

## BUILDING A NEW IDENTITY ON RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS: A CASE STUDY OF A VILLAGE IN SOUTH-WESTERN BULGARIA

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The article deals with the restored role and significance of religion in Bulgarian society after the political change in 1989. The revived interest in religion covers a wider scope than the specific spiritual one: many shrines develop or reaffirm their significance as the identity marks of their region or of various ethnic and confessional groups.

The case of St. Nedelya's chapel near the village of Garmen is analyzed. As a result of the author's work as a scholar and of the activities on a civil project aimed at investigating and reviving the traditional heritage, the chapel itself, the religious narratives relevant to it and its two holidays (Veneration of the Cross on the third Sunday of Great Lent and 7 July) become emblematic symbols for the local community. Subsequently the building of St. Anne's church in the centre of the village is completed and a great number of villagers visit it on big Christian holidays.

*Keywords:* Orthodox Christianity, civil activities, religious holidays, Christian shrines, local identity, Bulgaria

### TURNING BACK TO RELIGION

In Bulgaria 1989 did not put an end to communism; rather, it was the starting point for a complex and sustained process of social change, at first aimed at opposing and overcoming the ongoing communist regime. For more than four decades Bulgarian society, although nominally part of Europe, had been isolated from Western Euro-

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pean countries and from the model of a “normal” and “civilized” development. Unlike some other countries in the former COMECON, “Late Bulgarian communism is a regime without a ‘history’ as nothing significant happened during this period. In Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland we can say that there was a history parallel to the official one, but in Bulgaria the chronicle of the period is reduced to that of communist party life” (Znepolski, 2009: 713–714). Still pending was the creation of a civil society and the (re)establishment of democracy based partly on that of pre-communist Bulgaria, but more on democracies elsewhere, in the “civilized world”. Iyaylo Znepolski characterizes the communist period in this respect “as a moment of breakage, of interruption in the natural evolutionary course in the development of society” (Znepolski, 2009: 711).

After the change, a single party with its solely permitted ideology was replaced by a multitude of parties and a variety of ideologies suppressed or absent during communism and now freely and openly articulated. This political and conceptual pluralism was proclaimed liberation of thought and speech and a significant step towards the establishment and the development of democracy. However, as a pendular reaction to the previous immobility the process swung to the opposite extreme: “It expressed and in a sense also created tendencies toward fragmentation, toward antagonism of social groups and strata, toward atomised and nonnegotiable subjects and positions. This process undermined the state’s foundations, made institutions unstable, weak and ineffective, delayed economic change, and accumulated aggressive energies in society” (Bogomilova, 1995: 18; my translation here and below).

One of the ways that people tried to counteract those destructive tendencies was through the consolidation of Orthodox Christianity and its spiritual values. Although not very popular among the political elite, this impulse toward integration was widespread among writers, poets, historians, philosophers, clergy and other intellectual groups, who sought to revive the emotional and unifying significance of Christianity at the eve of Bulgaria’s Liberation from the Turks (1878), when the Bulgarian nation became identified with Orthodoxy (Bogomilova, 1995: 18–19). Prior to the development of this theoretical perspective and soon after the 1989 political change, however, ordinary people, especially in the villages and in the small towns, had already turned to religious symbols. They recuperated or continued now legally and more visibly a practice that, while marginalized for decades, was never fully interrupted even in the most rigid years of totalitarianism. This “natural” turning back was not directed towards official, institutional Christianity, but rather to “religious festivals, connected with patron saints’ names, miracle-working icons, etc. – i.e. to the popular and conventional ways of looking for a miracle” (Bogomilova, 1995: 20).

