

8-2012

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Recommended Citation

Altanov, Dr. Velislav (2012) "Religious Revitalization among Bulgarians during and after the Communist Time," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 32: Iss. 3, Article 4.

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RELIGIOUS REVITALIZATION AMONG BULGARIANS DURING AND AFTER THE COMMUNIST TIME

by Dr. Velislav Altanov

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Terms and Abbreviators

BGOC Bulgarian Greek Orthodox Church
EMC Evangelical Methodist Church
ECC Evangelical Congregational Church
EBC Evangelical Baptist Church
UEPC Union of Evangelical Pentecostal Churches
CoG Church of God
NSA National Sports Academy
BCoG Bulgarian Church of God
CoGB Church of God in Bulgaria
UCoG United Church of God
CBOCRC Committee for the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and Religious Cults under the authority of Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Directorate of Religious Affairs)
MFA Ministry of Foreign Affairs
DRA Directorate of Religious Affairs
LC Law of Confessions

Introduction

Bulgaria today has a total population of some 7.4 million of whom about 5.5 million are Christians.¹ Some 5 million belong to the Bulgarian Greek Orthodox Church (BGOC), between 100,000 and 300,000 are Protestants (evangelicals)² and about 50,000 are Roman Catholics.

Christianity came to Bulgarian lands already in the first century when it was part of the Roman Empire. The so-called "Conversion" of the Bulgarians in 865 A.D. by King Boris I – Michael, torn between Rome and Constantinople opted for the latter placing the Bulgarian church under the authority of the Greek-Orthodox Patriarchate of Constantinople. Over the centuries there have also been periodic alliances (*unia*) with the Holy See in Rome (during the reigns of King Kaloyan in the twelfth century and King Ivan Assen II in the thirteenth.), thus there remain "Uniates" (Roman Catholics of the Eastern Rite) among Bulgarians as well. Roman Catholics of the Western Rite were

¹ Internet Source: <http://www.nsi.bg/EPDOCS/Census2011final.pdf> (15.09.2011).

² In Bulgaria, the popular name for followers of the Reformation is Evangelical, i.e. the "Gospel" rather than "Protestant." Below we explain the reasons.

present from the 13th to 18th centuries when the Vatican sent missionaries among the Bulgarians during the time of the Ottoman Empire. Evangelical Protestants arrived in Bulgarian lands around 1840, and it was they who, centuries later, inspired a great religious revival among the Bulgarians in the last decades of the Cold War.

Bulgarian Evangelism

Rather than spreading from western and central European Protestant lands, the Bulgarian Reformation came from the UK and the USA,³ through preachers like Cyrus Hamlin, James Clark, and Charles Morse who established the first missions among the Bulgarians in the middle of the 19th century.⁴ Thus Bulgarian Evangelicals do not use the term "Protestant" or "Reformed" but rather call themselves "Evangelical churches" (Methodist, Congressional, Baptist, etc.) according to their Anglo-Saxon roots. The first Evangelical Congregational and Methodist churches (ECC and EMC)⁵ in Bulgaria were founded in 1864. There was as yet no autonomous Bulgarian Greek Orthodox Church – Exarchate (founded in 1870) of the Orthodox Patriarchate of Constantinople that sought by all means to assimilate the Bulgarian Orthodox.

Thus the first Bulgarian institutionalized Christian churches were the Evangelicals established in the nineteenth century. Their foreign missionaries set up the first nursing homes and the first Boys and Girls Intermediate Schools, in Plovdiv and Stara Zagora.⁶ They helped publish the first weekly newspaper "Zornitsa", the first magazine "Ljuboslovie", and the first books: "Arithmetic", "Short Bible History", "Basic Geography", "Bulgarian Grammar",⁷ and others. Dr. Elias Riggs and Dr. Albert Long, representatives of the British and American Bible Societies, assisted some members of the Bulgarian Enlightenment like Mr. Petko Slaveykov, Mr. Hristodul Sechanov and others (1858-1871) to translate, publish, and distribute the Bible in modern Bulgarian.⁸ Up to 1926 it was the only translation of the Holy Scriptures in the spoken Bulgarian language. Evangelical missionaries organized worship services with European choral and instrumental music.⁹ The anthem sung every year on May 24th to honor St. Cyril and Methodius actually comes from one of those hymns.

