

DUALISTIC AND TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS VIEWS AND THEIR EFFECT ON THE SOCIAL FABRIC IN BULGARIA

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Abstract. The role of religion in modern society and human relations has long been considered increasingly marginal. Surprisingly for scholars, religion and religiosity became even more influential in postmodern times, though in various forms. The paper aims to discuss the social effects of different types of religiosity in Bulgaria, including Newbogomilism, emphasizing dualistic elements of the religious worldviews on social trust and cohesion, proposing a conceptual framework to analyze that. The working hypothesis is that the dualistic worldview has a negative impact on the social integration of Bulgarian society today.

Keywords: religiosity; spirituality; social cohesion; dualism; neo-bogomilism

Is there a need for religion in contemporary society?

The inception of sociology as a discipline is intertwined with analyzing religious beliefs' societal impact, exemplified by Durkheim's foundational work on anomie, highlighting religion's integrative function in fostering social cohesion through shared values and mechanical solidarity. However, Inglehart and Welzel (2005) posit that traditional religiosity's constitutive role in achieving organic solidarity diminishes in complex modern societies. Their value change theory suggests post-materialistic values drive contemporary social ties (Norris & Inglehart, 2009; Welzel & Delhey 2015; Welzel et al. 2005), indicating a shifting role for religion in post-secular societies and a decline in traditional religiosity in affluent nations. While existential threats may correlate with traditional religiosity, prosperous populations increasingly contemplate life's meaning, a core aspect of spirituality.

Max Weber's seminal work on religion, particularly *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, illustrates the reciprocal influence between religious worldviews and social structures. He argued that Calvinist beliefs, with their dualistic predestination perspective leading to a "Calvinistic panic" and the pursuit

of wealth as a sign of divine favor, coupled with piety and asceticism, facilitated capital accumulation and the rise of modern capitalism.

Durkheim and Weber, albeit with different approaches, demonstrate the key role of religion as a driver of social development, whether through social integration or the individualizing function of religious values in economic growth and social welfare. In the contemporary context, this debate remains relevant: what is happening to society and its social cohesion in the face of growing secularism, and what is the role of religious values and worldviews in economic and social development?

Thus, for our purposes, it's worth exploring **to what extent new individualistic religiosity or spirituality** as observed in contemporary sociology of religion is a factor responsible **for the rise of anomie** in the Bulgarian society or at least not contributing to the **social cohesion**. International studies suggest that societies with declining religious participation often experience **higher levels of social alienation** (Lim & Putnam 2010), **mental health issues** (Koenig et al. 2001), **and distrust in institutions** (Aksoy & Wiertz 2024). Those phenomena are complex and multifaceted, and according to Bauman (2000) contemporary society is characterized by fluidity and instability, leading to existential uncertainty. On the other hand, religion based on the Berger's concept of "sacred canopy" (1967) provides a stable and coherent frame for individuals and societies. To explore those complex relations empirically, it is necessary to propose a theoretical framework, which enables such analysis, which is the aim of this paper.

The role of religion in Bulgaria?

The role of religion in Bulgarian society is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, deeply intertwined with the nation's historical, cultural, and social fabric. Ivan Hadjiyski's seminal work, "Bit i dushevnost na nashiya narod" (The Spirit and Culture of Our People) laid foundational groundwork in understanding this relationship. His analysis highlighted the profound influence of religious beliefs and practices on the moral and ethical norms of Bulgarian communities, as well as their role in fostering social cohesion and community identity. He meticulously documented how religious rituals and customs, particularly those associated with major holidays, permeated and structured everyday life, especially in rural settings. According to him, the traditional beliefs and practices of Bulgarians are a blend of Orthodox Christian and pre-Christian beliefs, customs, and rituals. While acknowledging the significant influence of Orthodox Christianity in shaping Bulgarian moral values and worldview, he also emphasized the persistence of pre-Christian elements, reflecting a dualistic religious heritage. Orthodox Christianity, beyond its spiritual role, served as a crucial national institution and social factor, influencing social relations and behavior, contributing to what Hadjiyski termed "people's psychology" (Hadjiyski 1974).