In religion many people find strength during economic and especially spiritual crises. Faith seems to be an instrument for managing reality and its deficiencies that has proved its effectiveness through the millennia by providing spiritual support, especially necessary in times of trial. The “socialist ideals” by which the Communist Party disguised its dictatorship had failed, and it became clear that the state was an economic and moral wreck. The revival of the interest in religion in Bulgaria was experienced as a return to pre-communist moral values of the bourgeois society, now favourably recalled as “the good old days”. The whole situation worked to the advantage of Christianity. But the Bulgarian Orthodox Church as an institution, in spite of a visible surface activity, played little part in the major religious events, which took place in spite of it. As a whole, the Church was unable to lead the popular interest in

faith or channel the new religiosity toward official Christian doctrine and knowledge. It was unable, for instance to institute the study of religion or of history of religion in public schools<sup>1</sup>. Learning about faith and the principles of Christianity, therefore, remains a matter of individual initiative and interest; as in the time of communism, it still depends on one's upbringing, social milieu and personal inclinations. Nonka Bogomilova shows that Bulgarian Eastern Orthodoxy's dogmatism largely isolated it from the popular cultural and spiritual ferment and so Orthodox Christianity "proved to be 'unfit' for popular use" with its God excessively "transcendent and aloof" (Bogomilova, 1995: 22).

In contrast, so-called "folk Christianity" undergoes a vigorous revival and becomes the main feature of local religious culture. The Orthodox Church as an institution and priests with specialized training lead only a part – even if one agrees it is the most important part – of Christian ritual and religious practices in and around shrines. Lay believers themselves play a decisive role in maintaining local religious culture and initiate many activities, including promotion and proselytism. Without it being their conscious goal and with the full conviction that they strictly observe the official religion, instead of being simply supporters of the local religious culture, lay believers become its makers and interpreters, its true **creators**. This kind of creative intervention is manifest most obviously in ritual practice and oral religious narrative.

## THE CHANGE IN THE OFFICIAL DISCOURSE

After dismissing Todor Zhivkov as leader of the Communist party and head of the Bulgarian state on November 10, 1989, the remaining leaders' main concern was to maintain their own political and economical power. It was not an easy task, because significant groups of people led by intellectuals, especially in Sofia and in some other big cities, were already quite active and refused to be manipulated any longer. Mass meetings, processions and the slogans chanted during them showed that the power of the Communist party was by no means secure. Hence, in the several months that followed the remaining leaders had to negotiate a series of compromises and concessions to stay in power, one of which was an official declaration of respect for the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and acknowledgment of its role in the nation's spiritual life. This declaration was also a way to earn international dividends, an official (re)affiliation of the country to the universal human values of the Christian Church – as maintained throughout the "normal" and "civilized" world.

The government's declaration was also a result of the developments within Bulgarian Orthodoxy. At the beginning of 1990 the organ of the Communist Party and official newspaper of the government *Rabotnichesko delo*<sup>2</sup> printed (on page six) a statement of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church's Holy Synod addressed to the Chairman of the National Assembly expressing full support for the nationwide process of renovation and the aspiration for "a highly civilized, democratic-constitutional state". The Synod also made a number of demands, among others for legally guaranteed religious freedom and freedom of conscience, for regulated relations between the state

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1 Religion in Bulgaria is an optional subject in schools with little popularity. Another possibility for religious instruction in some churches is Sunday school.

2 The title translates as 'Worker's Affair' or 'Worker's Cause'.

and the church, and for the convocation of a national church council in the autumn of 1990. Especially significant were demands for the restoration of the religious use of churches and monasteries that during Communism had been turned into museums, and for re-establishment of the official celebration of religious holidays<sup>3</sup>.

A special characteristic of the Bulgarian case is that the official Orthodox Church had never taken a stand against the Communist government, whether before the change or after it. The then Patriarch Maxim was elected to his position in 1971 with the approval of the Communist Party, which at the time controlled all social activity. After the change in 1989, Father Christopher Sabev, as leader of the Committee for the Protection of Religious Rights, Freedom of Conscience and Spiritual Values<sup>4</sup> and the Christian association *Salvation*, challenged the legitimacy of the 1971 election. Both of these new organizations worked for the reformation of the Church and joined the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF)<sup>5</sup>, marking the start of a long process of dissent in Bulgarian Orthodoxy<sup>6</sup>. This dissent became the main concern of religious organizations and the central topic of the religious news during the subsequent years of transition. In this light, the Holy Synod's statement from the beginning of January 1990 was an attempt of religious leaders to strengthen their own power; by expressing support for the communist government, they trusted that the government in its turn would guarantee their own **legitimacy**. The Synod in the meanwhile also wanted to gain authority in the eyes of the general public by demanding the restoration of the Church's significance and for increasing its social role.

