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HOW PAGAN ARE BULGARIANS? ON THE MODERN THINKING ABOUT BULGARIAN IDENTITY AND THE QUESTION OF *INTERPRETATIO CHRISTIANA*[*]

INTRODUCTION

The question posed in the title is provocative in two ways. First, it is formulated in such a manner that the notion that Bulgarians are "religiously indifferent" or "religious in their own way" – a popular notion in modern Bulgarian culture – seems to be a statement of fact. Secondly, it suggests that the quality of being pagan can be not only measured, presumably by Christians, but also adequately determined in the conditions of the (post)secular world. In response to this provocation, I would like to address the issue of the common interpretative structures that shape Bulgarian cultural memory. I perceive this supposed paganism among modern Bulgarians as a mental construct deeply related to the significance of what is (considered) Christian. However, it should be interpreted beyond the strictly theological or apologetic scopes.

My reference point will be the notion of Bulgarians as irreligious, non-believers, or heretics, which reflects the prejudices of "the founding fathers" of Bulgarian humanities, most of whom were literary scholars and ethnographers. Obviously, the meanings of terms such as "religious", "belief", or "Orthodoxy" are most relevant here, but what is more striking to me is the very persistence of this self-image, regardless of changing socio-political conditions or patterns of practising faith. Therefore, in this paper I will focus on the meaning of this view within the Bulgarian national narrative and its relationship to cryptotheological

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entanglements in modern humanities and social sciences. As a result, I will address the question of the religious sources of modern patterns of thought and, in doing so, offer a contribution to the history of ideas and to changing ways of classifying social phenomena as religious or non-religious.

While the question "How pagan are Bulgarians?" refers directly to the role of religion in modern society, it will be interpreted within the framework of the postsecular turn, which has been challenging secular(ist) approaches in academic research for the last two decades[1]. In this light, the notions of religiosity and secularity are recognised as a dialectical and contextual pair as well as a particular construct of modern thinking that needs to be uncovered and re-evaluated with reference to the local conditions of modernity. Therefore, raising the question of what is considered religious and secular in Bulgarian culture appears to help understand the persuasive potential of the notions of "Christian" and "pagan". I will focus on a particular discourse of Bulgarian intellectuals who represent the local field of the humanities, which has been particularly important for creating national imaginaries, as well as for focusing on particular meanings and semantic distinctions (cf. Джевиецка 2025). Literary criticism will be my point of reference, but I will not limit my argument only to texts concerning specific literary issues. As I will show, the matter of literature is closely related to local claims about historical development and national identity; therefore, many distinctions and standpoints will overlap and be mutually dependent.

The aim will be to address the issue of the "pagan" nature of Bulgarians in light of the notion of *interpretatio christiana*. In doing so, I will engage with the second important assumption of the postsecular turn, namely, that various modern or "secular" concepts and ideologies are either religiously motivated or have religious roots. According to Agata Bielik-Robson, these roots may be interpreted in terms of cryptotheology (for more, see Bielik-Robson 2008: 8), which represents mental constructs and habits that reflect specific hidden or unconscious – cryptotheological – assumptions about the religious, and as such have an impact on how one may think about and classify phenomena. What is important in this context is that these cryptotheological entanglements do not imply explicit or declarative influences of a particular doctrine, but rather the cultural and worldview background that shapes some understanding of the religious and, as such, concerns both the intellectuals under analysis and contemporary scholars, including myself.

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[1] For more on the postsecular turn, see McLennan 2010. The literature on postsecularism is vast and variable, depending on the specific understanding of the notions and research approach marked by it.

In the context of the master narrative of the Bulgarian nation, notions such as "heresy", "paganism", "lack of religiosity", and "false religiosity" are commonly used to refer to the so-called Bulgarian national character or spirit. They are related to the particular context of the humanities of the late 19th century and early 20th century, which had been influenced by the philosophy of Johann G. Herder and national psychology; however, what is more important is that the humanities originate from Christian vocabulary and doctrine, although they have been used to describe different social phenomena. The question is whether they can be seen as a manifestation of *interpretatio christiana* and how this relates to the presumed cryptotheological entanglements of Bulgarian intellectuals who, educated within the Western-European horizon, responded intensely to the ambivalent experience of cultural modernisation and secularisation from the end of the 19th century.

My first claim is that there are three important sites of memory (or narrative structures) that evoke and intertwine notions of heresy, paganism, or false religiosity: Bogomilism, Bulgarian ethnogenesis, and so-called folk religion[2]. The issue of Bogomil heresy, or *haeresis bulgarica,* is a crucial element of the Bulgarian self-portrait and, as such, has already been commented on by Grazyna Szwat-Gylybowa (2017). For this inquiry, I will only point out that the Bogomils, who were initially positioned in opposition to the vision of a native Christian peasant who is simple and pure, became over time an important lens for evaluating the role of Christianity in Bulgarian history. Szwat-Gylybowa has convincingly shown various contradictions in the approaches to the phenomena among Bulgarian intellectuals, as well as semantic shifts in their standpoints, and linked these to the specific socio-political situation and the rhetorical or ideological goals of the Bulgarian intellectual milieu. She emphasised the importance of the experience of modernisation and the need to fit into the Western European model. She also deconstructed the narrative in relation to Enlightenment models of thinking, showing that the Bogomil myth served the paradigm of cultural missionism.

