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Christianity and Islam in Bulgaria - between history, mythology and reality.

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Bulgaria is a unique phenomenon in the history of the world. For nearly 1500 years, the Bulgarian state has been present on the world map without changing its name. History does not know another country that has existed for so long under the same name. This long history is intertwined with many different events, it remembers periods of greatness and fall, of power and slavery, of construction and ruin. From a religious point of view, this story is also very interesting. Bulgarians replaced paganism with Christianity from early on, although in general, Bulgaria as an empire officially accepted Christianity in 865. But history remembers several Bulgarian states and not all of them accepted Christianity as their religion.

During the 7th century, from the Old Great Bulgaria created by Khan Kubrat, three different Bulgarian states appeared on the historical map. Two of them under the name of Bulgaria, and the third under the name of Khazaria. The first two, as their name indicates, were created by the Bulgarians, by the sons of Khan Kubrat. The third is the work of nomads and the Bulgarians of Kubrat's eldest son, Bayan. The three Bulgarias in different periods officially accepted one of the three world monotheistic religions as their confession. The state of Asparukh, which still exists today – modern Bulgaria, accepted Christianity in 865, the state of Kotrag, which remains in history as Volga Bulgaria and lasted until the 16th century, when it was finally captured by the Russians, in 922 accepted Islam as official religion. The third state, which remained in history as the Khazar Khaganate and in which the Bulgarians were the predominant population, adopted Judaism as its official confession in 730.

That is, we see a unique phenomenon, a nation that splits into several parts, three of which form their own states, and these states accept one of the world's three monotheistic religions as their confession.



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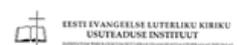
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The Bulgarians' encounters with Islam began in the early Middle Ages. As part of the Khazar Khaganate, the Bulgarians encountered Islam thanks to the several wars fought between Khazaria and the Arab Caliphate in the 7th and 8th centuries. As part of present-day Bulgaria, the Bulgarians encountered Islam for the first time in 717, when the capital of the Eastern Roman empire Constantinople was besieged by the Arabs of Maslama, the brother of Caliph Suleiman, and it was only a matter of time before they conquered it. Then the Bulgarian Khan Tervel came to the rescue with his army and put 100,000 Arab troops to flight. Fifteen years later, Karl Martel would stop the Arab invasion from the West at Poitiers. The two rulers were declared by the Church to be the saviours of Europe. The Bulgarian khan Tervel was declared a saint of the Church and is known as the holy king Tribelius or Theoctistus, because he is supposed to have become a monk at the end of his days. Volga Bulgaria, as we have already mentioned, accepted Islam as its official religion at the beginning of the 10th century.

These first encounters with Islam were followed by sporadic ones over the centuries, with their intensity increasing in the 13th and especially from the beginning of the 14th century. By the middle of the 15th century, the entire Balkans were incorporated into the Ottoman Empire, and the Christians became subjects of the Ottoman sultan. For nearly 500 years, Bulgarians have been part of this empire, which officially professes Sunni Islam, but in which Christians have always been the majority. These 500 years, during which Islam prevailed, brought great changes and upheavals in the lives of Bulgarians, in their culture, moral values and belief system. The ruling class was that which professed Islam, something that in the early years of the conquest led to a considerable number of Christians voluntarily accepting Islam in order to preserve their wealth and position in the society. That is a fact, that a part of the Christian Bulgarian elite accepted Islam in order to preserve their elite position. Over the centuries, periods of voluntary and forced acceptance of Islam alternated in a number of regions of the country. For example, in the Rhodope Mountains, which became a favourite hunting ground for the sultans, a part was forcibly converted to Islam.

The liberation of Bulgaria in the 19th century from Ottoman rule brought with it a colourful religious picture, a predominantly Christian population, but also a large Muslim minority. For the first few



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decades, they coexisted peacefully and without problems, regardless of the heavy Ottoman legacy. However, the communist coup in Bulgaria on September 9, 1944 fundamentally changed things. The church, which had saved the Bulgarians from assimilation into the vast empire, became the main ideological enemy of the new atheist power, and unprecedented persecutions began against it, leading to the violent death of hundreds of clergymen and monks. Christian churches were closed and destroyed. Under the slogan of “one people, one nation”, a fierce campaign against Muslims also began. History was interpreted in favour of the new ideology. All Muslims were declared Bulgarians, who according to the communist propaganda at various times were forced to change their faith. Various campaigns and events were being carried out for the Bulgarianization of all Muslims in Bulgaria - deportation, administrative sanctions, forced change of names, economic coercion, emigration campaigns, etc.

In January 1948, the displacement of the Muslim minorities living along the southern state border of Bulgaria near Turkey and Greece began. The social modernization launched by the regime was also partly directed against the influence of Islam. In 1953, new passports with photographs began to be issued, causing widespread discontent among Muslims due to the belief that taking personal photographs violated the Koranic prohibition of human images. Particularly indignant were they about the photographing of women with their faces uncovered. In 1958, the implementation of the long planned "cultural revolution" began. The methods of this revolution were: the forced removal of traditional Islamic clothing (ferezhets, burka, scarves, shalwars, fezzes, kyulafis). At the end of 1959, the Ministry of Public Health issued a special circular, with which an attack was also launched against the traditional circumcision of boys (sunnet or Khatna). Unable to stop it suddenly, the authorities force the medicalization of this manipulation: it should only be done by professional doctors, and the boys should be hospitalized. Thus, the religious semantics are removed, and the shunts are subject to criminal prosecution for inflicting serious or moderate bodily harm.

Parallel to this, since the first years after 1944, a purposeful emigration (expelling) campaign in the direction of Turkey has been going on. On July 17, 1970, the Bulgarian communist party took a decision for "the national awareness of Bulgarians of the Muslim faith". In order to stop the



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"Turkization" of a part of the population, a process of changing Muslim names to Christian ones began. The campaign began first in the region of city of Smolyan, and in 1971–1972 it spread to other parts of the Rhodope Mountain. In the winter of 1984, another decision was taken, to change all Muslim names in Bulgaria to Christian ones. This led to numerous protests, murders and even terrorist acts in the country. As a result of this campaign, which lasted from 1984 to 1989, over 350,000 Muslims left Bulgaria and settled in Turkey. But this insanity put an end to the fall of the communist regime in Bulgaria on November 10, 1989. Against the background of the ongoing conflict in the Balkans between Christians and Muslims - former Yugoslavia, Serbia, Kosovo, North Macedonia, etc., today Bulgaria is a model for peaceful and conflict-free existence of the two religions. The rights of Muslims are guaranteed by the constitution, and the nearly 10 percent Muslim population has one of the most influential political forces in the Bulgarian parliament, winning about 9-10 percent of the vote in all elections since 1989.



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