Because of the mutual support between the Communist Party leaders and the Holy Synod, on 25 February 1990 for the first time *Rabotnichesko delo* officially published news (on page two) about a religious event. The reporter, Violeta Zheleva, with the title "The Sunday of Penance and Forgiveness" briefly reported on Patriarch Maxim's special evening service from the previous day on Shrovetide (the first Sunday before Lent, known as the Sunday of Forgiveness). The article informed that the Patriarch had delivered "nationwide forgiveness" and appealed for love, compassion, charity and penance. He also expressed his satisfaction because of the restoration of this hitherto neglected church ritual, and in turn had asked for forgiveness for his own conscious or unconscious words and deeds that may have caused offence<sup>7</sup>.

Soon to follow was another such article on 4 March 1990 – this time on page one – about the Patriarch's thanksgiving service in the Sofia St. Alexander Nevski memorial temple on the occasion of the Bulgarian National Holiday (3 March) commemorating the liberation from Turkish rule. The reporter Zina Sokolova pointed out that, "There is hardly a more suitable place for the start of our national holiday than the temple built in memory of our liberators"<sup>8</sup>. The state television (then the only one) broadcasted the service and Bulgarians nationwide were able to see that government members, who

3 No. 9, 9 January 1990, p. 6; my translation; the source of the information is the Bulgarian Telegraph Agency.

4 Established in October 1988 in the town Veliko Tarnovo.

5 The Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) was created on 7 December 1989 as a political opposition against the totalitarian system.

6 For the dissent in the Bulgarian Orthodox Church compare: [www.pravoslaviето.com](http://www.pravoslaviето.com).

7 Violeta Zheleva. *Nedelyata na pokayanie i proshka* [The Sunday of Penance and Forgiveness]. – *Rabotnichesko delo*, No. 57, 26 February 1990, p. 2.

8 Zina Sokolova. *Blagodarstven moleben v chest na Osvobozhdenieto* [A Thanksgiving Service in Honour of the Liberation]. – *Rabotnichesko delo*, No. 63, 4 March 1990, p. 1 (my translation).

were also members of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, officially attended, including the prime minister Andrey Lukanov, the chairman of the national assembly Stanko Todorov, the minister of defence Dobri Dzhurov – the same people who for years led the Party’s policy of marginalizing the church and persecuting its activities.

The articles about church services in the official communist newspaper and the participation of the Party leaders and members of the government in one of these services were the first and quite unambiguous signs, that marked the end of “aggressive atheism”, which collapsed along with the “damned totalitarianism”, as Maxim Maskin would put it at the end of 1990 in the same newspaper<sup>9</sup>. The order of these events seemed symbolic. The official religious discourse was introduced by a “nationwide forgiveness” and then followed by “national integration” on the official holiday – as if all the contradictions, persecutions and oppression of religious life and group identity based on religion could be magically erased in one fell swoop. Doubtless, no one really thought the return to **normality** and age-old religious values could be that simple; but it was also clear that after these symbolic acts religious life could no longer be repressed or marginalized. The events signalled an irreversible restoration of the role of religion, with results that were soon visible.

Gradually, first with caution and in some places with fear, more and more people attended church services and in one way or another became involved in religious activities, repairing monasteries, churches and chapels or building new ones; taking part in charity campaigns or organizations; and, with the most immediately perceptible effect, participating in pilgrimages and religious processions. National radio and television began to broadcast church services on major Christian holidays<sup>10</sup> and report on religious events from various parts of the country; so did the newspapers. The revived interest in religion and sacred places and the stories and the activities connected with them covered a wider field than the exclusively spiritual. Many churches and chapels, and especially monasteries, developed or reaffirmed their significance as the markers of identity for their region or for ethnic or confessional groups. Sacred places became the symbolic centres of communities for communication and consolidation, taking on a highly visible role for healing and psychological transformation, for salvation and the transcendence of the barriers that divided and limited people in their daily lives.

