

Freedoms renounced: Church and state in Bulgaria

by [Victor Kostov](#) in the [March 22, 2000](#) issue

Bulgaria is a small country with a long history. Like other Balkan countries, it has gone through turmoil, slavery, exaltation and defeat. Though Bulgaria is the quietest and most obscure nation on the troubled Balkan peninsula, its people have to wrestle with the usual social evils that plague former communist-bloc countries: slow reforms, economic difficulties and moral confusion. And Bulgaria's evangelical community of 100,000 people has its unique problems and anxieties.

Evangelical leaders are concerned about a crackdown on religious liberty proposed by pending legislation. The law would provide the legal tools to persecute those who work to spread God's word, Bulgarians and foreign missionaries alike. This is happening even though Bulgaria's new constitution mandates religious freedom. Last year four new bills for a Denominations Act were introduced into the National Assembly. Three of those bills endorse government control over all religious communities, especially "nontraditional" ones like evangelical Christians.

The first of these drafts, and the one with most weight, was proposed by the Directorate on Religions, a committee of the executive branch's Council of Ministers. The directorate, established to control Christian and other religions when the country was communist, lingers on long after its reason for existence has ended.

The second draft was proposed by two congressmen from the Socialist Party (BSP), the new name for the former communists. This bill, devoted to the continued oppression of religious believers in what is now proclaimed to be a pluralistic environment, came as no surprise, given the party's long practice of religious tyranny. During four decades of communist rule, faith in God was mocked and believers were relentlessly persecuted.

The third bill was suggested by the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization, a small, ultranationalist party which specializes in inflammatory rhetoric and feisty leaders. This last draft exceeds even the first two in its hostility toward religious

freedom.

What has prompted this vehement legislative assault on religious liberty in general and on evangelicals in particular? A number of factors fuel this attempt. Communist propaganda and repression have for years shaped Bulgarian culture into a fortress of atheistic thought. People have been programmed to treat believers as socially and individually inadequate.

The Eastern Orthodox Church's fear of sects and proselytism is another factor. Orthodox leaders insist that theirs is the only true church. Also, many Bulgarians equate being Orthodox with being Bulgarian. Proselytism, then, is seen not only as a spiritual concern of the clerics but as an attack on national identity. The pending legislation assures both patriots and Orthodox priests that their concerns will be backed by the law. Many politicians have played the religious-national identity card to gain popular support. Backing an act which proposes to limit "foreign sects" and protect Eastern Orthodoxy is such a tactic.

Last July the Bulgarian Tolerance Foundation, a human rights organization which is an offshoot of the Helsinki Committee, held a conference in Sofia on the three draft laws. The event exposed the pending legislation as an attempt to curb religious liberty. Conference organizers reported on the weaknesses of the bills, which lacked judicial control, invited arbitrary procedures and introduced a specialized restrictive regime for people on the basis of their faith. All the draft laws propose severe penalties for those who practice their faith outside of government imposed limitations. One of the bills even suggests that a huge fine be levied against those who "publicly practice religion without registration with the government."

These reports demonstrated that during the past three years of democratic rule the problems of believers have essentially remained the same as under communism. Maurice Verfaillie, secretary general of the International Association for the Defense of Religious Liberties, a European organization, noted in his address that the bills offer freedoms in their first part and take them away in their second. They demonstrate the legislature's clumsy inability to implement religious tolerance through the nation's laws.

A fourth, very Western-style draft by the former executive director of the Bulgarian Center for Human Rights, Plamen Bogoev, was introduced in October. Bogoev's draft challenges legislators to grant parents the right to determine the religious education

of their children. Whereas none of the other drafts even mentions financial issues, Bogoev's bill guarantees the right of ministries to be supported by tax-deductible donations. It proposes that every religious entity be registered at local courts, without any government intervention. Bogoev has included clear definitions of the important terms "religion" and "religious discrimination."

Bogoev's proposal, by far the most democratic and compliant with the constitution, was deemed by a parliamentary commission to be "one-sided, incomplete, and inadequately representing the constitution and the religious situation in the country." The first three bills appear likely to be considered by the assembly. The only positive sign for evangelicals so far is the legislature's delay in dealing with the Denominations Act. It is still not clear when the parliament will take up the bills.