In contemporary sociological analysis, the influence of religion in Bulgaria can be examined through two primary lenses: firstly, as a foundational element of the traditional Bulgarian worldview, reflecting the historical fusion of Orthodox Christianity and pre-Christian beliefs; and secondly, through the institutional context, specifically the impact of religious institutions, such as the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, on social trust and social cohesion.

Sociological literature suggests that the rise of “multiple religiosity” or “believing without belonging” emerges as a reaction to the perceived institutionalization of traditional religious practices (Davie 2000). This perspective argues that entrenched religious institutions may prompt individuals to seek alternative spiritual expressions and new religious movements. Within the Bulgarian context, it is relevant to examine the presence and impact of these trends on the religious landscape and Bulgarian worldviews. Furthermore, it is crucial to investigate whether perceived institutional stagnation within the Bulgarian Orthodox Church contributes to the rise of alternative spiritualities and the decline of social trust. Research on post-communist religious transformations in Eastern Europe indicates a search for novel spiritual identities, potentially diverging from traditional institutions (Tomka 2011). Consequently, analyzing Bulgaria’s contemporary religious landscape necessitates considering the interplay between traditional religious institutions, alternative spiritualities, and the evolving socio-cultural context.

Previous sociological research on religiosity in Bulgaria

Bulgaria presents an intriguing case in the interplay between religiosity and social (dis)trust. As an Eastern European country with a strong Orthodox Christian heritage, it balances Western scepticism towards religion and Eastern reverence for tradition (Todorova 2009). Compounding this dynamic is Bulgaria’s historically low level of trust in public institutions. Eurobarometer and Transparency International surveys have repeatedly shown that Bulgarians have serious distrust in key state institutions such as the government, the judiciary and political authorities (European Commission 2017; Transparency International 2019). This widespread distrust is the result of decades of political instability, corruption and ineffective governance that have significantly eroded public faith in institutions (Nikolova & Marinov 2016).

Against this backdrop, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church stands out as one of the few institutions that continues to enjoy high public trust (Open Society Institute 2021). Historically, the Church has been not only a spiritual but also a national pillar, especially in periods of political repression such as the Ottoman Empire and the communist era (Todorova 2009). Its role as a guardian of cultural and national identity places it in a unique position relative to other institutions and can influence public attitudes on a variety of issues.

Recent opinion polls (Gallup 2024) show that three-quarters of Bulgarians self-identify as Orthodox, but less than two-thirds say they are believers. This

discrepancy suggests that for many Orthodoxy is primarily a cultural affiliation and national identity, not necessarily a religious practice. This aligns with the Balkan “millet-secularism” model, where religious identity, shaped by Ottoman legacies, underpins national belonging (Evstatiev & Eickelman 2022). Here, secularism coexists with symbolic Orthodox dominance, fostering “controlled tolerance” of minority faiths while marginalizing new religious movements. Others debate whether Bulgaria’s secularization reflects Byzantine “symphony” (Ghodsee 2009), elastic politicization of religion (Krasteva 2015), or “neo-secularism” – where Orthodoxy signifies identity without shaping behavior (Merdzhanova 2021). Qualitative studies suggest Bulgarians exhibit “belonging without belief,” though further research is needed to test correlations between Orthodox identity, institutional trust, and secular behavior.

Despite evolving religious attitudes, scholars concur on Orthodoxy’s significant symbolic role in post-communist Bulgarian society and the state. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church is perceived as a moral compass and pillar of national identity, enjoying relatively high public trust (43.1% trust vs. 35.8% distrust), though this is susceptible to political factors and scandals.

Increasingly, Bulgarians differentiate between institutionalized religion and personal spirituality. Belief in divinity extends beyond declared religiosity, aligning with a trend towards holistic spirituality (Karamelska 2023). Religion is viewed as a dynamic sphere encompassing diverse spiritual expressions beyond traditional ecclesiastical structures. The growing “spiritual but not religious” phenomenon includes interest in new age movements, esotericism, and alternative practices (Petrova 2022; Goncharova 2012; Kurkchiev 2022). This transition from traditional religiosity to more individualized forms of spirituality has important implications for societal attitudes and the way society integrates and constructs its social fabric.