## ST. NEDELYA’S CHAPEL NEAR GARMEN

This case study analyses observations and narratives about the chapel to St. Nedelya<sup>11</sup>, documented during field research, beginning in 1998, in the village of Garmen<sup>12</sup>; it also analyses observations and experiences from the pilot project *New Life for the Old Tradition in the Valley of Mesta*<sup>13</sup>.

9 Maxim Maskin. Hristiyansko-folkloren kokteyl [A Christian-Folklore Cocktail]. – Duma [Word] (the new title of *Rabotnichesko delo*), No. 265, 24 December 1990, p. 3.

10 This practice began on Christmas Eve 1990, when a First TV program directly broadcasted at 6.00 p.m. the liturgy from the Sofia St. Alexander Nevski memorial temple; at 0.55 – the Christmas Ceremony from Saint Peter’s, Rome; and on the next day at 12.55 – the Ceremony from Rome with the Pope’s message (compare the TV program in the newspaper *Duma*, No. 263, 22 December 1990, p. 8).

11 In Greek *Agia Kyriaky*, literally St. Sunday.

12 In the Mesta river valley, Gotse Delchev region, South-Western Bulgaria.

13 The project was led by Georgi Garov and was carried out by the cultural centers (the characteristic Bulgarian *chitalishta*) in the four villages of Garmen, Dabnitsa, Koprivlen and Pletena, near Gotse

A colleague, Georgi Garov<sup>14</sup>, suggested my field research in Garmen, where relatives were willing to let a specialist record for future generations the story of St. Nedelya's chapel. In the summer of 1998, together with another colleague, Georgi Minchev<sup>15</sup>, I recorded two versions of the legend from the direct descendants of the chapel's founders – their grandson Yordan Ralev and his wife Sophia Raleva. The two retold the story of Yordan's mother, whose parents were the main protagonists. In May 1999, the national TV centre in Blagoevgrad<sup>16</sup> made a documentary film about the chapel, including the story and its narrators.

Later I analysed the recorded texts in two papers – one discussing the differences between the man's and the woman's strategies of narration (Georgieva, 2000) and the other outlining the way universal and recurring motifs were localized (Georgieva, 2000a). I included both the studies in a book (Georgieva, 2000b) for which a special presentation was organized at the village cultural centre on December 2, 2000. The event was a great success, and the people were proud that a scholar from the Academy of Sciences had studied their village. Again, I took part in another audio and video recording the chapel's story in the spring of 2001 with yet another colleague – Vihra Baeva<sup>17</sup>. In the meantime, I had made close friends in the village and began to visit it regularly, as I still do.

I also participated in the project *New Life for the Old Tradition in the Valley of Mesta* which began in June 2002, the initiative of an expert from the King Baudouin Foundation of Belgium and a team of Bulgarian professionals. It involved amateur groups and activists at the cultural centres of four villages, lasted for a year and was then the only project in Bulgaria in which groups of local people were organized and trained to research their own culture and recuperate valued and emblematic activities from the past. The first phase was fieldwork that recorded beliefs, rituals, local memories and historical narratives; this material was stored in the four village libraries and a selection was published as a book (Georgieva-Angelova et al., 2003). The subsequent phase was the revival of activities significant for the past of the different villages. In Garmen the people revived an amateur theatrical group that had existed until the 1970s and had been quite popular in the region. Since at the time of the project there were one women's and two children's folkdance groups and one men's folksong group active in the village cultural centre, the team decided to organize a musical performance that would involve some of the previous actors and all of the existing folk groups. The local historian and writer Iliya Milev suggested that the theme be the story of St. Nedelya's chapel, for it was part of local history, had dramatic potential and due to my previous research had acquired a new importance in Garmen.