Bulgarian students of theology from the Robert College founded in Istanbul (Constantinople) in 1863, returned home as teachers, writers, and public figures,¹⁰ and spread liberal democratic ideas among the Bulgarian people. In 1876, Robert College published translations of reports into French and English of the Turkish massacres and other atrocities during their suppression of the April uprising in Bulgaria, and sent them to foreign embassies. This led to the intervention of the Great World Powers in Bulgaria.¹¹

American and British missionaries and the Bulgarian Evangelical Churches contributed to the awakening of the national spirit and the formation of the revolutionary Movement for

³ Nestorova, Tatiana. *American missionaries among the Bulgarians 1858-1912*. Sofia. 1994. p. 9-12.

⁴ Nestorova, Tatiana. *American missionaries among the Bulgarians 1858-1912*. Sofia. 1994. p. 12, 15, 16.

⁵ On the front walls on the building of the First Evangelical Congregational Church (ECC), on street "Thessaloniki", 49 in Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria as the year of its foundation was written "1864".

⁶ Petkov, Petko. *The role of Protestant churches and schools for the education and spiritual life of Bulgaria after the Liberation*. In col. *The influence of Protestant missionaries for the spiritual and political liberation of the Bulgarian people*. Sofia. 2002. p. 44-45.

⁷ Clark, James. *The Bible and the Bulgarian enlightenment. Book on spiritual awakening of the Bulgarians*. Sofia. 2007. p. 195-197.

⁸ Nestorova, Tatiana. *American missionaries among the Bulgarians 1858-1912*. Sofia. 1994. p. 80-81.

⁹ Nestorova, Tatiana. *American missionaries among the Bulgarians 1858-1912*. Sofia. 1994. p. 27.

¹⁰ Kuleva, Vessela and others. 145 by the establishment of Robert College. <http://www.argumenti.net>, (20.07.2008).

¹¹ Altanov, Velislav. *Metropolitan Methodius Kusev and national issues*. Sofia. 1998. p. 144.

Liberation of Bulgarians helping to lay the foundations of the new, third Bulgarian State. After the Liberation of Bulgaria in 1878, the Evangelicals and Robert College alumni introduced journalism to the young country, established the Institute for Statistics, the National Library and universities. After the EMC and ECC, the Evangelical Baptist Church (EBC) was also established in the country in the late nineteenth century.

Characteristics of Evangelism in Bulgaria

Bulgarian Evangelism is neither typical Western Protestantism, nor pure Anglo-Saxon Evangelism. It was "a new seedling" of the Western European Christianity, transplanted on Bulgarian Eastern Orthodox soil. It possessed traits of both its donors and its receivers. The Evangelicals have adopted several features of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, like asceticism, hermitism, strict Puritanism, and some of the medieval Bogomils'¹² anti-institutional convictions.¹³ Out of this, in 1907, there arose among some evangelical Bulgarians from North-central Bulgaria an informal holiness movement called "Jerusalem Uppers." Its founders were the preachers Yoncho Hinkov and Stoyan Tinchev, originally members of the Methodist Church. Their followers aspired to spiritual renewal and church revival, forming communities of independent home-church groups, with no legal status, church administration, or property, but of believers brought together solely by their spiritually-religious, moral, friendly, and family relations. Over the years, those groups have called themselves variously, "God's People"¹⁴, "Free Brethren", "Northern Brethren"¹⁵, etc., according to their various traditions and customs.

Pentecostalism is a branch of Anglo-Saxon Evangelism, originating in the USA in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They derive their name, from the story of Pentecost told in Acts 2:4 of where the gift of tongues was given by the Holy Spirit.