Trust in social institutions

In sociology, trust is a fundamental concept explored by classical theorists. Simmel (1908) viewed trust as anticipating the future and enabling action despite limited information within modernization. Luhmann (1979) considered trust a core aspect of social reality, distinguishing between interpersonal trust, evolving into systemic trust as complexity increases, thus serving as a mechanism for reducing social complexity. Giddens (1990) emphasized trust’s necessity in modern institutions, where individuals rely on “abstract systems” without direct experience. Endreß (2002) argues that these two forms of trust are interrelated, with interpersonal interactions often influencing institutional trust. The interplay between systemic and interpersonal trust is essential for understanding trust in contemporary social systems.

Shapiro (1987) examines how impersonal trust is managed through institutional mechanisms, highlighting its vulnerability without personal relationships, building

on Granovetter's embeddedness concept. Giddens (1990) introduced "active trust," continuously recreated through interaction in contexts of declining traditional trust and institutional instability. In the Bulgarian context, marked by low public trust in political institutions, examining trust in religious institutions as a foundational pillar is pertinent. Recent UN reports underscore the importance of social trust for well-being, noting how institutional distrust can erode social cohesion (United Nations 2024).

Contemporary dualistic and non-dualistic dimensions of religiosity/spirituality

Dualism, a philosophical-religious concept positing a struggle between good and evil, is interpreted by Bogomils as an ontological separation where the material world, created by a malevolent demiurge, contrasts with the divine spiritual realm. According to Henning and Henning (2022), the origin of dualistic currents in world religions has its roots in Zoroastrianism, which originated in ancient Persia. This religion first introduced the concept of so-called ethical dualism, in which people are divided into good and bad. Moreover, the authors conclude that there is a link between the type of society – in this case marked by conflict and confrontation between warring groups (internal and external) and the religious outlook. Dualistic tendencies in religions emphasize the relationship with the need to confront one group or community with another, while societies that are more founded or forced to cooperate develop a rather non-dualistic worldview. While it is true that societies characterized by conflict may be more likely to adopt dualistic worldviews, and societies characterized by cooperation may be more likely to adopt non-dualistic worldviews, it is important to avoid deterministic explanations. Religious traditions are dynamic and evolve, interacting in complex ways with their social and cultural contexts.

Thus a form of ethical dualism enters Christianity, and other Abrahamic religions, but "evil" is not given such prominence; evil and death are defeated. It is considered to have no being, it exists but by God's assumption, i.e. "evil" is not conceived of as an ontological reality. The being of the world or creation is entirely due to God and is renewed by his divine energies. Evil derives its existence and manifestation from the misdirected desires, energies and actions of human beings, i.e. the entry of sin into the world has an ontological dimension in addition to its moral-ethical side. Sin is the misapplied gift of God and represents the ontological rupture of man from God, so evil itself has no being, it is an existence drawing strength from this broken relationship. This is a very complex theological treatment in terms of dualistic ethics in the world, but the ontological monism of being has its implications in terms of the formation of ethical and religious notions. In practice, in the everyday life of individuals and societies, the development of a religious worldview is an assemblage of ethical categories, notions, and practices.

Contemporary religiosity exhibits dualistic thinking through skepticism towards institutions, alternative spirituality, and rejection of official doctrines.

Rousou (2021) argues that the conventional dichotomy between institutionalized religiosity and individualized spirituality inadequately reflects the fluid integration of diverse spiritual teachings and practices in everyday life. This interweaving of tradition and innovation in shaping worldviews necessitates a nuanced approach in surveys assessing public attitudes towards religiosity and spirituality, considering both dualistic and non-dualistic aspects. Thus, our research assumption is that, contrary to the “market” logic that the multiplicity of forms of religious life and the competition between them, in which the state is the guarantor of “rule-following” and the neutral arbiter of a fair fight in the field of the spiritual, in fact this amplifies social fragmentation and leads to a decline in social cohesion. Moreover, the dualistic elements in the religious worldview reinforce confrontation in society, diminish social trust, and accentuate the division between “us” and “them,” usually those who represent the state and hold the instruments of power, as it inherently opposes the “spiritual.” the “elevated” or “enlightened”, incorporated in “chosen” individuals, bearers of secret spiritual knowledge, usually from the popular lowlands to those others, representatives of the “corrupt” or at least “unenlightened” secular and religious power, residing in their “ivory towers”, far from the problems and challenges of the people.