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Delchev (South-Western Bulgaria, the valley of the river Mesta, between the Rhodope and Pirin). Its base was the Iskra cultural centre in Garmen. It was funded by the King Baudouin Foundation, Belgium, and by the Open Society Foundation, Sofia, through the program Living Heritage of the Workshop for Civil Initiatives Foundation. A thematic issue of the journal *Bulgarski Folklor* [Bulgarian Folklore] was dedicated to the project: Georgieva 2004; compare also the introduction to the issue: Georgieva, Garov 2005; as well as Georgieva 2009.

14 He is Associated Professor at the South-Western University 'Neophyte Rilski' in Blagoevgrad and takes part in various initiatives, connected with training or consulting local amateur folk groups, civil projects, festivals, etc. He led the above-mentioned project.

15 He is Professor, Doctor of Sciences, and the Head of the Department of Slavic Philology at the University of Łódź (Poland).

16 The district's main town.

17 She is Associate Professor, PhD, and works in the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

In brief, the story tells about a dream of the main protagonist Linka, in which St. Nedelya demands that she and her husband should find out an icon hidden in the earth not far from the village, and then they should restore the monastery which once existed on that place. The husband Stoyan refuses to go looking for the icon on the grounds that they are rather poor to build a monastery. The dream recurs and finally, when on their way to the nearby village, Stoyan gets paralyzed, not being able even to speak. With a sign of his head he agrees that they should start looking for the icon and immediately recovers. Then they dig the icon up and with it Stoyan goes around the neighbouring villages to collect alms for building a chapel. Thus in a few years the chapel is built and some miracles start to happen on it, the most emblematic of which is the recovering of a paralyzed boy, who after spending a night in the chapel, starts to walk freely (Georgieva, 2000; Georgieva, 2012: 196–199).

I participated in all the stages of the project, helping to train the groups of volunteers, direct the fieldwork, advise on the transcription of the material and supervise its storage at the libraries of the four villages. But my work with the most impact, it became subsequently clear, was to help in composing the script and staging in Garmen of the musical production *The Miracles of St. Nedelya*. The scenario, written with Iliya Milev, followed the plot of the legend, focusing on the saint's holiday – 7 July, with the emotions and devotional practices that constitute the celebration. Petyo Krastev<sup>18</sup> composed special music for the performance, and local people constructed the scenery. In the course of the preparations and rehearsals, the participants became more and more enthusiastic and increasingly identified with the events they represented. Some phrases from the script became proverbs on their own and started circulating the village in everyday situations, initially by the direct participants, and later by others. Several of these phrases are still in use. The performance in April 2003 was a great success that far surpassed the expectations of both participants and audience. People recognized and identified as their own the story on stage and incorporated it as part of their community heritage. The national TV centre in Blagoevgrad videotaped the spectacle and made a TV novel from it, organizing for that purpose a “real life” performance at the sacred site itself.

Gradually the legend of St. Nedelya's chapel drawn from a private family story acquired for the people of Garmen significance as an emblematic statement of their history. In the summer of 2003, volunteers partly repaired the chapel. In connection with other projects villagers laid out an eco-path<sup>19</sup> from the village to the chapel, put up a fence to prevent robbery and vandalism, carried out other repair work, and in the autumn of 2009 repaired the roof with money from the municipality and private contributors. In 2004, the chapel's story was once again included in a broadcast of the Aloma regional cable TV centre in Gotse Delchev. The story and the chapel took on more and more importance as a sign of the local identity. Whereas in 1998 few villagers knew about the legend and would hardly mention the chapel among the significant sites in the settlement's territory, in 2004 when a questionnaire was circulated among the inhabitants, all pointed to it as a significant local landmark (compare

18 Petyo Krastev is a musician and a composer and at the time of the project an Orchestra Conductor in the professional Pirin Ensemble in Blagoevgrad; at the time of this writing he is the Ensemble's Chief Artistic Director.