While all minority religious groups voiced serious criticisms of the bills, the two rival synods of the Orthodox Church made no comment and sent no representative to the July conference. No longer do the Orthodox leaders have to choose between proving their loyalty to the communist regime or enduring persecution. Their indifference to the debates on religious liberty may be due to their sense of security. Since the fall of communism in 1990 both socialist and democratic governments have supported the image of Orthodoxy as a pillar of Bulgarian national identity. Identification with Orthodoxy has brought political dividends to politicians of all ideological colors, regardless of their true religious convictions.

Yet young Orthodox believers, enthusiastic about the faith, sometimes have to put up with a scrutiny similar to that applied to evangelicals. Such was the case with the Pokrov Foundation. Three years ago a group of Orthodox, college-educated believers tried to establish the foundation to promote the Orthodox faith, charity and religious education. Since their work was not officially sanctioned, their legal registration encountered bureaucratic setbacks quite similar to those faced by evangelical groups.

When the 50 years of communist rule ended, evangelicals expected a loosening of government control over church activities. But in 1992, only two years after the fall of one-party rule, a strong antievangelical campaign arose. Similar attitudes prevail today. Evangelical churches and American missionaries have been accused of "stealing the souls of Bulgarian youth" and "imposing Western cultural values." But no one has opposed the flooding of the market with Western mass culture and consumer items.

A number of attempts have been made to explain the hostility to religious and especially to evangelical Christian beliefs. Some say that Western culture, though nicely packaged, invades local traditions and is associated with the strength of money, not with service and humility. Some point out that after the doors opened to Western ideas, it was the “prosperity gospel” that immediately gained a foothold among young, charismatic congregations. But the situation is actually more complicated: the roots of unbelief and atheistic cynicism go deeper than Bulgarians are willing to admit. And anti-Christian feelings are not only directed against missionaries. Last year a teacher in a town in central Bulgaria was fired by school officials for being a member of a local charismatic congregation.

A love-hate relationship with American influence already existed more than 100 years ago when the first American Protestant missionaries came to the country. Nineteenth-century Bulgarians, who valued education, were highly interested in the free literature the missionaries brought along, but quite cold toward the missionaries’ religious message. Eastern Orthodoxy was their faith.

Uniformity of thought and belief became so deeply ingrained in the national character during the years of atheistic indoctrination that both ordinary folk and the media consider with suspicion every unfamiliar mention of religious belief. Any group other than the Eastern Orthodox is considered a “sect.” But most Bulgarians who claim to be Orthodox remain largely atheistic in lifestyle and worldview.

Inconsistencies about religion plague every level of the legislative and executive branches of government: old laws are dug up and used as if they superseded the new constitution; local governments, unauthorized to regulate religion, nevertheless issue religious decrees; the legislature makes laws that severely limit religious groups from registering as nonprofit organizations, yet no similar limits are placed on nonreligious groups.

The government’s response to criticism on the topic is to avoid responsibility and to use Orwellian rhetoric to justify itself. For example, Christo Matanov, a former head of the Directorate of Religions, stated that religion needs to be regulated through special legislation in order to protect the interests of the believers.

Unfortunately, the evangelicals did not join the debate in a unified and well-prepared manner. Their main body, the Evangelical Alliance, failed to introduce its own draft law. This was partially due to the government’s deceptive tactic—church leaders

were given only one week to respond to the drafts. However, denominational leaders did not cooperate with Christian legal experts to implement an efficient strategy, even though the issue has been on the table since the fall of communism.

The solution to the chaos and irregularities in the legal system is very simple: cancel all the laws that regulate faiths and denominations; dissolve the Directorate on Religions; equitably apply the constitution and don't treat religious believers as more dangerous than unbelievers.

God is a God of miracles. If any of the first three proposed drafts becomes law, the church in Bulgaria may need one of those miracles. But then, the Book of Acts has always been a better handbook on freedom than even the most democratic of constitutions or charters on human rights.