Pentecostal Missionaries in Bulgaria in the 1920's

In 1920 Pentecostal missionaries Dionysii Zaplishnim, with his Bulgarian wife Olga Zaplishni, and Ivan Voronaev, American citizens of Russian origin,¹⁶ landed in the Bulgarian port of Burgas, where they founded a community that became a kind of "New Jerusalem" for spiritual revival.¹⁷ From there, the missionaries travelled throughout the country founding new spiritual communities.¹⁸ Soon even the "Jerusalem Uppers" in Northern Bulgaria adopted Pentecostal teaching. The main leader of the Northern Brethren in Bulgaria was Stoyan Tinchev, after whom this community, the "Tinchevists," is named.

Union of Evangelical Pentecostal Churches (UEPC)

In 1928, Pastor Nikolai Nikolov – Olga Zaplishni's nephew who had studied theology in the U.S. and had the full support of the American Pentecostal "Assemblies of God" – united and

¹² Bogomilism was a Christian people's movement for reforms, lead by priest Bogomil occurred in Bulgaria in the IX century. It was against the merger of the church with political power. It lasted several centuries. See Joseph Seifert, *World Revolutionaries. First Bogomil and Hus to Lenin*. ("Hristo Botev". Sofia. 1994), pp. 18-22.

¹³ Altanov, Velislav. *One Very Specific Protestant Community in Bulgaria – Tinchevists*. Sofia. 2009. p. 123

¹⁴ Ignatov, Pavel. *Problems of Evangelism*. part I. Sofia. 2006. p. 256-257.

¹⁵ Stoykov Ventsislav. *History of the Bulgarian Church of God*. Sofia. 1999. p. 4.

¹⁶ Ignatov, p. 132-133.

¹⁷ [Anonymous author]. *History of the Evangelical Pentecostal Churches in Bulgaria*. [No place of issue]. 1977. p. 6. During Stalinist totalitarianism in Bulgaria, religion and illegal religious publications were persecuted. That is why it was wise of this author to conceal his identity. Comparing his data, we find that a book with similar title (also using citations) officially published after 1989 uses the information from this illegal, unpublished book.

¹⁸ Ignatov, p. 138.

registered the main group of Pentecostal churches in Bulgaria under the name "UEPC", as a separate, officially recognized Christian denomination.¹⁹ In 1929, he invited the *Tinchevists* to join, but Pastor Tinchev, refused. Thus, in Bulgaria, as in America since the early 1920's,²⁰ the Evangelical societies were divided into two separate "branches" – the UEPC (chaired by Pastor N. Nikolov), registered and institutionalized) and the *Tinchevists* (an informal alliance of unregistered home communities).

The Soviet Occupation of Bulgaria (1944) and the Beginning of the Cold War

On 9 September 1944, the Red Army invaded Bulgaria launching an era of Stalinist totalitarian rule characterized by aggressive and militant atheism²¹ that sought to destroy faith and religion,²² as they claimed "overcoming religious superstitions and remnants of the past."²³ The new Communist government pursued a policy developed and tested in the USSR. In its first years, until 1947, it professed religious tolerance as a way to placate and avoid criticism from the Great World Powers. Soon, however, its attitude toward all religious communities changed dramatically. The new government moved against the BGOC, the Evangelicals,²⁴ and the Roman Catholics; first by legal means, but soon by violent attacks, executions, confiscations of property, and internment of religious leaders and laymen.²⁵

Pressure and Repression of Religious Denominations by the Communists After 1947

Documents from the National Archives for the period 1947-1962 reveal a clear and terrible picture of the violence and terror to which the new government and the State Security Services subjected all religious communities in Bulgaria. Protest letters from the leadership of the BGOC, the Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Society, complain that the Communist authorities forbade religious education of children and youth, vandalized churches, stole religious icons and beat priests, nuns, and religious leaders who were constantly under threat of the new authorities.²⁶ Church farm crops were expropriated, church lands and buildings confiscated and converted into museums, cultural centers, schools and office buildings of the Communist Youth Party, "Komsomol".²⁷ Children of priests were forbidden to study in universities and institutes. Propaganda campaigns were waged against monasteries and church authorities through the government media. Religious gatherings in private homes were outlawed.²⁸ Repression of religious

¹⁹ Ivan Zarev, *History of the Evangelical Pentecostal Church in Bulgaria - 1920-1989*. Sofia. 1993. p. 32-33.