19 Actually an eco-path with two branches, starting from two different places in the village – from its centre and from the neighbourhood Zagrade.

also: Georgieva, 2004)<sup>20</sup>. The two days connected with St. Nedelya – the Veneration of the Cross on the third Sunday of Great Lent (in Bulgarian *Krastopoklonna nedelya*) and 7 July (the day of the saint's death) – have become important feasts for the village community. Villagers celebrate with a special solemnity 7 July: there is a service in the chapel attended by a great number of villagers; they prepare *kurban* (a boiled and shared animal offering) and after its blessing hand it out to those attending; and there is a small scale fair with sellers selling sweets, children's toys and sundries.

The increase in the chapel's significance had another, unexpected, side effect. For many years a half-built church stood in the village centre, its construction abandoned. The main sponsor of the building was a prosperous businessman in Sofia. For a while, he had regularly contributed funds for it until he realized that instead of building of the church the village priest, well known for his corruption, was building his own house. After the success of *The Miracles of St. Nedelya* and the increased popularity of the chapel, the church board expelled the priest. The Sofia sponsor resumed his contributions and in two years the church (which is rather big for the village) was completed, decorated and consecrated to St. Anne. Now the two holidays of the saint – 25 July (the Dormition of St. Anne) and 9 December (the Conception of St. Anne) are important feasts for the village, and many people gather in the church on those days<sup>21</sup> and on all the major Christian holidays.

## RELIGION – THE “NEW-OLD” CONSOLIDATING SYMBOL

The briefly described activities in Garmen and their positive and constructive results consolidated the community and increased its self-confidence and self-esteem. After forty-five years of Communism, it took more than a decade for the village inhabitants to take their first steps towards an active civil society. When I started my study of St. Nedelya's chapel, they were of course proud, but considered it **my own business** as a scholar. My work made their community visible in the social space and significant in their own eyes; but still they thought it as something which **happened** to them, coming from **outside**, or, if we stick to totalitarian terminology, from **above** – from the centre Sofia and from those who **own** knowledge and control all activities. During the pilot project, they still regarded it a matter concerning professionals, whom they were simply assisting. Only at the end, when the results were available and they could see the published products of their own work – the book, together with an audio cassette and an audio CD, and even more so after the production of *The Miracles of St. Nedelya*, did they adopt the St. Nedelya story as **their own** endeavour, **their own** culture, and **their own** lives. Moved by the magic of what turned out to be deeply affecting theatre, they underwent a kind of transformation as a community, taking responsibility for what happened to them. It seemed to be an *initiation* into the *communitas* defined by Victor Turner as a state of wholesome and equal individuals

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20 There are two books about the history of Garmen, both written by local historians; one was published before, the other after the Change (Siderov, 1987; Milev, 1999). In both the information about St. Nedelya's chapel is rather sparse; to compensate, in his book about the Orthodox shrines in Garmen written after the project's work Iliya Milev devoted several pages to the chapel and included three photographs (Milev, 2004: 31–34, 88–89).

21 As one is in the summer and the other in the winter, family members who do not live in the village can choose to attend the feast most convenient.



that is “a means to the end of becoming more fully involved in the rich manifold of structural role-playing” (Turner, 1995: 139). Like a hero in a fairy tale who acquires “magic” power by learning how to make use of his or her abilities, the Garmen activists became aware of the community’s resources, which then they successfully promoted, winning recognition from the community at large.

The fact that it was the St. Nedelya’s chapel and subsequently the church of St. Anne that acquired central significance requires special attention. As recounted in detail in the first book about Garmen’s history, people from the region were active in the revolutionary movement for the liberation of Macedonia from the Turks before 1912 and later participated actively in the legal and in the underground and partisan movements of the Communist Party (Siderov, 1987: 36–47, 48–110). There is a monument in the centre of the village to the partisan Boris Munchev, killed by the police on 6 May 1943. Up to the time of this writing, although now attendance is sparse, communists in the village still commemorate this day, paying tribute at the monument and at the memorial tablet at the location of the partisan’s death in the mountain. Despite this revolutionary and communist heritage of the village, after the collapse and the discrediting of the “proletariat’s dictatorship” in 1989, communist ideals and symbols no longer served to unify and bring together the inhabitants. With the end of the previous regime’s political compulsion, the community disintegrated and became segmented with no real social centre.