> By placing the heretical mentality in the pre-Ottoman period, it provided the raw material for the construction of a mythologised historical and philosophical foundation to those who wanted to create an image of Bulgarians that would provide an alternative to that constituted in the period of national revival. The stereotype of the Orthodox Christian patriot (which they believed was a false portrayal of Bulgarian spirituality) was

[2] In this context, it is also worth having in mind the (hi)story of forced Islamisation or changing of faith, which functions in Bulgarian master narrative and was recognized by Nikolay Aretov (Аретов 2001; Аретов 2006) in terms of the mythologem of "abducted faith" (*похитена вяра*).

> now countered with an anti-stereotype of Bulgarians as perennial heretics, the first fathers of European religious reform movements, European rationalism, enlightened humanism and, more recently, syncretic New Age spirituality (Szwat-Gylybowa 2017: 292).

The Christian category of heresy functioned here in the context of Enlightenment anti-clericalism, as well as the need felt by the Bulgarian elites and their young modern nation to be recognised as civilised. As a result of the intertwining of the two discourses of the modern period – the antidogmatic and the progressive one – to be a heretic became a positive feature. The key element was a certain ethical ideal related to being a heretic that paradoxically invoked Christian values or exhibited characteristics associated with them, albeit perhaps only rhetorically. In any case, it was about moral purity, sensitivity to injustice, and concern for the good of both the individual and the collective, all of which Bogomils supposedly shared, in contrast to the official Church authorities.

This assertion about the "innocent Bogomils" was common, especially when commenting on the history of the medieval Bulgarian kingdom, as shown by Szwat-Gylybowa. Here, I will give only one example from a textbook on *literary* history by Dimitar Marinov (1846–1940). It shows a specific type of argument widely raised by Bulgarian writers, which refers to the idea that what matters is the viewpoint of the people (the masses):

> The strict moral life of the Bogomils had a positive influence on the masses. While the Orthodox clergy, dressed in Byzantine style, avoided meeting and communicating with the simple rural and urban masses – associating only with the boyars, who were also dressed and adorned in Byzantine style – the Bogomils, dressed simply in the Bulgarian style and modest, pious and gentle, gathered with the common people and talked about religion, their livelihood, and other aspects of public life. All this had enormous positive consequences: the common people regarded the Bogomils as truly righteous and good Christians. That is why the persecution against the Bogomils and their books made a bad impression and had the opposite effect: it contributed even more to the spread of the Bogomil heresy (Маринов 1887: 113)[3].

Even when the "anti-Christian" essence and, in this sense, the "pagan" roots of the Bogomil teaching – which consisted in dualism and/or rejection of a significant part of the Christian tradition – were acknowledged, the assumption was that the moral intentions inscribed in it were worth praising.

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[3] All the translations are mine, if not stated otherwise.

> From the dogmas of Bogomilism, it is clear that it resonated with important aspects of the pagan beliefs of our ancestors, which enabled it to spread successfully; and its ethics, imbued with a democratic spirit and respect for labour, restraint, and peace, were able to attract the respect of the righteous and inspire courage in the oppressed (Теодоров 1896: 106).

In this light, Bogomils could appear to be true Christians. Indeed, the movement was largely interpreted negatively, owing to the Bogomils' presumed responsibility for the state's decline. This was due to the social stir they had caused, as well as their dualistic, and thus nihilistic (in terms of consequences), worldview, which Peter Mutafchiev (Мутафчиев 1934) famously focused on. However, what seems to have prevailed at that time was the idea of the Bogomils as "the only patriotic party in Bulgaria" (Маринов 1887: 111). They were regarded as an inherently Bulgarian movement that stemmed from local folk conditions, expressed national features, and thus served the nation's needs. As concluded by Georgi Konstantinov (1902–1970), Bogomilism was "one of the most interesting religious revolutions of the Middle Ages", "a new, free-spirited, bold, and dynamic manifestation of Christian civic morality", "a new poetic and religious vision of the universe and humanity" (Константинов 1941: 579, 583, 583). Eventually, within the Bulgarian intellectual discourse, Bogomilism transformed into a social revolutionary movement against the Church, and during socialism it functioned as an expression of Bulgarian non-religious/atheist and democratic spirit (for more, see Szwat-Gylybowa 2017). Before that, however, the common framework was that, as an expression of the Bulgarian character, it served as a basis for considering Bulgarians true Christians.

THE BULGARIAN ETHNOGENESIS

The cultural views of the Bulgarian ethnogenesis have also been the subject of many historical and critical studies (for example, see Даскалов 1998; Detchev 2013). In general, three interpretations of Bulgarian ethnogenesis may be regarded as both academic reconstructions and historical myths serving the needs of particular national projects: the (Proto-)Bulgarian, the Slavic, and the Thracian. I will not delve into the question of the possible ethnic roots of the modern Bulgarian nation because this issue is still thought-provoking and ideologically biased, and as such deserves a separate study. What is important is that the "pagan" or "pre-Christian" aspect of identity is a significant element in all of the ethnogenetic narratives and (again) is perceived in a positive light as it conveys the potential for cultural superiority. These views reflect attitudes toward Christian heritage and its role in the history of the Bulgarian nation, and, as such, they concern the ambivalent

notion of the Middle Ages that functions in the Bulgarian master narrative by combining two important cultural elements: Christianisation and Byzantinism. It turns out that although Old Bulgarian literature (culture), which reflected Byzantine patterns, made a great contribution to the development of Slavic civilisation and thus became a source of national pride, it was also perceived as a precondition for the Bulgarian state's decline. The reason was that it emerged under foreign influence and resulted in the misguided politics of the Bulgarian rulers, who became estranged from their people.

