

FUNDAMENTAL VALUES FOR IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AMONG THE BULGARIAN MUSLIMS

ЦЕННОСТНИ ОСНОВАНИЯ ЗА КОНСТРУИРАНЕ НА ИДЕНТИЧНОСТ ПРИ БЪЛГАРСКИТЕ МЮСЮЛМАНИ

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Abstract: *The results of the analyses of European Values Study data (European Values Study 2008) indicate significant differences between the social and value profile of Eastern Orthodox Christians and the Muslim community in Bulgaria. In this survey, for an important share of the respondents who define themselves as Muslims, religion is no longer a value in itself but a complete environment, which determines the attitude towards other values and relations. Religious morality structures the new models of participation and forms of solidarity. While the Orthodox Christians mostly have a traditional respect for the norms of faith, among an important part of the Muslims religion is becoming a value scale and a core of social activity in general. While we do have reason to consider that, overall, Bulgarian society is in a process of rethinking its attitude to religion, this applies to a much greater degree to Muslims. The mediating complex of factors that most probably accelerate certain processes of consolidation of the religious community is connected with its partial social isolation, its specific profile of professional, civic, and political activity.*

KEY WORDS: VALUES, ISLAM, IDENTITY, RELIGION, TOLERANCE, TRADITION, FAITH

1. The mobile characteristics of identity

Achieving ethnic and/or religious identity – but not so much in its spatial coordinates as in respect of its quality (which results from correlating to the others) – is an important step towards overcoming the perception of others as strangers, a perception that may be considered as based on a lack of intersubjectivity. Life together in a living present tends to reject the image of the isolated and self-reproducing community and asserts the notion of a multi-cultural, poly-religious and multi-ethnic reality. The active participants in such a reality correlate to one another in the course of constituting it. A possible approach in the framework of this perspective would be to look for the dimensions of ethnic and religious identity in the social context, where the predominating trends are actually realized.

The analysis of the Islamic community (the Ummah) as a space of total identity can be meaningfully conducted in two basic aspects: the existing notion of community that Muslims have, and the specific nature of the mutual personal and community ties that the faithful maintain when coexisting with the Others. The unwavering idealization of the Ummah in both the historical and theological aspect is a trend that shapes individual and collective consciousness. People are seen as either believers in Allah or infidels. Territories and countries are either “the House of Islam” or “the House of War”. Armed conflicts are either a “holy war” for the true faith or “internecine conflict” (Fitnah). Taxation is either sanctioned by Sharia law or is non-legitimate, etc. In this concrete but comprehensive sense, religious affiliation, the belonging to the Ummah, is established, maintained and transmitted as the fundament of a person’s life; it turns into a total identity. Given the dissolved boundaries between the religious and the secular sphere, the religious norms become a factor that regulates and largely predetermines the social and political reality in the Ummah.

In Islamic cannon, all possible human activities are encompassed by two categories: permissible (halal) and prohibited (Haram). The religious identity of the true believer would be impossible without this all-encompassing regulation. In other words, all values in Islam are refracted through the lense of “religion”, which is not one value among others but is the integral environment that determines, encourages or penalizes human conduct. How is the integration of the faithful within modern society and the nation state made possible? To what degree are the inner dynamics and cohesion of the Islamic community influenced by the transformations occurring in society? (Given that these are transformation whose historical memory is linked to a different religious dimension and whose political development in history includes periods of passionate rejection of all religious traditions.) Closely connected with these two questions are two essential aspects of the norm in the Islamic

community: 1. The prescribed rules of relations and conduct in the family, and 2. Canonic principles of the relation between parents and children and, in a broader aspect, between adults and young people.