²⁰ Vinson Synan, *The Century of the Holy Spirit. 100 Years of Pentecostal and Charismatic Renewal, 1901-2001*. Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001 p. 75.

²¹ Raymond Aron, *Democracy and Totalitarianism*. Sofia. 1994. p. 166.

²² Peter Petrov, "Fair in Raduil. The Socialist Transformation of a Religious Holiday", In *Bulgarian Folklore Magazine*, Vol. 3-4/1997. Village between change and tradition. (BAS. Sofia. 1997), p. 105.

²³ Stefan Chureshki, *Roots of conflict between Christianity and Marxism in communist Bulgaria. Towards a Philosophy of Bulgarian history*. Internet Source: <http://www.bg-history.info/5246/Koreni-na-protivorechie-to-me-zhdu-hristiansvtoto-i-marksizmut-prez-komunizma-v-Bulgariia-Kum-filosofia-na-bulgarskata-istoriia.html> (2.07.2010).

²⁴ Jordan Kochev, *The Trial of Evangelical Pastors-spies*. ("Otechestven Front". Sofia. 1949), pp. 68, 77, 96, etc. This book is remarkable because it was issued by the Communist government. Its propaganda purpose was to explain to Bulgarian people that the Protestant leaders have been condemned in these trials because they were found guilty of being spies of the American and Western European governments.

²⁵ Slavian Popov, *Simple Bulgarian communism*. Part. 2. Sofia. 2008. p. 204-221.

²⁶ Archive of CBOCRC, MFA and DRA, Fund 10, list 9, AU 1169, major № 336, Letter to the Holy Synod on CBOCRC: Mourning the grand priest Nedelchev who had been beaten by the deputy mayor in the village of Pisarevo, Novi Pazar. (1960).

²⁷ Daniela Kalkandjieva, *Bulgarian Orthodox Church and the New Religious Law*. ("Demos". Silistra. 2004), p. 157.

²⁸ Friedrich Hayek, *The Road to Slavery*. MAK, Sofia. 2004), p. 61.

institutions, spiritual leaders, and laity became so widespread that even the leadership of the Catholic eparchy had to ask the government for permission to send the Pope a greeting telegram on his 80th birthday in 1961.²⁹

Other religious communities had to accounting for every dollar of aid and donations for the Christian work received from the West.³⁰ Shops selling items like communion plates and chalices necessary for worship were closed. Publishing was severely restricted, and all religious activities involving exchange of funds were heavily taxed. Spiritual leaders were sent to "voluntary labor camps." The Police banned pastors from their cities and parishes, where they had been ministering for years, intentionally cutting them off from their only source of income. They were allowed to minister again only if they agreed to limit drastically their religious activity or "at least start" to cooperate "voluntarily" with the government.³¹

National Archives documents also describe in detail how the Communist authorities sought to stifle and gradually to eliminate religious communities. The quoted data covers only the period up to 1962, but religious persecution continued right up to 1989. Pastor Haralan Popov, who managed to emigrate to Sweden, has written a book describing the chilling brutality of the officers of the People's Militia during and after his arrest.³² Pastor Hristo Kulichev, jailed in late 1985 (four years before Democracy in Eastern Europe), confirms this cruelty.³³ Thus, what Russian sociologist Viktor Garadzha says about the Soviet Union applies equally to Bulgaria: "In totalitarian societies, the church ceases to exist as an independent variable."³⁴