This ambivalent approach towards the medieval era has been discussed by Albena Hranova (Хранова 2011), who has noted that Bulgarian historiography was torn between two conflicting visions from the very beginning. On the one hand, there was a common Western European perception of the Dark Ages as a backward period in history that supposedly contributed nothing to the development of humanity. This perception was rooted in (post-)Reformation and Enlightenment criticism of the Church. On the other hand, there was a local image of the Golden Age that focused on Bulgaria's cultural flourishing in the first decades after Christianisation and, as such, fitted into the romantic vision of a glorious past. However, the prejudice against Byzantinism was also highly influential. As shown by Diana Mishkova (2023), this prejudice reflected the modern notion of the Middle Ages as a corrupt and decadent, dogmatic and scholastic period in the history of humanity, but, specifically in the context of the Balkan region, it concerned the "corrupt" Byzantine Empire. This negative attitude toward Byzantine heritage was shaped by the French Enlightenment and subsequent Western historiography and focused on the theocratic state organisation and moral decay of the Eastern Roman Empire. In the Bulgarian context, this negative attitude manifested itself as the notion that Byzantium had a fatal impact on the national community. For example, according to Aleksandar Teodorov-Balan (1859–1959), the author of an academic-level handbook on the history of Bulgarian literature structured for secondary schools, there was only one merit of Byzantine literature, namely that "in the dark Middle Ages it preserved the torch of ancient education until the Western Christian nations took it over, freed from vulgarity and barbarism" (Теодоров 1896: 77). Therefore, Christianity, as a religion supposedly imposed upon Bulgarians by foreign powers, was also perceived as corrupt. Moreover, in the intellectual discourse of the late 19th and the first decades of the 20th century, there was an explicit claim that Christianisation was an inherently tragic event because it resulted in both the coercive disruption of the pagan tradition and in Bulgaria's cultural and political dependence on the Byzantine Empire (cf. Danova 2020).

While the concept of heresy sends us forwards in the history of Christianity, the concept of paganism sends us backwards. In any case, the point of reference and the criterion of evaluation in the Bulgarian context is the ideal of the Bulgarian

State and Church, understood as morally superior and responsive to the needs of the people. It is in this sense-making horizon that Bogomilism may be regarded as the reason for both the catastrophe of the First Bulgarian Kingdom (681–1018) and the "justifiable" reaction against the Byzantine influence. Also, it is in this sense-making horizon that the apocrypha and other unofficial medieval literature can be praised as positive and/or "national" (*народна*). The premise was that the old Bulgarian literature, defined as Church-related (*църковна*) and thus official, was supposedly disconnected from the needs of the people because the elites had copied Greek models and, as a result, condemned themselves to subjugation to the Byzantine Empire[4].

> If we examine our old literature in relation to our folk creations, we will see that it has neither the foundation nor the structure of our folk intellectual works. Our old intellectual development did not follow its natural course and order, and our literary life did not develop from our folk elements (Маринов 1887: 74).

Within the approach to cultural change and foreign influences in the history of the Bulgarian nation, the anti-clerical and anti-Greek biases meet and intertwine. As a result, it was precisely the approach to the Christian and Byzantine roots of Old Bulgarian literature that determined the approach to the role of Bulgarian heresy and its social manifestation. Clearly, this approach was not only a reminiscence of the Western European attitude towards Byzantium, but also an expression of local resentment towards Greek elites that erupted during the National Revival period. It may also be viewed in light of the view of Christianisation as a purely

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[4] The specific nature of the scholarly narrative on Bulgarian medieval literature was already highlighted by Anissava Miltenova (Милтенова 1989) who demonstrated the differences between late 19th-century approaches and those of Boyan Penev, i.e. the key literary historian of the interwar period. The problem lies in the extent to which medieval literature can be studied using methods applied to modern literature, which constitutes one of the key issues in the history of Bulgarian medieval (literary) studies. Nevertheless, from my perspective, all literary-historical works from the turn of the 20th century and the interwar period share the same bias which ultimately leads to an ambivalent understanding of Bogomilism and the apocrypha. Maya Ivanova (Иванова 2024), commenting on this with regard to the relationship between Penev and Polish Slavist Wojciech Golabek, follows Miltenova's observations, noting that it was Penev who introduced the medieval literature as an integral part of the national literature. And yet, as far as the Old Bulgarian literature is concerned, his position remains ambiguous. While a broadening of the concept of national literature as well as changes in scholarly vocabulary and frameworks certainly occurred over the nearly half-century separating these textbooks of Bulgarian literature, the fundamental aporias did not disappeare, stemming from the strong concepts of originality, national character, and realism – concepts that could be regarded as expressions of the ideal of authenticity, variously understood and functionalized throughout the history of literary studies. This question deserves (and will receive) a special attention in a separate study (cf. Drzewiecka 2023b; Drzewiecka 2026).

political act, as well as of "cultural guilt", as Sirma Danova (2020) commented. Importantly, both assumptions were already present in the 19th century in the positions of writers such as Hristo Botev (1848–1876) and Georgi Rakovski (1821–1867), developed further in the early 20th century in the fields of history and literary studies, and reached their culmination during communism. Here, I would like to draw attention to the fact that the establishment of Christianity as an official religion was understood as having created a social divide between the elites (the palace) and the people (the subjects), ultimately leading to a decline in public life and culture. This notion may be interpreted in terms of a secularised (or politicised) view of religion. However, what is important here is that at the core of this notion there is the assumption that religion is an important institution as both a socio-political factor and an expression of a way of life and character.

