ISLAM AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN BULGARIA: LOCAL TRADITION VIS-À-VIS GLOBAL CHANGE

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1 Introduction

In Southeast Europe, as in other post-communist regions, the restoration of civil and religious freedoms has often been accompanied by the rediscovery of religious roots. Within the ongoing processes of globalisation, the rapid transformations and re-negotiations of identities have brought about dynamic changes in the ‘social imaginaries’ of the cultural understandings shared by the religious communities in many different regions of the world. Indeed, there are multiple identities within every society, each with variations and sometimes conflicting subdivisions by status, class, occupation, profession, generation and gender. However, “for many, religion is the only loyalty that transcends local and immediate bonds”. Not only in the Middle East, but also in Europe, many Muslims in particular are increasingly turning Islam into a significant public and political force shaping and re-shaping social space. Accelerated to an unprecedented level by the new media and the internet, these developments have opened up new horizons for the formation of transnational public spheres in which religion plays an important social role, and migration and translocality become ever more consequential.

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2 We use the term ‘Southeastern Europe’ interchangeably with ‘the Balkans’.


Europe, Western and Eastern alike, is involved in new types of networks of transnational relations, discourses and currents in which the influence of religion is expanding and becoming ever more visible. Religious revival and the increasingly visible presence of faith-based communities and groups in public and political life in many regions of the world, including secularist Europe, has been sharply described by Gilles Kepel as “God’s revenge”. On a global level, the most marked revivals are those of Islam and the powerful wave of Protestant-based Evangelical Christianity. Indeed,

differing views on Muslims’ presence in the West have raised questions about Muslim marginalisation and integration, their success and failure, their identity, culture, religion, and education, all of which have become issues within the last two decades.

At the same time, traditional churches, such as the Catholic and the Orthodox, seem to face challenges unknown in their previous history. Significantly, in Southeastern Europe, particularly in Bulgaria and former Yugoslavia, just as in other countries on this side of the former Iron Curtain, the mass influx after 1989 of religious emissaries and evangelisers from different denominations did not lead to the realisation of expectations of the emergence of a ‘free market of religions’. The majority have instead preferred to return to traditional religious denominations. This trend brings to the fore, among other things, the issue of how traditions are made and maintained. Throughout the regions of Islamic influence elsewhere, education has always been a remarkable sphere of primary importance for the making of tradition. Yet, religious education and the madrasa (literally from Arabic, ‘place of study’, or Islamic ‘college’, to use the phrasing of George Maqdisi) in general were conceived in the pre-modern, classical Islamic period.

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7 Hann, Chris. “Introduction: Faith, power, and civility after socialism”, in Chris Hann et al. (eds), The Postsocialist Religious Question: Faith and Power in Central Asia and East-Central Europe (Münster: Lit, 2006), pp. 1–26. We owe this reference to our colleague Dr Ilia Iliev from Sofia University St Kliment Ohridski.