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**Religious Art at the Service of an Atheist State:**  
**Cultural Policy and Nationalistic Propaganda in Late**  
**Communist Bulgaria**

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**Abstract:**

In this paper, I will look at an aspect of cultural policy and nationalistic propaganda in late Communist Bulgaria. More concretely, I will consider the uses to which religious art was put to in the context of the state-sponsored 1300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the Bulgarian state (henceforth 1300 Years Bulgaria). I will show that religious monuments were a prominent element in the events associated with the anniversary celebrations, but they were cast in a very specific guise. The religious dimension of the art under my attention was downplayed, while nationalistic interpretations, playing on modern concepts such as “nation”, “artistic genius”, etc., were advanced in order to describe pre-modern art. In other words, according to the view proposed here, 1300 Years Bulgaria, is not an example of a softening line of the Communist state towards religion, as has been frequently suggested. Rather, it is a rather flamboyant illustration of nationalistic propaganda common to late Communism not only in Bulgaria but elsewhere as well.

In Part I of my paper, I will outline briefly the Marxist-Leninist position on religion, which was followed in Communist Bulgaria. The question: “what is to be done about religion?” refers to Marxism’s insistence that religion can have no place in a Communist society. Whatever forms cultural policy took throughout the Communist period, the ideological position behind them was quite consistently atheist. In Part II, I look at the ways in which religious art was used by the Bulgarian Communist state in the late 1970s and early 1980s, particularly in the context of 1300 Years Bulgaria. Religious art, in short, became one of the tools of nationalistic propaganda. The question: “what is to be done about the cult object?” highlights the idea that religious art was intentionally dissociated from its religious and cultic connotations and presented, instead, as an instance of “national genius”.

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**The Marxist-Leninist Position on Religion: What Is to Be Done about Religion?**

The position of Marxist-Leninism on religion<sup>1</sup> can be summarized in the popular expression, which both Marx and Lenin used: “Religion is the opium of the people”. Already in 1905, Lenin had explained that

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<sup>1</sup> On this, see, for example, McLellan, D., *Marxism and Religion*, (Basingstoke and London, 1987); Post, W., *Kritik der Religion bei Karl Marx*, (Munich, 1969).

“religion teaches those who toil in poverty all their lives to be resigned and patient in this world, and consoles them with the hope of reward in heaven”. Thus he concludes:

“As for those who live upon labour of others, religion teaches them to be charitable in earthly life, thus providing a cheap justification for their whole exploiting existence and selling them at a reasonable price tickets to heavenly bliss. Religion is the opium of the people. Religion is a kind of spiritual intoxicant, in which the slaves of capital drown their humanity and their desires for some sort of decent human existence”.<sup>2</sup>

In this view, religion, a remnant of feudalism, becomes the ideological weapon of capitalism. It has been rightly noticed, that, strictly speaking, this view of religion as an ideology is “anticlerical rather than atheist”.<sup>3</sup> It is the Church that is the butt of much of the Lenin’s invectives against “religion” as “one of the most odious things on earth” and “God” as a concept of “inexpressible foulness”.<sup>4</sup> This is why, as Lenin writes in a letter to Maksim Gorki in November 1913: “nowadays both in Europe and in Russia any, even the most refined and best-intentioned defence or justification of the idea of God, is a justification of reaction.”<sup>5</sup> Whatever the value of the Marxist analysis of the Church as an institution, the Communist views of religion as such are, on the whole, extremely simplified and basic and come down to the equation of religion and superstition. Consider, for example, article 13 of the Russian Communist Party Programme: “It is impossible to be a Communist, a Leninist, and retain belief that conditions of life, of society, of industry, the weather, or an individual’s health can be influenced by prayers, by sprinkling ‘holy water’, by burning incense or by performing any other superstitious rites.”