THE BULGARIAN RELIGIOSITY

The question of Bulgarian religiosity is closely related to views on so-called folk religion, which became a subject of discussion during the interwar period with the intensification of secularising worldviews and customs. Some intellectuals were deeply concerned that "even for those nations that are at the forefront of human civilisation, religion has not declined as much as it has in our country" (Янков 1920: 500), while others held that the decline of faith "has not gone to extremes" (Влайков 1939: 398) and that the focus should instead be on eradicating superstitions (Цанков 1939). Although the question of religious practices had also been raised during the 19th century in relation to the notion of inventing/articulating national identity, it was in the interwar period that the idea of Bulgarian religiosity – as well as the idea of religion in general, especially its role in society and the place of Orthodox Christianity as a traditional religion within it – were addressed more systematically. The discussions were multi-layered and reflected an intense and polarised process of adapting to or rejecting new Western European ideas and projects. A symbolic point of reference was provided by the well-known assertion of Boyan Penev (1882–1927), a famous literary critic and historian of Bulgarian literature, who, commenting on contemporary Bulgarian literature in 1921, elaborated on the idea that Bulgarians are religiously indifferent (Пенев 1921: 241).

The concepts of non-believer or non-religious refer to a more recent social vocabulary that one may characterise as post-Enlightenment or even secular. This positioning was indeed external as it concerned religion as a social institution and doctrine, but it was still situated within a Christian framework – namely, the understanding of religion as a coherent belief and behaviour. The discussion concerned vernacular religiosity in particular. Bulgarian religiosity was identified with folk-church religiosity, which seemed quite ambiguous, if not heretical or superficial. This was explained by the conditions in which the people had to live.

The prevailing claim was that there was a general "process of disbelief" (Влайков 1939: 398) and a "decline in religiosity among our people" (Вакарелски 1937: 692). What is important is that this perceived decline was explained mainly by social changes and new worldview trends that entered Bulgarian society after the new Bulgarian state was established in 1878, formulated by various intellectuals from external positions.

On the other hand, there was another explanation for the religious "decline" that sought to ground itself in the Bulgarian spirit, supposedly "pragmatic" and not inclined to religious sentiment; therefore, the observed forms of religiosity were not an expression of decline but a natural feature of the people. Bulgarian literature was portrayed as being "poor in religiosity, mysticism, and ethical depth" (Константинов 1927а: 367). However, when Bulgarian literary critics and writers from the interwar period commented on Bulgarian literature and its connection to religion, the prevailing position was that there was no such relationship; the main objection was not that religious and/or Christian themes were absent from Bulgarian literature, but that they were not used adequately in poetic works and were treated superficially and purely aesthetically. Elements of the Christian tradition were seen only as props; they were not an integral part of poetic expression and did not express the depth of the poet's spirit or contemplation of the world. The key assertion was that Bulgarian writers by nature lacked deep spiritual commitment and did not search for eternal truths that transcend the earthly dimension of life.

Importantly, some argued that the problem stemmed from intellectuals' misunderstanding of religiosity. For example, Cvetan Minkov (1891–1967), a folklorist and author of historical prose, noted: "It is true that the mystical side of religious sentiment has not been captured and has not become a theme for our writers. But how many other aspects of our spiritual existence have remained untouched by our poetry, which is, indeed, still earthly, realistic, and rarely romantic" (Минков 1935: 166). Stefan Mladenov (1880–1963), an acclaimed linguist and academic lecturer, even explicitly stated: "Most of our well-educated ("intelligent") Bulgarians have completely wrong views about the Christian religion and its significance in the history of Bulgaria and so many other cultural nations" (Младенов 1935: 41).

On the other hand, there was a notion that the nature of religiosity and religious sentiment was understood differently by Bulgarians; therefore it should be acknowledged as such. "An unfounded and overly extreme assertion is ready to deny the sublime religious impulses of Bulgarians or to belittle their attitude towards Christ" (Минков 1935: 164). As Cvetan Minkov concluded in 1935, "the religious sentiment of Bulgarians is moderate to sober, calm but strong, lasting, deep, and sincere" (Минков 1935: 165). However, it was Georgi Konstantinov who re-evaluated the notion of Bulgarian religiosity in the most direct way,

explicitly stating that Bulgarians "felt God differently", characterising their religion, i.e., Bulgarian religion, as "earthly, positive, fanatical" (Константинов 1927б: 501). For him, Bulgarians conceived and practised their faith differently, which did not mean they were non-religious or indifferent: "The problem of Bulgarian religion was primarily the problem of life", i.e., it focused on social issues and was inseparable from the ideas of nation and politics (Константинов 1927б: 498).

The strategies for dealing with the perception of *religiosity* among Bulgarians varied from praise to complete denial. However, the ideological basis for both apologists and critics of Bulgarian religiosity was, as they saw it, the question: *Are we (still) Christians*? Christianity as a starting point seemed valid regardless of the commentators' ideological convictions. This would confirm that the issue of religiosity occupied an essential place in the national narrative and, as such, indicated the status of Eastern Orthodoxy as a cultural factor. Moreover, what also mattered was the "correct" attitude towards the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and the traditions that were perceived as great national values. This agreement with the Christian/Orthodox identity of the Bulgarian people was required and expected since it was perceived as the true, authentic spirit of the nation. Good examples here are Archimandrite Evtimiy's response to the question "Are Bulgarian poets and writers deniers of religion?" (Евтимий 1942: 1) and Stefan Cankov's commentary on the secularisation of Bulgarian society in his study *The Bulgarian Orthodox Church from Liberation to the Present* (Цанков 1939), which one may summarise as follows: as long as a Bulgarian writer recognises the spiritual values of his people, he is not a "denier". This condition can be seen also as a relic of a mode of identification in terms of faith which was typical of the premodern communities but had its national(ist) manifestations during National Revival. In this perspective, the issue of (un)changing religious denomination may point to a broader interpretative matrix.