The identification structure of Bulgarian Muslims is realized at two levels. The first is the religious one. According to the definitions at this level, the Bulgarian Muslim is a Muslim, the Turk is a Muslim, and the Bulgarian is a non-Muslim. The second level is the ethnic one. According to its definitions, the Bulgarian Muslim is a not pure Turk, the Turk is a Turk, and the Bulgarian is a Bulgarian. On the other hand, religious affiliation increasingly becomes the predominant reference point compared with ethnic self-definition. Under these circumstances, the preconditions exist for a gradual “secondary Turkization” of the Bulgarian Muslims. This trend has a negative effect on ethno-religious relations at the regional level, and it permanently restrains the processes of social integration in the regions with a mixed population. The attempt to abandon a group identity is looked upon with mistrust by both the Bulgarians and the Turks. The Bulgarians, under the influence of their national mythology, are inclined to look upon Bulgarian Muslims as some kind of traitors (who have been made Turks). The Turks, for their part, find it hard to accept the idea that a Muslim does not understand Turkish, regarded as the traditional language for Muslims in Bulgaria. This non-acceptance leaves the Bulgarian Muslims in a very insecure position with respect of their identity.

Significant changes are taking place in traditional Bulgarian Islam. One of the main agents of these changes today are the young Muslims who are still students in secondary schools and universities. Through this future spiritual elite of the Muslim community, new dimensions and new dynamics of this community’s integration process will emerge and be asserted. The attitudes and positions of these young people, their values, will define to a considerable degree the directions of the process of integration of religious communities into the secular, democratic political model. That is why part of the efforts of researchers for interpreting the problem of the integration of the Muslim community in contemporary Bulgarian society will increasingly have to be focused on an analysis of the representations, justifications, and argumentations of the members of the spiritual and intellectual elite of the Muslim community in Bulgaria.

The initial assumptions that set the boundaries of this analysis are defined by the understanding that the so-called folk Islam in our country is being subjected to a fundamental rethinking in the context of modern democratic development and of the impact of contradictory phenomena which we have defined as a new Islamic culture and which mirror the effort to construct a specific Islamic modernity (Bosakov 2015). Together with this,

we share the view that the Muslim community in our country is a unity only in the representations of non-Muslims. The internal differentiation and fragmentation of the contemporary Islamic *lifeworld* is a fact the fundamental importance of which is often underestimated. That is precisely why one object of the researcher's interest in this study is the internal heterogeneity of the representation of the unifying impact of religious education in the Muslim social environment.

The basic themes that shape the research efforts in this direction are formulated around the distances between meanings in the interpretation of democratic civic and secular values on one hand, and observance of the religious canon on the other. The social realities of the attitude towards Islam in Bulgaria are a precondition for attempting to formulate new questions and build various hypotheses reflecting the dynamic reality of the relations between religious communities.

The results of the analysis of European Values Study data (European Values Study -2008)¹ indicate significant differences between the respondents who have defined themselves as affiliated to Eastern Orthodox Christianity and to Islam.² It is precisely through comparison that we distinctly see the difference between declared religious *affiliation* and a complete religious *identity*. Among Eastern Orthodox Christians, there is a considerably more significant internal differentiation in indicated opinions and assessments than among Muslims. Those who have defined themselves as Muslims display a higher level of personal integration as regards their value orientations than do Christians or people of other religious confessions.

Along with this, a comparison between different religious groups in the study clearly reveals that the profile of atheism has practically lost a great part of its value orientations. Outside the declared non-affiliation it involves with respect to a specific religion, atheism practically does not involve any specific value or social orientations of its own.

To this we should add the fact that this survey of values in Bulgaria is the first in which a comparatively lower share of respondents have clearly indicated affiliation to Eastern Orthodoxy (58,6 %). The mechanical declaring of religious affiliation is gradually giving place to fuller, better integrated sets of values, and this trend seems more distinct among the Muslims. That is why the chosen research hypothesis can be confirmed and partially modified on the basis of the findings. Regardless of various differences internal to the Muslim group, the results show a higher degree of integration at the level of values (Bosakov 2009). This gives us reason to continue our research in the direction of the basic elements of the hypothetical set of value orientations that corresponds to the Islamic religious identity in present-day Bulgarian society.

The data show that, among those who indicate *religion, work* and *family* as very important in their lives, there is a greater share of respondents self-defined as Muslims. At this stage of analysis we may say that it is around these three spheres that the most clearly discernable groups of value orientations are concentrated, those for which we may claim with a high degree of probability that they are the value orientations of Muslims in Bulgaria. While among all respondents, taken as a whole, religion is relatively less often defined as a leading value for the respondent, its importance for Muslims is predominant.