Therefore, religion as a superstition can have no place in a Socialist society and atheist propaganda throughout the Communist period was a constant motif in policy-making.<sup>6</sup> However, what was to be done about religion? This is where one notices a variety of views among Communists, which might be summarized under the headings of a “soft” and a “hard line” on religion. In certain periods, of course, the “soft line” became dominant, while in others, policies were mostly defined by “hard liners”. However, what is much more interesting is that the two lines would often very often co-exist. In fact, if policies on religion are seen as a typical example of the exercise of cultural hegemony, it is possible to suggest that cultural hegemony frequently takes place in the grey area between consent and coercion. Indeed, some recent interpretations of Antonio Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony hold that “hegemony” and “dictatorship of the proletariat” are complementary in Gramsci’s thought and that “consent” and “coercion” actually co-exist.<sup>7</sup> This position challenges the common understanding of cultural hegemony, which is based on the opposition of “hegemony versus domination”<sup>8</sup> and “a predominance obtained by consent rather than force”.<sup>9</sup>

Marxist-Leninist theory holds that with the development of economic forces religion will naturally disappear. As Lenin said at one point, religion will be “steadily relegated to the rubbish heap by the normal course of economic development”.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, Marxist-Leninism devoted much time insisting on the need for propaganda and the development of a scientific worldview to combat religion. Engels, while reporting the imminent disappearance of religion, recommends at the same time that Christianity cannot be “destroyed through ridicule and invective alone, it has to be overpowered scientifically, i.e., historically explained.”<sup>11</sup> Lenin

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<sup>2</sup> Lenin, V. I., “Socialism and Religion”, *Novaia zhizn'*, 16 December 1905. The phrase “the opium of the people” occurs with Marx, the main idea being basically the same as later with Lenin; see Marx, K., *Contribution to a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, in *Early Writings*, ed. by Thomas Bottomore, (London, 1963), p.43: “The struggle against religion is, therefore, indirectly a struggle against the world whose spiritual aroma is religion. [...] Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as illusory happiness of men is a demand for their real happiness”.

<sup>3</sup> McLellan, D., *Marxism and Religion*, (Basingstoke and London, 1987), p.96.

<sup>4</sup> McLellan, p.4.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in McLellan, p.103.

<sup>6</sup> Shakhnovich, M., *Lenin i problemy idealizma. Kritika religii v trudakh V. I. Lenina* (Lenin and the Problem of Idealism. The Critique of Religion in the Works of V. I. Lenin), (Moscow, 1961); Lenin, V. I., *Religiia, tserkov' i partii* (*Religion, the Church and the Party*), (Moscow 1926).

<sup>7</sup> Thomas, P.D., *The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony, and Marxism*, (Leiden, 2009), p.65. See also Opratko, B., *Hegemonie: politische Theorie nach Antonio Gramsci*, (Münster, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.27.

<sup>9</sup> Femia, J., *Gramsci’s Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness, and the Revolutionary Process*, (Oxford, 1981), p.24.

<sup>10</sup> Lenin, V. I., *Religiia, tserkov' i partii* (*Religion, the Church and the Party*), (Moscow 1926).

<sup>11</sup> Engels, F., *The Peasant War in Germany* (1850), (London, 1969), p.197.

also called for “science in the battle against the fog of religion.”<sup>12</sup> As it was mentioned in a decree in 1918, religion should be eradicated not by “punishment and repression, but with good schools, Communist propaganda, and Socialist economics”.<sup>13</sup> One may well wonder if religion would disappear anyhow, why bother with ideological propaganda. We can, of course, treat this as one of the many contradictions of Communist theory and practice. I think, though, that a more fruitful approach would be to consider the problem from the perspective of cultural hegemony understood in the sense suggested here. One may believe, from a Marxist-Leninist point of view, that religion would become obsolete at some point in the development of a society and at the same time feel obliged to intervene in this process and speed it up through propaganda, but also, when deemed necessary, through violent means.

There is some irony in the fact that religious art, i.e. objects produced by believers for believers to serve religious functions, was used for propaganda purposes by an often militantly atheist Communist regime. I will be interested in the roles that religious art was cast in during the late 1970s and early 1980s by the Communist regime in Bulgaria.

## The Role of Religious Art in Nationalistic Propaganda: What Is to Be Done about the Cult Object?

The Communists’ view of religion as a dark superstition, muddling the minds of people, seemed to find no better confirmation than the popular attitudes towards holy images. Since the theology of the image, worked out in the context of the Iconoclastic Controversy in Byzantium (8<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> c.), was inaccessible to the average believer, he/she almost automatically invested images with supernatural powers. In Eastern Europe, as well as in the West, images were believed to cry, to shed blood, to have the ability to cure the sick, etc.