INTERPRETATIO CHRISTIANA

The ambiguous attitude towards Bulgarian religiosity manifests itself in both different evaluations of the phenomena and different understandings of what constitutes the religious. In terms of genealogy, the dominant notions intertwine; they are interdependent and variable in meaning. What remains is the usage of the concepts of paganism and heresy. The question is whether these rhetorical attempts to describe local religiosity – to define it as heretical, pagan, or non-religious – can be seen as manifestations of *interpretatio christiana*.

From a postsecular perspective, the cryptotheological entanglements of the modern social sciences and humanities are considered to refer to Christian values and vocabulary which underpin modern European thought not only in terms of

a specific worldview but also specific interpretative structures derived from the Christian Church tradition. Possible understandings of the non-religious as non-believers offer additional perspectives here. The question that arises is what it means to be a non-believer. Is it someone who does not practise according to the norm? Or is it someone who is not spiritually engaged? In these cases, "a believer" refers to a specific – "spiritual" – understanding of worship and inner attitude, which can be seen as an expression of a mentalist approach to religion, associated by historians and anthropologists with Protestant influence (for more, see Asad 1993, Meyer 2012).

As far as the accusations against Bulgarian religiosity are concerned, intellectuals have distinct standpoints. One refers to the wrong religious practice; the other refers to the wrong object of veneration. The common presumption is that this malpractice is rooted in the pagan past of the Bulgarian people and expresses pagan relics and superstitions in so-called folk religiosity. As summarised by Ivan Hadzhiyski (1907–1944), who commented on the issues of religiosity in his influential study *The Material and Spiritual Life of Our Nation* (1940–1945), syncretism is a typical feature of Bulgarian local religious patterns.

> [...] Christianity with its ideas and dogmas has had very little impact on the mindset of the peasantry. The country priest, in order not to break ties with his parishioners, was forced to serve popular pagan superstitions more than he implemented the provisions of the church councils. [...] Thanks to the easy availability of religious literature and higher intellectual standards, combined into a remarkable mixture with ancient superstition, Christian dogma held a more prominent place in the minds of the townspeople (Хаджийски 1945: 171)[5].

Hadzhiyski distinguished the religiosity of the urban classes based on their intellectual capacity and engagement, resulting from the transition from rural to urban environments, which suggests that it was knowledge and self-awareness that mattered. However, it was the lack of pagan relics of folk life that seemed to be the key element in his notion of religiosity. The underlying assumption was that Christianity had been imposed violently on the Bulgarian people and that it did not correspond to their spirit or way of life.

In the context of literary criticism, however, the focus was on the (lack of) usage of religious motifs. When addressing this issue, Konstantinov followed Penev's claim that there was no commitment or mysticism in contemporary Bulgarian literature, and that what prevailed among writers was a superficial

[5] The English translation is after Szwat-Gylybowa 2017: 67.

aesthetic approach to the subject. His ironic comment on the poetic image of Jesus in the works of Bulgarian authors as "schematic, rough (*груб*) and devoid of mysticism and depth" is a good example:

> Our poets are content merely to mention him [Jesus], without having any heartfelt connection with him, and so his image most often stands as an old familiar piece of decoration. The definitions given of him are either rough [*груб*], materialistic, or empty. It is perhaps no coincidence that in several poems by different poets, the first definition given to Jesus is that he is barefoot [*бос*] – to rhyme with Christ [*Христос*] (Константинов 1927б: 505).

Although these accusations concerned the Bulgarian poets' lack of engagement with religion and their "purely" decorative, instrumental use of religious images, Konstantinov ultimately justified this by suggesting that a typical feature of Bulgarians is that they "express religious problems through social problems" (Константинов 1927б: 506).

In the above-mentioned examples of addressing the issue of Bulgarian religiosity, the point of reference was the claim that it was poorly practised, and this is deserving of our special attention. An explanation here could be that this criticism stems from the presumption that the "proper" religious attitude should be measured by an individual's spiritual commitment rather than ritualistic engagement. Thus, this would refer to the mentalist bias associated with Protestant genealogy as it views any material expressions of belief rather suspiciously (cf. Keane 2007; Meyer 2012). In this sense, the underlying cryptotheological assumptions would be inherently Christian. However, one may also place it within a different (or older) paradigm, i.e., *interpretatio christiana,* understood here as a specific discursive approach of Christian authors toward the (non-Christian) Other. In particular, this would correspond to the Idolatrous and Orthopractic discourses as distinguished by Jiří Dynda (2026). Obviously, it would be difficult to find direct references to these models of addressing people's beliefs, even if one considered them only as ideal types that infused 19th-century ways of thinking about religion and thereby influenced scholarly discourse. However, it is quite possible to consider them as modes of *interpretatio christiana* in terms of the relics of *interpretatio christiana* that had survived in notions such as nature worship, pagan survivals, superstitions, or polytheism that organised the early research in religious studies and ethnography[6]. These academic approaches towards the

[6] This aspect of the modern heritage of *interpretatio christiana* was discussed by Jiří Dynda during the scientific conference *Aspects of Interpretatio Christiana in the Slavic World* held in Athens in October 2025.

"Other" certainly refer to the Christian roots of modern science, although one should not overlook the influence of the models established by Church polemics and anti-heretical treatises. It seems that what is also of great importance here is the role of the discursive schemes in relation to "pagans" and "heretics" that functioned within the local Eastern Orthodox culture.

