, nurses, clerical people, etc. Archbishop Desmond TUTU was appointed as president. This firmly based the Commission in a religious context (too much according to some). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission travelled the whole of the country, heard the testimonies of oppressed and oppressors (and sometimes the distinctions were not even all that black and white). People told and learned truths, people were heard, people received amnesty, and people received