Measuring religiosity and spirituality in society

For the purposes of this study, the measurement of religiosity will focus on three main components of Zwingmann et al.’s (2011) five-level model of the impact of religiosity on health: centrality, resources, and spiritual well-being. **Centrality** of religiosity is best operationalized, according to the authors, by applying Huber’s Centrality Scale (C-Scale), which allows for an assessment of the extent to which religious beliefs and practices are integrated into an individual’s life. **The resources** provided by religiosity, in turn, are measured on the basis of an adapted version of the System of Belief Inventory (SBI), distinguishing between social resources (support from a religious community) and individual resources (a close relationship with God/higher power). **Spiritual well-being** is operationalized according to the Spiritual Well-Being Scale (SWBS), which reflects the subjective experience of meaning, harmony, and connection to the transcendent. Thus, data will be analyzed by conducting a representative public opinion survey and differentiating respondents in terms of the importance of a religious worldview in daily life (centrality), the ability to mobilize resources from this religiosity (social and individual), and the degree of subjective assessment of spiritual state.

Regarding the measurement of spirituality, which will be conceived in the Bulgarian context as a separate phenomenon, the model proposed by Büssing (2011) will be used, which distinguishes four main dimensions: religious orientation, search for insight/wisdom, conscious interactions and belief in transcendence. This model will enable to capture the broad spectrum of spiritual experiences and beliefs that are

not necessarily associated with institutionalized religion. To these dimensions will be added questions that explore the dualistic and non-dualistic elements in respondents' worldviews. The dualistic elements will be operationalized through questions that explore the belief in the existence of a fundamental struggle between good and evil, the division of the world into "us" and "them," and the tendency toward categorical moral judgment. Non-dualistic elements will be measured through questions that explore belief in the unity of existence, the interconnectedness of all things, and a holistic understanding of the world.

Quantitative methods will be used to collect data – a survey with a representative sample of the Bulgarian population. The collected data will be analyzed using statistical methods to establish correlations between the dependent and independent variables. Special attention will be paid to the analysis of the influence of dualistic elements in the religious worldview on social trust and cohesion.

Regarding social cohesion, which is also a complex and multifaceted construct that has been operationalized by Bottoni (2016) based on seven dimensions of social cohesion, including interpersonal trust, social relationships, social support, participation, openness, institutional trust and legitimacy. This approach is particularly suitable for the study of the religious/spiritual sphere in Bulgaria, as it allows to analyse how individual religious beliefs and practices are related to social cohesion at different levels, from interpersonal relations to trust in institutions. It allows to explore how religious participation in the community influences interpersonal trust and social support, or how religious values are related to openness to differences and trust in institutions. Multilevel analysis allows for the influence of contextual factors such as regional differences and national policies on the relationship between religiosity/spirituality and social cohesion. Based on this approach, the initially formulated working hypothesis can be refined to the following propositions about the relationship between religiosity and social cohesion in Bulgaria, which can be empirically falsified in a subsequent study, namely:

- Religious participation in the community is positively related to interpersonal trust and social support.
- Religious values are positively related to openness to differences and trust in institutions.
- Regional differences and national policies influence the relationship between religiosity/spirituality and social cohesion.

Conclusion

This study has set out to conceptually delineate the multidimensional dimensions and outline the complex interrelationships between the social phenomena of religiosity, spirituality and social cohesion, deployed within the Bulgarian context, which has traditionally seen religious and worldview syncretism, creating a unique

picture given contemporary developments and global influences in postmodernity. Multidimensional models are proposed to measure religiosity, spirituality and social cohesion to capture the nuances of these complex phenomena and their interplay. It is hoped that the results of the future empirical study will contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between religious views and social cohesion in Bulgaria. Such a sociological reading and analysis of the different types of religious and spiritual practices and their impact on society, the formation of its values and perceptions, as well as its identity and integrity, will allow to achieve a deeper understanding of these complex processes and, ultimately, to propose effective solutions to counteract the erosion of public trust and strengthen the social fabric in Bulgaria.

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