In the Bulgarian case, an important element is also the motif of forced Islamization, developed during the 19th century by intellectuals and national ideologues. Through literature, journalism, and historiography, this motif gradually entered the public consciousness as the mythologeme of the "abducted faith" (Аретов 2001; Аретов 2006). It relies on old hagiographical patterns tracing back genetically to early Christian hagiography and martyrology, and can be viewed as another relic of *interpretatio christiana*. Importantly, in folklore this motif illustrates the general notion of the people's suffering; so one may assume it has evolved into a topos that activates specific connotations. Ultimately, the archetype of "abduction" as Aretov called it – signifies forced conversion, suffering, and traumatic memory. There are, of course, differences compared to early Christian models – the victim is a Christian rather than a pagan, and the perpetrator is a Muslim rather than a Roman (pagan), the violence is less severe and requires some kind of justification – yet the underlying model remains the same, with the object of conflict being an inherent/proper Bulgarian identity.

As Aretov pointed out, the motif of violent Islamization served to consolidate the nation by asserting the value of that which was stolen. Interestingly, however, it remained in the shadow of other mythologemes during the National Revival period, gaining more relevance only in liberated Bulgaria which may suggest that it was due to the changing social conditions, when being a signal what had been lost, it began to refer to the Christian faith within the context of the secularization experience. Moreover, it was raised and developed during socialism with a special emphasis on the motif of (national) betrayal – once again for consolidation purposes, becoming a vivid example of instrumentalization of religious tradition. Paradoxically, the motif of "abducted faith" functioned alongside the notion of the Christianity as something imposed and foreign to Bulgarians. This issue of addressing the experience of "changed faith" requires further analysis, especially since it concerns the same crucial period of shaping Bulgarian modernity since the late 19th century. However, what is worth noting at this point is that regardless of the different points of reference, the interpretive model seems to be the same. It follows to polemical and early Christian patterns filtered through the ideology of national revival, i.e., to the tradition of hagiographic literature which determines how the tension between internal (or proper) faith and imposed (or false) faith is managed and articulated.

Importantly, "non-believer" does not only denote someone who practises the common faith in a wrong manner. It may also mean someone external to the Church's religious mission. Within literary studies, this kind of accusation

appears only to a limited extent in Konstantinov's above-mentioned commentary. First and foremost, it manifested itself in a famous essay by Atanas Dalchev, "Religious feeling in Bulgarian poetry" (Далчев 1929), in which Bulgarian poets were also criticised for their decorativeness and lack of spirit, but not justified by reference to their supposed national spirit (see also Рикев 2020).

And yet, the most significant way to address the question of (non)belief may be found in the attitude toward the activities of the Bulgarian Church throughout the history of the state. The starting point here would be to admit that engaging the church tradition in the service of political power means that religion was used for external purposes. However, the significance of the Church for the survival of the people/nation is part of the Bulgarian Church discourse itself, and it did not lose its particular status during the communist period, although it was reinterpreted in an atheist context. Here, I would like to address this in terms of *interpretatio christiana*, understood not as a Christian discourse about the non-Christian Other but as a Christian way of accommodating pagan practices, which means reinterpreting and accepting "pagan" or non-Christian elements for the needs of the Church.

I would like to propose examining the common claim in the Bulgarian master narrative that Christianity (Eastern Orthodoxy) played a key role in the emergence of Bulgarian culture and, later, in its preservation during Ottoman rule, which also may be seen as a peculiar expression of *interpretatio christiana*[7]. In the interwar period, the difference in the main focus of church writers and literary critics regarding the approach to the religious component in Bulgarian society became more pronounced. While the former traditionally emphasised the role of morality in the life of the community and the nation, the latter focused on morality and ethics from the perspective of personal integrity. Nevertheless, the common point of reference for both arguments was the idea of collective development, in which the Bulgarian Orthodox Church played a significant role as both a moral compass and a politically engaged institution. This ideological framing of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church was repeated during communism when the (interwar) prejudice that Bulgarians are nonbelievers or irreligious became a clearly positive feature that enhanced the new narrative of Bulgarians as atheists by nature. There was a shift in meaning and focus due to changes in political conditions. Still, the general assumption remained the same, i.e., the Church had always been an important

[7] The significance of Eastern Orthodoxy in constructing national identity constitutes a fundamental motif of conservative discourse in Bulgaria, serving as evidence of the appropriation of Church tradition for the needs of modern times (cf. Tadić-Papanikolaou 2013). Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that the Orthodox heritage was functionalized by various intellectual and ideological circles in Bulgaria, not all of which can be considered as linked to the Christian worldview (cf. Пенчев 2017).

social factor in the nation's history. Therefore, although the Christian Church was officially marginalised and rejected, it was also culturally acknowledged for its historical role, especially in support of the National Revival and liberation movement. It is this paradox that deserves our attention because it reveals the same way of thinking about the social role of a religious institution. Yet, one could seek something more than just a structural adaptation of a specific narrative.

In 1975, in his famous book *Bulgarian Easter or the Bulgarian Passion*, Toncho Zhechev formulated an interesting appraisal of this movement, in which he accused Bulgarian activists of manipulating the religious sentiment of believers and subordinating the struggle for an autonomous Church to the interests of the national struggle.

> They, who hail from the kingdom of unbelievers, have made religion and church institutions a tool for their ardent political fanaticism, and subsumed into nationalist ideology and nationalist goals all the various elements of the nation's life, including traditional Christian ideas concerning the supreme and universal ideas about human life. [...] Bulgarian activists from the national church movement took liberties with church organisation, religion and its doctrines that merely cemented our disbelief, and the victory of that movement was the beginning of an open, comprehensive political struggle for national liberation, accompanied by obvious belittling of the relative influence of Church and religion in the life of the nation (Жечев 1980: 17)[8].