The resurgence of nationalism during the late Communist period has been seen by some authors as a defining feature of the evolution of the Communist state. Emil Lengyel wrote a book under the title *Nationalism – The Last Stage of Communism* (1969). Rather harshly, Lengyel refers to Bulgaria as the “un-nation” and claims that before Communism, “the Bulgarians were not aware of their nationality”.<sup>14</sup> I am not interested here in arguing the more general point about the lack of national consciousness in the pre-Communist period. What is relevant to my purposes is the notion that there was a nationalistic project in the late Communist period, which was heavily sponsored by the state. I will interpret the organization and the various events connected to the celebration of the 1300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the Bulgarian state along these lines. My focus of interest will be the uses to which medieval monuments were put in this context. I will suggest that there was constant tension between the nationalistic agenda of the state, on the one hand, and the atheist ideology that informed the ideology of a Communist state. In simple words, the problem came down to how to bring forth medieval monuments, most of which were religious, as an example of national achievement, while at the same time, to completely obliterate their religious dimension.

I will summarize some of the developments in the anniversary events by following the account presented in the book by the contemporary Bulgarian historian Ivan Elenkov, *Kulturniat front* (The Cultural Front, 2008). The Bulgarian state was founded in 681, which makes it one of the oldest in Europe. In 1981, there were huge and ambitious anniversary celebrations that were the result of years of work. The idea for such an event had been first mentioned in an official context in 1976, when a “State Commission 1300” had been set up. The anniversary was largely conceived by the Minister of Culture and daughter of the Communist President, Ljudmilla Zhivkova, and her circle. It was whole-heartedly and lavishly sponsored by the Communist state. As Elenkov mentions, there was “a direct propaganda element” (p.359) in the whole enterprise from the very beginning. Zhivkova had clearly said in a speech, given on 26 September 1978, that the 1300<sup>th</sup> anniversary would have to demonstrate “the place of Bulgaria in the development of world civilization.” Moreover, the national achievement of the past was to serve as a parallel to the present. Alexandar Fol, the Deputy President of the Committee for Art and Culture, an established historian, close to Zhivkova, spoke of a “Second Golden Age” (the first Golden Age being the age of King Simeon in the 9<sup>th</sup> century). As everyone understood at the time, this was “a complex programme for enhancing the role of art and culture in the harmonious development of the individual and society in the period of developed Socialist society.” As *Narodna kultura* (National

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<sup>12</sup> Lenin, “Socialism and Religion” (1905).

<sup>13</sup> Decree of December 1918, cited in Daly, Jonathan, “‘Storming the Last Citadel’. The Bolshevik Assault on the Church, 1922” in Brovkin, V., (ed.): *The Bolsheviks in Russian Society. The Revolution and the Civil Wars*, (New Haven and London, 1997), p. 236.

<sup>14</sup> Lengyel, E., *Nationalism – The Last Stage of Communism*, (New York, 1969), p.287.

Culture), one of the main newspapers at the time, wrote on 28 September 1979: “The national programme for aesthetic education is connected with the major purposes of the Party and state policy for the all-sided intensification of the subjective factor with its huge role in the development of the nation on its path to building a Communist society”. The article keeps close to the ideas of Fol voiced on 25 January the same year.

Once the anniversary events opened, they were grand indeed. Many of the events focused, as expected, on medieval monuments (another focus was the Thracian treasures, the specialty of Fol). There were several major exhibitions sent abroad – “1000 Years Bulgarian Icon” in Japan in 1980, “The Treasures of the Rila Monastery” in Vienna in the same year, “Medieval Bulgarian Art” in the USSR, in France, and in the UK in 1980-1981, etc. Several ambitious publications came out – the first volume of *Enziklopediia na izobrazitelnite izkustva v Bulgaria* (An Encyclopaedia of the Visual Arts in Bulgaria), *Bulgaria 1300*, *Bulgaria prez vekovete* (Bulgaria during the Ages), etc. A Jubilee Ship with large-scale models of Bulgarian monuments, again with an emphasis on Thracian and medieval ones, was sent to big port cities such as Amsterdam. In the meantime, conservation and reconstruction work was carried out on a numbers of sites in the country – the Rozhen Monastery, the churches in Nessabar, the ones in the medieval capital of Veliko Tarnovo, etc. It seems that the ambition was that the whole world should get to know about “the creative genius of Bulgaria” (this was the topic of a round-table discussion on 15 March 1980).