The intensive emotions provoked by *The Miracles of St. Nedelya* thus filled a gap – they served as a connecting bridge between the generations and between the different political groups, and the chapel itself provided a needed **integrating** symbol. As explained in the beginning of this text, by then religion was already officially recognized in Bulgaria and was successfully involved in the process of self-defining various groups despite the difficulties in “reviving ... spiritual life in a predominantly secular society” (Heppell & Norris, 2001: 5). Religion in general acquired prestige in Garmen, the most telling confirmation of which was the publication of a book especially dedicated to the village shrines (Milev, 2004). Of course, not all people were in fact believers, nor could they become believers at the drop of a hat; but those who used to be believers in the past now gained advantage and became the bearers and the spokespersons of the old customs. Their religious behaviour and knowledge in general, and in particular about the history of St. Nedelya’s chapel, became significant for the community and for the maintenance of its updated collective memory, understood here as “an evoking of a past to frame a present but also to conform that past to the present” (Wodak & de Cillia, 2007: 340)<sup>22</sup>.

The project’s work and especially the musical theatre performance caused in a shift in the community’s idea of history. In communist times, the emphasis was on the heroic struggle of the Party and on the victims of the capitalist system before the “Socialist Revolution” in 1944. For the subsequent period until 1989 the emphasis was on the successes of the so-called People’s rule. Now the interest centred on the sacred places – on the beliefs and the narratives connected with them. As underlined by Elżbieta Hałas, “it is not the past and memory of it that shape the present, but the present that makes use of the past, creating memory or, rather, it is done by the actors

22 Actually, as the authors point out, the citation is from Gronbeck (1998: 58) with whom they agree. Compare also with the observation of Jan Assman on **cultural memory**: “Cultural memory works by reconstructing, that is, it always relates its knowledge to an actual and contemporary situation” (Assmann, 1988: 130).

of social change drama” (Hałas, 2002: 116). Thanks to the initial scientific work and that of the project participants, the stories of miracle dreams and healings at the sacred sites acquired special significance. These stories circulated in the social space as the proof of the saints’ presence, agency and effective patronage in the community (compare Brown, 1982: chapter 5). Identifying with St. Nedelya’s chapel and later with St. Anne’s church, the Garmen villagers sought to re-establish contact with the patron saints themselves; in their own belief, they aspired to their intervention and protection. This relation is clearly put by William Christian: “The linking of a religious figure to a shared identity seems to have this effect: It elevates or generalizes the basis for identity to the status of a family relation under the love, authority, and protection of a divine parent” (Christian, 1989: 12).

Fixing their new community image on the two saints and their holy days, the Garmen inhabitants rearranged their relations in several directions at the same time. First, they settled their own past, in which along with the revolutionaries and communists pious and divine figures emerged. Then, they shifted toward the values accepted in the post-1989 society, which were the values of the “normal” and “civilized” world. Furthermore, they restored the balance with the supernatural and the divine, which was repressed and denied under Communism, but which even then did not cease to signal its existence through dreams, omens and miracles. In addition, and most importantly, they assured their future through the restoration of divine agency and patronage and their own consolidation as a civil society.

The preference for Christian religious symbols as identifiers for the Garmen community has an additional reason. The municipality of Garmen is situated in the relatively closed and isolated valley of the river Mesta at the foot and on the slopes of the Rhodope Mountain; it comprises 16 villages and includes a variety of ethnic and confessional groups – Bulgarian Orthodox Christians, Bulgarian Muslims, Turkish Muslims, Roma Muslims, and Roma Protestant Christians. Religious belonging, therefore, is of great importance as a sign of identity. The Muslims in the region – both Bulgarians and Turks, underwent the forcible conversion of their Arab-Turkish names into Christian-Bulgarian ones during the so-called Revival Process (1984–1989) of the Communist regime. After the political change at the end of 1989, they sought to restore their true names and demonstrate their ethnic and confessional identity. This process took a tragic turn in neighbouring Bosnia, but as John Nandriş explains, “The misery of Bosnia or Kosova is not primarily a ‘religious conflict in the Balkans’ but a pay-out from the Peace Dividend of Marxism which for so long suppressed group identities” (Nandriş, 2001: 23).