The Tinchevists and Communist Rule

The government policy to disrupt religious communities affected mainly registered denominations that had bank accounts, real estate, and were prepared to reveal them to state officials. Among those denominations were the BGOCC, Roman Catholic (and Uniate) churches, Muslims, the White Brotherhood, EBC, EMC, ECC, and UEPC. All were fully controlled by the government: their properties confiscated, their leaders imprisoned, and all their religious activity prohibited both in public places (outside of church buildings) and in private home gatherings. Unofficial religious groups, however, like the Tinchevists, who had no funds, properties for structures escaped much of the persecution.³⁵ Of course, the Tinchevists were not completely left

²⁹ Archive of CBOCRC, MFA and DRA, Fund 10, Inventory 10, Case 2/7, Case 332. Letter of the Catholic Diocese CBOCRC to ask permission to send a greeting telegram to Pope John XXIII. (1961).

³⁰ Archive of CBOCRC, MFA and DRA, Fund 10, Inventory 10, Case 13, Case 632. Letter of the Union of Evangelical cathedral church on CBOCRC to \$ 300 sent by Mladenov, living in the U.S. (1962).

³¹ Kalkandjieva, p. 183.

³² Haralan Popov, *Tortured for His Faith: Modern Christian Epic of Courage and Heroism*. (Haralan Popov. Bulgaria. 1994), pp. 31, 35, 43. (Published earlier in the USA in several editions).

³³ Christo Kulichev, *Of Freedom in Prison*. (No place of issue). 2002). pp. 76, 157, 174, 276.

³⁴ Viktor Garadzha, *Sociology of Religions*. ("Infra-M". Moscow. 2007) p. 243.

³⁵ Archive of CBOCRC, MFA and DRA. Inventory 9, Case 1, Rev. 21. Main № 4702. (1959).

undisturbed, they also suffered. Their leaders and laymen were also beaten, and jailed;³⁶ some of them even killed.³⁷ Yet through it all their activity could not be stopped.³⁸

The decision of Pastor Stoyan Tinchev in 1929 not to register his followers under the umbrella of UEPC turned out to be wise. Their unique form of spiritual life and informal religious practice as home groups kept them relatively safe from the heavy anti-religious policy of the Communists, which nearly suffocated all other faith groups.

"Renaissance" – Rise of Tinchevists During the "Developed Socialist Society" (1971-1989)³⁹

The Tinchevists' asceticism, their tendency to retreat from and remain isolated from the outside world also contributed to the relative "freedom" they enjoyed within the boundaries of their communities. Their isolation (communicating only among themselves) preserved their uniqueness and difference from all other Evangelicals. We should also note that throughout the period of totalitarian rule (1944-1989) the Bulgarian Evangelicals, both legal and illegal, all managed to have the primary literature available for every believer. The Bible in common Bulgarian language was printed abroad and secretly imported into the country through various channels. In most cases, Christians from America and Western Europe smuggled the Bibles when visiting Bulgaria. The Communist authorities confiscated many Bibles, other Christian literature, and songbooks at the borders, as well as those found in Evangelical homes. Yet, miraculously, the Christian communities always had the necessary church literature. In the Churches of God, for example, spiritual hymnbooks (with over 200 liturgical hymns) were copied by hand and spread from person to person.

The political situation also contributed largely to this rapid increase in the number of underground societies. In later years, the government did not persecute Christians with such cruelty as it had in the first years of Soviet occupation. Suppression and repression of believers continued, but were significantly less than during the post-war years 1944-1953 (up to Stalin's death).

Other contributing factors for the promotion of underground religious communities in Bulgaria were, surprisingly perhaps, the emergence of the pop culture after 1945, and especially pop music,⁴⁰ first in America then spreading to Western Europe, and soon also in Eastern Europe. In Bulgaria, the followers of such pop movements were few and persecuted by the communist militia. Yet, young people listened to the Beatles, Rolling Stones, Elvis Presley, etc. and were influenced by the free spirit of the West. Logically, some reflections of that culture began to flow

³⁶ Milena Benovska-Sabkova, and V. Altanov, "Evangelical Conversion among the Roma in Bulgaria: Between Capsulation and Globalization". In *Transitions Magazine*, vol. XLVIII, № 2. (University of Geneva. Geneva. 2009), p. 137.