According to this assessment, believers are those who are religiously devoted and separated from political and national matters. Did Zhechev then reinforce the prejudice (or myth) of non-believing Bulgarians who use church institutions for national purposes only, or did he call for a spiritual conversion? The idea of a strict separation between the Church and the state also refers to modern, supposedly Protestant models of thinking about religion, which seems particularly problematic in the historical and theological context of Bulgarian culture. Is this a manifestation of the attitude towards the Church as an institution that is dictated by Western European notions?

The interpretation of the Bogomil movement as a manifestation of universal Christian values could also be considered as a form of *interpretatio christiana*. In this case, this would be about the adaptation of ideas that are not Christian in terms of doctrine but correspond with Christianity on some (functional or ideological) level, or at least may be interpreted as such since they meet the needs

[8] The English translation is taken from Szwat-Gylybowa 2017: 67.

of a community that identifies itself as Christian or seeks to be one. The positive image of the Bogomils ultimately reveals the Christian ideal, and the focus on action within this world does not diminish the value of the movement. The fact that it is discussed in religious and secular terms shows that it is meant to connect both spheres, which, in a sense, would express a Christian way of life. Therefore, it is suggested that Bogomil teachings serve as an alternative to "old" Christianity, or even represent a "better" Christianity.

Within the interpretative framework of modern *interpretatio christiana*, on one hand, the Bulgarian Church (milieu) is emphasising its ties with the state by adapting, in fact, a national(istic) discourse and inscribing its mission in the history of the modern state, allowing and even supporting various mutual intersections and affinities between the two institutions and their missions[9]. Would this be a "Christianisation" of the modern hubris of nationalism? On the other hand, we have national elites adapting the Enlightenment discourse, inscribing it into local and Eastern Orthodox religious patterns. Would this be a "Christianisation" of the modern hubris of humanitarianism? On the one hand, we have claims about anthropology and the nature of humans with their relation to deity; on the other, we have claims about ecclesiology and the nature of the Church within social reality.

CONCLUSION

The question is what this presumption that Bulgarians are pagans means within the local context and with regard to the cultural patterns associated with modernity. This assumption is undoubtedly a persuasive metaphor that captures the important notions of non-religiosity or wrong-religiosity. However, does this really mean that Bulgarians do not belong to the specific framework that is considered to be Christian? Does this refer to the modern notion of religion that has nothing to do with the traditional understanding of Christianity, which, *in emic terms*, goes beyond the scope of religion? Would this be an argument that Christianity itself has become reinterpreted? Focusing on the possible meanings hidden behind the prejudice that Bulgarians are pagan suggests that even the notion of *interpretatio christiana* needs to be called into question under the conditions of modernity. I would argue that the notion of *interpretatio christiana* should be understood both genealogically and semantically within the postsecular framework so that it may inform the research approach that Dynda (2026) called *acad-etic.* When

[9] For more on the relation between the Bulgarian state and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, see, i.e. Ганев 2006. The conservative discourse of Church milieus in the interwar period is well-known and commented in research, cf. Димитрова 2006. It is interesting, however, to see how it has been shaped in the context of the idea of religious denomination (confession) and its presumed relation with the idea of politics in the interwar period. See Drzewiecka 2023a.

commenting on the idea of Slavic paganism in modern research and elaborating on the insider-outsider perspective, Dynda explains his typology as follows:

> In traditional terms, *emic* refers to the discourse I refer to here as Discourse (2), the insider's outward statement, and *etic* usually refers to what I call Discourse (3), acad-emic discourse striving for transcultural objectivity and comparability. Level (1), the "pure" emic, is, in my opinion, unattainable for anyone other than those that transmit the particular culture. The concept (4) of acad-etic discourse is then intended to surmount the simple binary division between the emic ("indigenous") and the etic ("anthropological") discourses. Additionally, this helps to avoid identifying the etic discourse with the acad-emic one (Dynda 2025: 30–31)[10].

As the relationship between "the emic ('indigenous') and the etic ('anthropological') discourses" seems to be far more complicated, the aim would be to address the question of how to "accommodate the emic discourse of the studied culture, its emic concepts and their etic translations" without forgetting that every self-positioning generates particular limits (cf. Dynda 2025: 31). The postsecular point of view invites one to reconsider the very notion of the "religious" and "secular" opposition, as constructed and imposed within a specific framework which – when looked at in terms of genealogy and cryptotheology – reveals the great ambiguity of the supposed dichotomy of "indigenous" and "anthropological", or vernacular and academic.

The image of Bulgarians as pagans in a particular sense of non-religiousness can be perceived as a result of *secularisation*. Classifying phenomena as non-"religious" suggests that they have been interpreted with regard to the matters which within modern conditions are considered "secular(ised)", i.e., replaced or dislocated. The assumption that, regardless of the political situation, Eastern Orthodoxy could (and should) offer a nation-building morality can be seen as a form of *ethicalisation* of religion, which would consider it outside the primal context of religious faith, i.e., as a form of dislocation. However, in every case,

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[10] In general, the preceding can be summarized as follows (while in the medieval context, "culture A" may be explified by the Slavic pagan, and "culture B" by the Christian one):

1 (emic) = discourse of culture A about itself within itself

2 (etic) = discourse of culture A when referring to itself (to culture B).