Fortunately, this dramatic pattern of deep tension, and in its extreme form even war, was not repeated in Bulgaria. In Garmen’s region in particular, the inhabitants are accustomed to and tolerant of the variety of ethnic and religious groups living there with differences in appearance, rituals and habits. As pointed out in a study of one of the most popular sacred sites in contemporary Bulgaria, *Krastova gora* [Cross Mount], which is also situated in the Rhodope Mountain and is visited by both Christians and Muslims, “It is true nationwide that in the ethnically homogeneous Bulgarian-Christian communities and regions intolerance towards Muslims is much greater than in the mixed ones, where communication is carried out almost entirely on a face-to-face basis”. In mixed regions “the local inhabitants, used to the Muslim presence as well as to their rituals, display much more understanding and tolerance” (Ivanova, 1995: 110, my translation).

The same has held for the municipality of Garmen. From time to time, there have been attempts to create political tension, especially during election campaigns, but these efforts, however, have largely been ineffective. After 1989, most of the mosques in the region were restored with the help of both Muslims and Christians. In the few villages where Muslims and Christians live together, people celebrate all the major holidays in both religious calendars literally hand in hand<sup>23</sup>, gathering for a joint chain dance - *horo* - in the square. The Garmen people's identification with the two sacred sites of St. Nedelya's chapel and St. Anne's church is therefore also a way to stabilize their affiliation to Christian Orthodoxy in that mixed and varied region; a way to claim a centuries-old religious and cultural heritage.

## CONCLUSION

I had the rare opportunity to participate in and to observe first-hand an almost laboratory experiment in the establishment of a chapel as one of the community's significant markers of identity. In 1998 when I recorded the story of St. Nedelya's chapel for the first time, it was merely a part of the family chronicle - a significant and a very representative part, but one hardly known outside of the circle of direct descendants. When in 2001 the interlocutors were asked to tell the story again, they quite naturally remembered additional events and details and further elaborated the account. The culmination of the process was the production of the story on stage. Created and produced by a team of specialists, the spectacle, although performed by amateurs, transmuted into an impressive piece of art that left a deep mark on the community. Participants and audience recognized in it their **own** story, which in the same time expressed wider human and moral values and became a significant sign of their local identity. One might say that the initial family story gained importance and acquired significance for all the villagers because it was **properly** promoted.

The main achievement in this process, however, was the fact that what was promoted was the **proper** story - the one that corresponded to the pattern of "cultural memory": "a collective concept for all knowledge that directs behaviour and experience in the interactive framework of a society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation" (Assmann, 1988: 126). For centuries shrines have been places for contacting the unknown and the supernatural, places for maintaining the delicate balance between the human community and the divine: they were places of sacrifices and prayers, of dreams, healings and other miracles, places of consolidation for managing various crises and difficulties in life. An "effective" sacred place is the one with an uninterrupted cult, with an "active" patron saint - a "living" saint, in folk usage - one who appears in dreams and visions, solves problems, gives instructions and provides signs. Although during the Communist regime authorities repressed religion and tried to eliminate its basic teaching through rationalism and atheism, faith remained a vital resource for many people. When after 1989 the restrictions ended, shrines became what they used to be - places for community's consolidation and identification. Symbolically expressing universal values and moral

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<sup>23</sup> The only exception is the village of Skrebatno, where in recent years the inhabitants have been divided into two hostile groups who in the elections support different candidate-mayors, both of whom however are Bulgarian Muslims.

norms, the restored or newly built sacred places and their holidays regained significance as local markers of identity. This proved to be so even in villages like Garmen, which for a long time used to be “red” with supporters of the previous Communist, now the Socialist Party, predominant.

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