What comes across in all this rhetoric is that objects of religious art were not presented in their natural relationship to contemporary religion, but as aesthetic objects that are representative of national genius. As I have suggested elsewhere, this is a typical strategy towards religious art from the very beginning of the Communist period.<sup>15</sup> Religious art was re-contextualized in the sense that it was taken out of its original religious context and presented as a purely aesthetic object. It did not matter that modern concepts of nation, artistic genius, etc. were used to describe pre-modern phenomena. Neither was it of concern that the religious dimension was fundamental to the very existence of these works. Religious art was used, outside its original functions and meanings, to serve the nationalistic agenda of the late Communist regime in Bulgaria.

Scholars on nationalism have noticed that art in general and visual images in particular have an important role to play in the formation of national identity and do so in a specific way<sup>16</sup>. Recent studies tell us that nationalist mythologies can be credited with “creative powers of reconstruction” and even with “outright invention”<sup>17</sup>. Mixing “genuine scholarship with fantasy and legend with objectively recorded data”<sup>18</sup> belongs to the way in which nationalism works. It cleverly plays with romantic notions, such as the cult of the artistic genius. In the nationalistic context, however, the cult of genius “derives its meaning and popular appeal from [its] appropriation by the ‘nation’”<sup>19</sup>. As one of the most influential contemporary scholars on nationalism notices, “in the cult of genius, was reflected the sense of a people’s creativity and mission to the world. Indeed, a community that could not appropriate or produce any genius or hero was likely to be denied its claims, for its individuality resided to the full in its great men”<sup>20</sup>. This is how art as the product of genius visualizes identity as the quality an ethnos shares and which, at the same time, distinguishes it from all the rest.

As an example, I will draw attention to the nationalistic interpretations of the frescoes in the Boyana Church, near Sofia, of 1259, which were advanced in the context of the preparations for Bulgaria 1300. This work was brought forward as a witness of the great *Volkgeist* (Spirit of the Nation) and as an illustration of great cultural and artistic achievement. The popular idea, familiar to any Bulgarian child who went to school in the late Communist period, suggests that in the Boyana frescoes an anonymous Bulgarian master took the first steps in the direction of the Renaissance has taken root. The role of the Byzantine tradition that underlies the frescoes is, of course, consciously underplayed. Thus, what is from the point of view of art history one of the greatest examples of “Byzantinizing”<sup>21</sup> art, became an exclusive symbol of Bulgarian-ness. The frescoes were proclaimed to be completely “samobitni” – a word that can be translated into English as “original”, but, actually, carried much stronger connotations.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Antonova, Clemena, “Re-contextualizing Holy Images in Early Soviet Russia” in Fleckner, U., (ed.), *Der Sturm der Bilder: Zerstörte und zertörende Kunst von der Antike bis in die Gegenwart* (The Clash of Images: Destroyed and Destructive Art from Antiquity to Present Times), (Berlin: Schriften des Internationalen Warburg-Kollegs, 2011), pp.101-119.

<sup>16</sup> This has been mentioned, for example, in Anthony Smith’s *National Identity*, (Harmondsworth, 1991).

<sup>17</sup> Smith, A., *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, (Oxford, 1986), p.177

<sup>18</sup> *op.cit.*, p.191

<sup>19</sup> Smith, A., *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, (Oxford, 1986), p.200

<sup>20</sup> *op.cit.*, p.193

<sup>21</sup> I am borrowing Erwin Panofsky’s expression (Panofsky, E., “History of the Theory of Human Proportions as a Reflection on the History of Style” in his *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, (Harmondsworth, 1970), p.109. Panofsky does not explain his term, but it could be taken to refer to art done in the Byzantine style, i.e. what Vasari called the “*maniera greca*” (without Vasari’s derogatory connotation, of course).

<sup>22</sup> It literally means “unique” in the sense of something that has a “being” (from the root “b’it”) that nothing else possesses, i.e. it has a “unique being”.