Among those who have indicated religion as *very important for their lives*, Muslims amount to 31,1%, while the percentage of all respondents who have given this answer is 12,8%. The proportion of Eastern Orthodox who have indicated this answer shows it to be a much rarer choice for them than for Muslims (54,0 % of all those who indicated this answer declared they were Eastern Orthodox, although the relative share of this

religion among all respondents is much larger – 58,6%). There is a similar distribution of answers to the questions regarding the importance of work; it is only with regard to the family that a clear similarity between representatives of the two religions is registered.

Among those who have indicated religion as very important in their lives, the share of Muslims is three times as high as that of all other surveyed persons. The results show that relatively young people (aged between 18 and 24) are those who have selected this answer more often. The answer was given more often by women than men, and by residents of villages and small towns three times more often than by those of larger settlements. The social profile of those for whom religion is *very important* or *important* in their lives can be related to the existing inequalities between centre and periphery in the context of the growing differences by income and education, and this profile usually corresponds to a traditional type of family. For the predominant share of these people, religion is a factor that structures their whole lifeworld, defines the distances to others and the general meaning of attitudes to the family and work.

The findings, compared with those of the previous EVS waves, provide grounds for formulating the hypothesis that in the last ten years the importance of religion has generally changed in Bulgarian society (Fotev 2000). But whereas the predominant secular values have expanded their influence among the group of Christians, among Muslims in Bulgaria there is a process of strengthening of Islam as a set of values and of consolidation of the community around Islamic values. Hence, the discussion below will be devoted to the influence of the religious value system on the attitude of Muslims towards modern values and social practices.

Apart from the topic of *religion, work, and family*, Muslims indicating the other three sets of values, *leisure time, friends and acquaintances, and politics*, as very important to them are a smaller percentage than the overall percentage of this religious group within the total population. The difference in percentages is greatest as concerns the importance of 'leisure time' (only 9,1% of those who indicated this as very important for them were Muslims, whereas the share of Muslims in the total population is 12,8%). Next in order of importance come 'friends and acquaintances', where 9,4% of those who indicated this answer were Muslims, and, slightly higher, 'politics', indicated as very important by 10,0 % of Muslims.

Regardless of the distinct structuring of more important and less important value spheres in the lives of Muslims, in these six sets of values there are elements pertaining both to private and to public life. It is notable that the group of Muslims directs its attention in a greater degree to "inner" values, which regulate the intimate everyday lifeworld, such as 'religion' and 'family', while among their important values related predominantly to some sort of public interaction, 'work' is foremost.

The distribution of items defined as most important in the life of a person, and the exceptionally high share of Muslims who indicated religion as important compared with results for all other values, permits us to take the next step in this analysis and formulate one of its basic research theses: religion is not simply a value preferred and important for Muslim. All research findings give us reason to assert that, for the predominant share of the surveyed Muslims, religion represents an integral value scale upon which all other values are projected and acquire meaning. *Religion as an integral value system is a structuring factor of the attitude to the other spheres of personal and public life.* The religious ethics of Islam influences to a decisive degree the expressed attitude to the other values.

A comparison with the other religious communities, and especially with Eastern Orthodox Christians, does not show a similar process occurring there. The declared affiliation with Christianity, once placed in a different value context, begins to waver or takes on a different form. The results of this analysis give us reason to formulate the research hypothesis that there are significant changes taking place in religious consciousness in the

¹ The survey data are accessible at the Internet address of the Bulgarian Sociological Association: <http://www.bsa-bg.org>

² The lack of space in this article for a precise distinction between the sub-groups of Sunni and Shiite Muslims has led to generalizations that might, to a certain degree, obscure the essential distances between these two divisions in Islam.

past years, changes that have led to a relative decrease in the importance of religious morality among the largest group, that of Christians, and, on the contrary, to a consolidation of religious morality among Muslims. The testing of this hypothesis should be the object of an additional, full-scale analysis, but here we may claim that the religious dimension can be found in practically all issues related to everyday life, public interaction, and accepted values of the surveyed groups.

