

Secularization and Literature. Intellectual Elites in Bulgaria and the Question of Religion (1892–1944)

The scientific purpose of the project is to problematize the concept of religion (“the religious”) that is manifested in Bulgarian literary criticism created in the years 1892–1944, i.e. in the period that was marked by ambivalent processes of modernization and secularization of society. This will serve to trace the process of adapting the categories that determine the “Western” understanding of religion which is associated with the age of Enlightenment (actually, of Protestant provenance) in Orthodox conditions. At the basis of the problem, there is a question of conditions and effects of encountering different models of cultures.

Since the notion of “the religious” is inextricably interwoven with the notion of “the secular,” the subject of attention will be the religious–secular opposition. The research will attempt to define the rules for classifying ideas and practices as secular or religious and to answer the questions how “secular” literary studies register the attitude to “the religious” and how it affects the interpretation of modernity, including the view perception of their own nation by Bulgarian intellectual elites, who were people educated in the “West” but only after being raised in the native Orthodox culture which is derived from the folk and Church tradition. As a result, on the example of Bulgaria, the following will be presented: 1) the influence of the Protestant thought paradigm on Orthodox intellectuals and 2) the accompanying changes in meanings and valuations in relation to religious–secular relation; in this context 3) the process of shaping modernity in non-Western European culture, as well as 4) the role of humanities and literary studies in the process.

Attention will be paid to texts selected on the basis of three themes in the context of which the understanding of “the religious” is particularly evident: biblical tradition in literature, religious themes in literature and the relationship between religion and art. The research will take place in the light of post-secular thought and will consist in analysis of meanings related to the religious–secular opposition and establishment of their relations with various traditions and practices of understanding in the context of the religious, philosophical and aesthetic thought and socio-cultural conditions in Bulgaria and Western Europe, as well as in Russia. The genealogies that will emerge will reveal the connection with Protestant thought, and thus the complexity of local conceptualizations in relation to the religious sphere. The analysis will also reveal the background of the worldview choices which were made by the first Bulgarian professional literary critics and literary scholars, who are understood as “founding fathers of Bulgarian humanities”. As a result of the research, it will be possible to formulate conclusions and put forward new hypotheses in regard to the relation between Protestant and Orthodox thought and the significance of literary studies in this context.

From the perspective of the current state of knowledge and the directions of thought that are developed in the world's humanities, it is particularly important to focus on the issue of the encounter between the Orthodox and the Protestant model of understanding religion. The choice of so-called small culture – and the Bulgarian culture is perceived as such – to be the subject of interest is dictated by the fact that it offers a smaller number of sources which makes it possible to carry out a certain synthesis in this respect.

The problem of the Protestant and Orthodox categories in the light of the relation between secularization processes and reflection on literature in Bulgaria is addressed due to the auto-stereotype of Bulgarians as religiously indifferent (or possibly pagan, heretic or atheist) that was established in the analysed period but is still relevant now. This fact deserves special attention because of two paradoxical phenomena, especially from the point of view of the Western culture model. Firstly, as statistics show, Bulgarians commonly declare their attachment to the Orthodox tradition, but the percentage of believers is low. Although, according to the latest 2001 census, almost 83% of the Bulgarians describe themselves as Orthodox Christians, according to a poll carried out in 2005 on behalf of the European Commission, only 40% of the population believe in God. Secondly, relations with the Bulgarian Orthodox Church are constantly practiced in public sphere, especially in the political and state context. The very concept of religion (“traditional”, “Orthodox”, “Christian”, “Bulgarian”, or “autogenous”) constitutes the foundation of Bulgarian national ideology and, in this sense, is one of the basic themes in the elites’ deliberations. Moreover, the question of the (non-)religious worldview of the classic writers of the Bulgarian canon of literature is one of the “great” yet still unexplored literary topics; it recurs regardless of the socio-political conditions in Bulgaria, i.e. both during the formation of the Bulgarian state after liberation from the rule of the Ottoman Empire (1878–1944) and during the communist period (1944–1989).

Therefore, the study will deepen the reflection on the complexity of secularization processes; it will confirm that secularism which is understood here as a story of a triumphant and homogeneous parade of the secularity removes all “differences” and “inconsistencies”, and thus it destroys all testimonies of “otherness”, while secularization in each culture takes place in different way and has different effects and in this sense it is not unifying or unifiable.