The Boyana Frescoes had been an object of interest at least since they were first systematically studied by the great Russian Byzantinist, Andrey Grabar in 1924.<sup>23</sup> The later nationalistic interpretations were given credence when they received support from respected Bulgarian medievalist Ivan Duichev. In 1978, as part of laying the ground for Bulgaria 1300, a second edition of Grabar's essay was published, this time with an extensive preface by Duichev. After introducing Grabar and his work on medieval Bulgarian monuments, Duichev comes to the study on the Boyana Church and rather abruptly says: "A special attention for us represents, by the way, the opinion stated by the careful scholar about the local origin of the master-painters, who are the authors of the frescoes of 1259".<sup>24</sup> There is nothing factually incorrect about Duichev's statement. Grabar had indeed mentioned that the painter at Boyana was most probably Bulgarian.<sup>25</sup> However, the full sentence reads: "the work was done by a Slav master according to a Greek [Byzantine] original"<sup>26</sup>. By focusing attention on the first part of this statement, while disregarding the second part has led to a nationalistic interpretation of exclusivity, which was certainly none of Grabar's own intention. Duichev dwells particularly on Russian scholar's conclusion that in the thirteenth century we witness "a Bulgarian school of painting"<sup>27</sup>. He even commends the Russian author for his "courage for proclaiming as *purely* Bulgarian such a work of art"<sup>28</sup>. We see how by a subtle change of language, meaning is completely distorted. In its extreme form, this reading of Grabar's essay, which is still popular in Bulgaria has been taken to mean no less than that the Renaissance in Europe had started in Bulgaria<sup>29</sup>. As the contemporary Bulgarian scholar Diana Popova mentions with some irony, "this legend has firmly settled in the minds of generations of Bulgarians – it can be shaken neither by the logic of Eastern Orthodox art (which is different from that of Italian art), nor the opinion of specialists (Prof. Lazarev's<sup>30</sup> description of the Boyana frescoes as archaic is definitely not appreciated)."<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

By looking at the concrete case of the 1300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the Bulgarian state, this paper drew attention to the use of art as a tool of nationalistic propaganda in the late Communist period. I was interested in the paradox of a religious art at the service of an atheist state. I suggested that in their exercise of cultural hegemony late Communist regimes used medieval monuments as an example of the national genius, while, at the same time, stripping them of their religious connotations. The interpretation along nationalistic lines of the Boyana Church frescoes, that were advanced in the context of the preparations of the anniversary celebrations in Bulgaria served as an example.

**Biographical Note:** Clemena Antonova works on aspects of the problem of the icon, including the role that the religious image plays in contemporary, secularized culture. Her D.Phil. (Ph.D.) at Oxford University was published as *Space, Time, and Presence in the Icon: Seeing the World with the Eyes of God* (Ashgate, U.K., 2010). She has published articles in established journals, as *Slavonica*, *Leonardo*, *Sobornost*, *Cithara*, etc. She is a member of the editorial board of the *American Journal of Icon Studies*. Clemena Antonova has held research fellowships at the Institute for Advanced Studies at Edinburgh, the Royal Academy of Belgium, and the Institute for the Human Sciences in Vienna. At present, she is a Research Fellow at the Morphomata International Centre at the University of Cologne in Germany, where her project is entitled "Visual Biographies of Saints East and West (12<sup>th</sup> – 13 C.)". She has taught at universities in Bulgaria, Britain, and Morocco.

<sup>23</sup> Grabar spent the first few years of his exile from Bolshevik Russia at Sofia University before moving to Paris. While in Bulgaria, Grabar published *Boianskata tsarkva/L'Eglise de Boiana*, (Sofia, 1924).

<sup>24</sup> Duichev, Ivan, "Predgovor" (Preface) in Grabar, A., *Boianskata tsarkva/D'Englise de Boiana*, second ed., (Sofia, 1978), p.8; my translation

<sup>25</sup> Grabar even suggests the possibility that this artist or his students might have been the same ones who had decorated some of the Turnovo churches a few decades earlier, in particular, the Church of the Forty Holy Martyrs, decorated in 1230 by an iconographer, known as Dragan.

<sup>26</sup> Grabar, A., *Boianskata tsarkva/L'Eglise de Boiana*, (Sofia, 1924), p.20

<sup>27</sup> *op.cit.*

<sup>28</sup> Duichev, Ivan, "Predgovor" (Preface) in *op.cit.*, p.8; my italics

<sup>29</sup> Recently, an author in a long line to put forward such a claim is Boris Cholpanov in his *Star Moments in the Bulgarian Past. The Bulgarian Contribution to World Civilization during Antiquity and the Renaissance* (in Bulgarian), (Sofia, 2001). According to Cholpanov, the Boyana frescoes represent "a Bulgarian Renaissance, predating by a century the Italian one".

<sup>30</sup> Viktor Lazarev is a Russian scholar, who is accepted world-wide as one of the greatest specialists on Byzantine and Byzantine-inspired art.

<sup>31</sup> Popova, Diana, "The Myth" (in Bulgarian), *Kultura*, vol.18, 23 April 2004; my translation.