2. Labour, civic, and political engagement

As for value judgments regarding work, there is practically no distance between the views of Christians and Muslims, except as regards the understanding of the importance of remuneration for work. Good job security (14,1 %), generous holidays (15,1 %) and family-friendly, (14,2 %) are the more important features of a preferred job for Muslims. Muslims are more often inclined than Christians to attribute poverty to a lack of luck (20,1 % of respondents who gave this answer were Muslims), to laziness and lack of willpower (14,4 %), but also to social injustice (13,0 %). Likewise, with respect to work Muslims are more inclined to hold that, when jobs are scarce, Bulgarian citizens (13,1 %), and men (20,2 %) should be given priority over immigrants.

The judgments of Muslims regarding the degrees of freedom in making decisions in one's job do not follow a normal distribution of answers, and most of the indicated responses are clustered around the middle of the scale. An approximately equal share of Muslims indicated that they had a considerable freedom to make decisions in work and that they practically had no such freedom. But, regardless of these distinctions, in most cases the assessment of the respondents who defined themselves as Muslims were situated around the lower degrees of independence and freedom in making decisions in work. This assessment of their own freedom is in a way also displayed in the assertions regarding the importance of work as a third core of meaningful things in the registered value orientations of Muslims in Bulgaria.

The importance of work in the value system of Muslims is clearly shown by the results for this question. Together with this, in the context of self-assessment regarding the degrees of liberty in making decisions in work and the general attitude to work, at least one other interesting comparison can be made, that between the viewpoints of Christians and Muslims regarding the dimension of discipline, i.e. the willingness to obey instructions at work.

Nearly twice the share of Muslims as is their relative proportion in the population have expressed support of the view that instructions at work should be obeyed even when one does not fully agree with them – 21,1 % of Muslim respondents share this view. The lowest amount of support goes to the view that instructions should be followed only if one agrees with them – only 6,2 %. Still, among Muslims there is also a group willing to take an attitude to orders according to concrete circumstances and conditions (12,4 %). In comparison, Christians put a clear stress on the need to be convinced in the correctness of instructions – 63,9 % of respondents who have expressed this view have defined themselves as Eastern Orthodox Christians.

Apart from work issues, the survey results delineate a rather passive social position among Muslims with regard to a number of questions. Muslims have an insignificant degree of participation and engagement in social activities and organizations, except for religious organizations, activities related to helping disadvantaged people, and initiatives generally aimed at preserving peace. Against the backdrop of this rather passive profile of civic activity, in their social contacts part of the Muslim respondents express some reservation regarding living in neighbourhood with certain categories of people.

Their most distinct social distances are with respect to Christians (17,2 % of those who have indicated this response were Muslims), followed by people with AIDS (16,6 % were Muslims), people of a different race (15,0 %), Jews (14,6 %), homosexuals (14,3 %), and immigrants or foreign workers (14,0

%). Although these distances are not essentially different from the distribution in the whole surveyed population, they are noteworthy, especially in the context of the general hypothesis that there is a rather distinct isolation and closure of the Muslim group within society at large. Part of the explanation for these negative attitudes can be looked for in the overall registered level of mistrust towards others in general. In answer to the question as to whether most people can be trusted or not, the responses registered among Muslims show a slight preponderance of the view that 'you can't be too careful in dealing with people' (13,0 %). This data is in harmony with the registered agreement with the view that 'most people would try to take advantage of me' – 14,7 % of those who supported this statement were Muslims.

Exceptionally important in this context are the results for the statement 'Politicians who do not believe in God are unfit for public office'. Of the total 27,5 % of all those who expressed strong or partial agreement with this statement, an average of 64,35 % defined themselves as Eastern Orthodox Christians, and 21,25 % as Muslims. Both percentages are higher than the general distribution of these religious groups, but the share of Muslims is twice higher.