³⁷ According to the story of pastor D.T. (1947), Pleven, during the 1950s a young man from the neighboring villages had been killed by the mayor and the chief of militia under interrogation, because he had not stopped distributing Bibles, despite their orders (narrated 26/08/2007). See also Pavel Ignatov, *Behind the Wall*. (Sofia. 2010). p. 11-22. There the author describes 24 documented cases of persecution of believers from Tinchevist societies for their religious beliefs, that did not allow them to take up weapons or to ever take oaths. They were tried and imprisoned, serving long sentences. According to the author, these are just the documented cases, which means that there are many more undocumented ones.

³⁸ In some documents, secret service agents recognize the serious difficulties in their attempt to track or stop Tinchevists' work. See Dimitar Furdadjev and others (ed.). *Heralds of Truth. History of Evangelical Churches in Bulgaria*. (NP. 1994), p. 383.

³⁹ "Developed socialist society" is a term from the communist/socialist propaganda. Its purpose was to suggest that after 1971 (the time of taking control of state by the last communist leader Todor Zhivkov, often called in modern literature "dictator"), the country has entered a stage of stable existence, followed by progressive development.

⁴⁰ V. Altanov, *Modern Sound of Liturgical Music in Pentecostal Communities – One of the Reasons for Their Success*. (NBU. Sofia. 2009), p. 45.

into the pews of the illegal evangelical societies, finding in them fertile soil for their rebellious attitudes toward the communist authority.

Conversion⁴¹ to Pentecostalism was a global process which has been studied for decades by leading sociologists.⁴² Even behind the "Iron Curtain," the Tinchevists participated in this process as the vanguard of change in the beliefs of large groups of Bulgarians. They preached and proclaimed their faith in all corners of society: Their evangelists shared the Gospel with the country's minorities, atheists, Muslims, the Orthodox churches, and even officials of the governmental ministries. From some 4,000 members in 1960 they grew to over 30,000 by 1990,⁴³ thus increasing their members by nearly 10 times in 30 years. Thanks to them, Pentecostals today constitute 80-90% of all Evangelical Christians which was also of great importance for the unique "Renaissance" of these societies. The charisma, passionate, compelling sermons of spiritual preachers and leaders like Pastor Stoyan Tinchev (since 1965), Dimitar Pankov, and Pavel Ignatov added color to the unique fabric of the Bulgarian Evangelical societies. Pastor Pavel Ignatov, an acknowledged charismatic leader and captivating speaker, with a strong character and great organizational skills became "chief elder" of the Tinchevists in 1980. On the initiative of Pastor P. Ignatov, the Tinchevists adopted the name "Church of God" (CoG),⁴⁴ after considering the various names used over the years for their society.

Urbanization grew under Communist rule, and that also contributed to the rise of the CoG. Sofia, the capital of the country became a major political, economic, cultural, and educational center. Once prevalent among the wealthy rural population, believers of CoG gradually populated the cities. The unemployed sons of farmers and villagers were forced to seek education and employment in the urban centers, especially Sofia. In their new jobs and neighborhoods CoG believers evangelized persuasively and preached their "aggressive" sermons, inviting listeners to join them and participate in their communities to find salvation for their immortal souls.⁴⁵

Many energetic and active young people from the post-war generation of Bulgaria joined their ranks. The evangelist Tsenka Yaneva⁴⁶ for example brought the Gospel to some of the students from the National Sports Academy (NSA), where she worked as a cleaner in 1984 and 1985. Because of her testimony, a group of young athletes from Dobrich joined the CoG. Like the students from the NSA students from the National Theater Academy, the Sofia University and other institutions of higher education formed new CoG groups and took them to all their home towns and areas.⁴⁷

Women also contributed much to the widespread influence of the CoG in the capital and the country as a whole. The women's contribution to the rapid growth of CoG is significant and

⁴¹ Linda Woodhead, *Religions in the Modern World: Traditions and Transformations*. (Routledge, London, 2002), p. 172.

