Daniela Kalkandjieva

Daniela Kalkandjieva, after having studied history at the Sy Kliment Ohridski University in Sofia, received her doctorate from the Central European University in Hungary; her thesis was on the ecclesiastical and political aspects of the activity of the Moscow Patriarchate. In addition, she has done research on the Bulgarian Church, especially on the relations between religion and the public sphere, on inter-confessional dialogue, on the impact that the process of integration into Europe has on the Orthodox Church. Among her publication we may mention The Russian Orthodox Church 1917–1948, From Decline to Resurrection (London 2015) and a study on the Bulgarian Church in the years 1944–1953 (Sofia 1997).

Martyrs and Confessors in the Bulgarian Orthodox Church under Communism

In 1989, the fall of communism in Bulgaria broke the silence on the victimhood of Orthodox clerics during the rule of militant atheists. 27 year later, however, their canonization is still an open issue. None of them has been canonically recognized as a martyr or confessor. No date in the church calendar is dedicated for the commemoration of the servants of God who had not betrayed their vocation and who had witnessed their faith through martyrdom. Meanwhile, the archives of the Bulgarian Communist Party and its security services were declassified. Their study shed new light on the destinies of hundreds Orthodox black and white clerics who remained firm in their faith despite the severe persecutions and inhuman tortures. In this regard, the paper will discuss cases of hierarchs, priests, and monks of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, whose personal stories give us grounds to refer to them as martyrs and confessors.

At the same time, the paper raises the question: If “the blood of martyrs is the seed of Church” (Tertullian), why does the Bulgarian Orthodox Church prolong the canonization of those whose deaths in Christ can assist the revitalization of Christianity in such a post-atheist society as the Bulgarian? There is no simple answer to this question. Victimhood was not a guarantee for sainthood neither in the first centuries of Christianity, nor under communism. In the Bulgarian case, however, this relationship has been additionally complicated by the specific anti-religious policy adopted by the communists upon their seizure of power on 9 September 1944. More specifically, they did not follow the Bolshevik model of an open assault on religion. Instead, a more sophisticated strategy was adopted. It did not pursue an immediate destruction of the national Orthodox Church, but her transformation into pseudo-religious institution. In addition, the new communist rulers skillfully used the wartime situation to get rid of the most zealous and influential clerics under the slogan of fighting fascism. This and other specificities of the persecution of the Orthodox white and black clergy in Bulgaria do not allow us closely to follow the Russian experience in the canonization of Orthodox churchmen killed by the Bolsheviks in the 1920s and 1930s. The mentioned peculiarity does not mean an absence of Bulgarian Orthodox martyrs and confessors, but calls for a different approach, which to overcome the communist discourse that continues to distort the truth about the martyrdom of Orthodox clerics, by presenting them as “fascists”, “people’s enemies” or simply as criminals.

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