Whereas the largest group of Orthodox Christians chose a neutral position on the question, the greatest share of Muslims indicated strong agreement with this statement (27,1 %). If, to these, we add the figures for general agreement that unbelieving politicians are unfit for public office (15,4 %), we will have reason to formulate yet another research hypothesis, regarding the influence of religious morality on the other values in the representations of Muslims in Bulgaria. Religious affiliation is turning into an important factor with regard to the general social, civic, and political attitudes of Muslims. Even if this trend is present only among certain groups of Muslims, it is worth being the object of further research efforts.

The distribution of answers on the scale of agreement with the statement *Religious leaders should not influence government decisions* shows agreement among Orthodox Christians and Muslims alike. In both groups there are normal proportions of answers; here, 60,4 % of all respondents have expressed agreement with this statement. Yet, though by the small percentage of 8,1 % of all respondents, some have disagreed with the statement; here the Orthodox Christians have a predominant share (59,0 %), while Muslims are only 6,3 %. This result indicates the presence of a connection between religious affiliation, as a significant factor of approval for persons engaged in public office, and a higher level of support for a more active participation of religious leaders in determining the agenda of society.

Even more importantly, there is a proportionately higher presence of Christians among those who have agreed with the statement that religious leaders should not influence government decisions – 62,9 % of the Christians have expressed disagreement, and 55,1 % of all those who have expressed disagreement are Christians.

It seems that the study has registered important changes taking place in the whole complex set of relationships between religion and politics. This topic, which has comparatively rarely been in the focus of Bulgarian research interest, requires with increasing urgency to be rethought. According to one of the preliminary research hypotheses of this analysis, the attitude towards political life is mediated by priorities such as religion, work, and family (Galabov 2007b). Hence, a leading direction in further research should be the question as to the existence of a certain distance and lack of integration with respect to social processes, something that can be related to the relative closure within the framework of the religious and regional community; the results indicate a higher degree of coinciding between these two forms of integration amongst Muslims than amongst Orthodox Christians.

3. *Between the culture of neighbourhood and religious identity*

By its significant meanings and symbolic colouring, neighbourhood, as direct contact and direct spatial proximity with others, defines everyday life. This is the microsocial scale in which the real dimensions of individual achievement are situated and the conditions for success are estimated. The need to comprehensively study this question in terms of space stems from the understanding of identity as a quality that is invariably a result and a condition achieved in the course of relating to others and comparing with others (in this sense, identity is the result of a qualitative definition of the Other). Ethnoreligious distances reveal the parameters of a "contactless tolerance": in cases when assertions are proposed that do not require direct contact with others, there is greater willingness to look for socially desirable answers. Any concrete attempt to introduce religious awareness of the "others" in a situation of immediate contact leads to decreased potential willingness to accept those different others. The gap between a consistent compliance with religious morality and norms on one hand and the idea of the orthopraxis of the other religious community on the other, generates mistrust, disregard and suspicion as to the motives of people of a different faith. These attitudes correspond to a latent ethno-religious conflict, which is liable to secondary mobilization by political and economic means. In other words, neighbourhood, as a universal social network of everyday practices, is able to compensate for some of the tensions, but its influence remains confined within the framework of a contradiction in mass consciousness – the contradiction between a positive attitude to the neighbour who is of a certain religious confession and, at the same time, suspicion with regard to that religious community as a whole (Bosakov 2010).

In looking for the means to overcome the feeling of offended religious identity among the minority, an identity that it often perceives as being under threat, a careful sociological scrutiny of the culture of neighbourhood and of the importance of neighbourhood identifies the following states and processes:

- Growing modernization in everyday life is severely trying for part of the meaning and symbolism of a religion. With respect to Islam in particular, this is one

of the fundamental challenges of the new millennium: to devise a model of Islamic modernity in which the basic norms of Islam will preserve their importance, while the elements of the postmodern age that are forcefully entering into the life of society will be integrated without contradiction in the body of ethical views and values typical for the orthodoxy and orthopraxis of Islam;

- The admissibility of religiousness is not yet closely matched by respect for the right of others to be different and to follow religious norms different from one's own;
- The negative trends of development in the relations between tolerance vs. toleration of a different religious identity is a sign of an unfocused mass consciousness (toleration is primarily determined by the restricted option to be other than tolerant, rather than by an authentic culture of tolerance and respect for the different others) (Bosakov 2006).

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