⁴² Joel Robbins, *The Globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity*. Annual reviews. (San Diego, La Jolla, USA, 2004), pp. 117-143. See also Simon Coleman, *The Globalization of Charismatic Christianity. Spreading of the Gospel of Prosperity*. (UK, 2000), David Martin, "Evangelical Protestant Upsurge and Its Political Implications." In *Coll. Desekularisation of the World*, Peter L. Berger (ed.). (KH, Sofia, 2004), p. 58-77 and Peter Berger, *Desecularisation of the World: A Global Review*. (KH, Sofia, 2004), pp. 9-33.

⁴³ Stoykov, *History of the Bulgarian Church of God*, p. 6.

⁴⁴ Interview with Pavel Ignatov (1948), pastor, senior elder of the CoG-BCoG, now chairman of CoGB, Sofia, 25 August, 2010.

⁴⁵ Interview with Oleg Temelkov (1969), missionary, leader mladezhki CoG "Bethel", now a member of UCoG, "The River", Dobrich, 5 July, 2010.

⁴⁶ Interview with Tsenka Yaneva (1941), member of CoGB, 6 July 2010, Sofia.

⁴⁷ Interview with Pavel Ignatov (1948), pastor, senior elder of the CoG-BCoG, now chairman of CoGB, 20 December, Sofia.

commonly acknowledged. They make up about two-thirds of the total religious followers. Many go out daily to do street evangelism, traveling on public transport to visit patients in hospitals, and sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ and His salvation with random strangers on the streets and markets. Through their sacrificial work and faithful witnessing, many new members joined CoG.

Church of God (CoG) on the Eve of 1989

In 1984–1985, summit meetings between the leaders of the United States and the Soviet Union led to disarmament agreements like "SALT-2". President Mikhail Gorbachev proclaimed "Perestroika" and "Glasnost". Strained relationships and tensions⁴⁸ between East and West were eased by the ongoing talks and negotiations.

Meanwhile, CoG continued its activity, with its young and old people doing their best to bring new followers. Many new groups of believers flocked to their national gatherings throughout the country. Within their home churches, believers discussed many topics from the Bible: salvation, love of Christ, repentance, forgiveness, holiness, prayer, worship and sang typical Gospel songs. They even developed a specific "church jargon," a peculiar slang, which characterizes them as a specific micro-society. With its unique value system, CoG defines itself as a religious Christian-Evangelical subculture.⁴⁹ Yet, unwittingly, CoG became also a "dissident movement". Though it did not intend it, through its daily life and evangelistic work it was creating a practical resistance to the political power in the country, working directly against the government's policy of official atheism.⁵⁰ Political observers may be right when they argue that every socialist country except Bulgaria had an organized dissident movement. In Bulgaria, the people's resistance against totalitarianism⁵¹ took a different form. It acted under the banner of struggle for religious freedom and Christian identity.

Home churches began to proliferate and eventually people's homes were not enough to accommodate all the new converts of CoG. Led by their elder, Pastor P. Ignatov, they even developed a "combat" strategy and initiated negotiations with the political leadership of the Communists to come out of hiding and be registered as an independent denomination. Their request was denied,⁵² of course, and in response, in 1983, CoG organized small street demonstrations and protests, six years before the fall of the Berlin Wall.⁵³ After these negotiations failed Pastor P. Ignatov was forcefully separated from his congregation and family and placed in solitary confinement in a small mountain village. But this did not stop or restrict the activities of CoG.

Through CoG's contacts with Pentecostal evangelists from Yugoslavia, USA, and Finland,⁵⁴ religious problems in Bulgaria were brought to the attention of the international Christian community. That is how, in their struggle to survive, this relatively small religious group with no particular power or position in the country brought international pressure to bear on the Bulgarian government.

⁴⁸ Karl Barth, *L'Eglise entre L'Est et a L'Ouest*. (Editions Roulet. Geneve. 1949), pp. 10-11.