3 (acad-emic) = discourse of culture B describing culture A

4 (acad-etic) = self-reflection of culture B on its understanding of culture A

Often, level 1 (emic) is already profoundly influenced by reflection on level 2 or level 3 (the external stereotypes of a culture). This should not surprise us: the culture usually builds its self-conception on how it is both self-conceived and how it is perceived externally (Dynda 2025: 31).

the interpretation would, in fact, be an expression of *the acad-emic* approach that seeks to find descriptive means within the current terminological and cognitive frames. The use of the (Western European) vocabulary of the *religious–secular* opposition would be another indication that the Western process of secularisation has Christian roots, since it stems from a particular, i.e., Western Christian, tradition of understanding the "religious" as focused on the mental aspect of religious experience. Nevertheless, the core issue lies in the "religious–secular" opposition, which encourages us to adopt chronologies based on presumed religious–secular divisions and to interpret historical development through a "religious–secular–postsecular" sequence. Within this framework, the postsecular denotes the much-discussed "return of religion" or a new, more complex entanglement of religious and secular phenomena. I would argue that the real epistemic revolution concerns the social visibility of particular phenomena and the academic discourse that attempts to tackle them. My postsecular approach concerns the very vocabulary and the presumptions that lie behind it, as well as what it means to be religious/secular in the conditions of modernity (cf. Drzewiecka, Wiśniewski 2025). Therefore, I would like to consider this issue through a postsecular vocabulary.

In his essay *In Praise of Profanation*, Giorgio Agamben (2007) offers an interesting – and, in fact, very postsecular – approach to the issue of divisions by introducing a positive notion of profanation. Referring to the fundamental sacred–profane opposition, he points out that profanation means to return to common use that which has been removed to the sphere of the sacred (Agamben 2007: 82). However, "this operation is more cunning and complex than that and is not limited to abolishing the form of separation to regain an uncontaminated use that lies either beyond or before it" (Agamben 2007: 85). "For to profane means not simply to abolish and erase separations but to learn to put them to a new use, to play with them" (Agamben 2007: 87).

In this context, the question is whether perceiving this view of the Church's activity in social reality, and this search for genuinely world-engaging forms of existence, as ultimately Christian constitutes an *interpretatio christiana* on my part. Likewise, would it be an Interpretatio Christiana to view the reversal of separation as an expression of an inherently Christian openness to existence under conditions of ontological penumbra, which the postsecular anthropologists Johannes and Sharon Merz appear to advocate?

> The ontological penumbra is a space where the self and the other, ignorance and certainty, as well as the secular and the religious, meet, overlap, and intertwine. It is a reflexive space of dialogue, encounter and engagement, which is also marked by ambiguity and plurality, as well as creativity and productivity where "the other" includes both human and nonhuman entities who, in turn, need to be recognized as our counterparts (Merz, Merz 2017: 2).

Would it be an *interpretatio christiana* if one concludes that classifications and orders that are supposedly Christian labels should be revised because they do not meet the reality of the inherently messy human existence? What is *interpretatio christiana*? If one agrees that Christianity is not a religion in the modern sense[11] – that, from the very beginning, it "put the distinction between sacred and profane into crisis" (Agamben 2007: 79), and therefore exceeds the modern and now-habituated religious–secular divide by embracing different aspects of the undivided life – then any attempt to describe and classify it according to the rules of the *acad-emic* discourse appears profoundly misguided, since it reduces the diversity of the intertwined counterparts within the phenomenon. Understanding such notions as "pagan" or "non-religious" in modern times, especially after the postsecular turn, when religiosity was (re)found as a sense-making (co-)factor, becomes even more important as it also concerns the language of description. However, the stakes here are not "to restore something like a natural use that existed before being separated into the religious, economic, or juridical sphere" (Agamben 2007: 85), but "to deactivate the apparatuses of power and return to common use the spaces that power had seized" (Agamben 2007: 77). Case studies such as the Bulgarian one, which involve local meanings and projections of collective identity governed by a particular apparatus of differences, can help reveal the uncertain nature of our academic vocabulary and the habitual presuppositions that shape our understanding of what counts as "religious" and, increasingly, what counts as "Christian".

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[11] Cf. "Religion can be defined as that which removes things, places, animals, or people from common use and transfers them to a separate sphere" (Agamben 2007: 74).

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ДОКОЛКО ЕЗИЧНИЦИ СА БЪЛГАРИТЕ? ВЪРХУ МОДЕРНОТО МИСЛЕНЕ ЗА БЪЛГАРСКАТА ИДЕНТИЧНОСТ И ВЪПРОСА ЗА *INTERPRETATIO CHRISTIANA*

(Резюме)

В статията се разглежда представата за българите като „езичници“, „нерелигиозни“ или „еретици“ от гледната точка на тяхното функциониране в съвременните хуманитарни науки и националния наратив. Основавайки се върху „постсекуларния обрат“ и концепцията за криптотеологията, авторката подчертава, че представата за езичеството е ментален конструкт на модерността, дълбоко преплетен с имплицитни християнски структури на мисълта. Чрез анализ на три ключови наративни структури – богомилството, етногенезиса и т.нар. „народна религиозност“ – тя посочва как традиционните християнски категории са били преосмислени, за да оформят българското национално въображение. В резултат на това изследването илюстрира как академичните дискурси от началото на XX в. могат да се разбират като произтичащи от по-стари модели на *interpretatio christiana*, и така повдига ключови въпроси за мирогледните и професионалните обвързаности на самите изследователи, които се опитват да опишат тези явления.

Ключови думи: българска култура; национална идентичност; постсекуларизъм; криптотеология; *interpretatio christiana*; богомилство; народна религиозност; езичество.

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