⁴⁹ Anatoly Shendrik, *Sociology of the Culture*. (Moscow. 2005). pp. 301-303.

⁵⁰ Christian Godin, *Dictionnaire de philosophie*. (Librerie Arthem Fayard. 2004), p. 428.

⁵¹ Stephen Bankov, *Dossier on Both Sides of the Iron Curtain*. (NP: 2001), p. 594.

⁵² Pavel Ignatov, *Bloodless Persecution of the Church: Totalitarian State Against the Church of God in Bulgaria 1960-1991*. ("LIC". Sofia. 2004), p. 100.

⁵³ *Ibid.* p. 156.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 108-109.

In December 1987, Dr. David Walker and Lambert de Long, representatives of the American Church of God,⁵⁵ with headquarters in Cleveland, Ohio visited Bulgaria and the Bulgarian CoG manifesting their support for their Bulgarian brethren and acting as their mediators at the highest level of government. As a result of that visit, the Bulgarian CoG became affiliated with the international CoG in USA, through which they received support and protection in their continuous "battle" with the communist government.

The End of the Cold War

The unofficial clash between CoG and the Communist government in Bulgaria ended in the defeat of the latter. The Bulgarian Communist Party no longer exists in the public domain, but the Bulgarian CoG is alive, well, and still growing and serving God and society. On December 27, 1990, the denomination was officially recognized by the state and registered under the 1949 law on Confessions under the name "Bulgarian Church of God" (BCoG). For the first time since their founding in the early twentieth century, the Jerusalem Uppers, the Tinchevists, and the CoG became an independent denomination, officially recognized by the state. From a "private religion," it was elevated to the "public domain". As Jose Casanova⁵⁶ has said, CoG became "a public religion".⁵⁷

In the years to follow, BCoG was the main catalyst of the wave of massive evangelical events in city squares and stadiums throughout the country, some of which attracted huge crowds of people (30,000 in Stara Zagora and 40,000 in Sofia). With these numbers, their crusades were tantamount to political protest marches and demonstrations, demanding democratic change in the country. None of the nearby Balkan countries had such massive, public demonstrations of the Christian faith and religion as such – neither Greece, nor Romania, Yugoslavia, or Turkey – only Bulgaria.

Along with CoG, the official UEPC was formed as well, whose belief is similar, having itself suffered pressure by the authorities. Many new Pentecostal churches, known as New Charismatic communities, also moved into the public space. Many non-charismatic evangelical churches (EMC, ECC, EBC) joined and were followed by Eastern Orthodox Christians, Roman Catholics, Muslim in publicly manifesting their faith. The U.S. intervention in support of BCoG ensured victory over the atheistic, totalitarian power. Yet every victory has its price. Becoming an officially recognized branch of the U.S. CoG changed the unique identity of the BCoG, unifying it with the American way of faith and worship. This caused the BCoG to lose some of its unique identity⁵⁸ which for decades distinguished it from other denominations in the country.

Conclusion

Today, the Church of God, its branches and formations (Bulgarian Church of God, United Churches of God, Church of God, God's Church in Bulgaria and New Charismatic communities) has been the first to set up soup kitchens and develop helping ministries to people in need – drug addicts, alcoholics, abused women and children, prisoners, etc. They laid the foundations of Protestant theological education in Bulgaria, establishing the first Protestant institutions, creating Christian Gospel art (modern compositions for liturgical worship, drama, theater and pantomime), and publishing and distributing periodicals and much, much more. Once underground and

⁵⁵ Ibid., p.102.

⁵⁶ Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*. (University Press. Cambridge. 1994).

⁵⁷ Benovska-Sabkova, V. Altanov, p. 138.

⁵⁸ Gene Edwards, *The Americanization of Christianity*. (Veliko Tarnovo. 2006), p. 53.

invisible to the Bulgarian nation, today the Evangelical Christians are actively and earnestly involved in local administration and all social processes in Bulgaria.