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АЛБЕНА ГЕОРГИЕВА, *Фолклорни измерения на християнството. Устни разкази и локална религиозност в района на Бачковския манастир „Успение на Пресвета Богородица” и на Хаджидимовския манастир „Св. Великомъченик Георги Победоносец”* [*Folk Dimensions of Christianity. Oral Narratives and Local Religiosity near Bačkovno Monastery of the Mother of God Petritzonitissa and Hadžidimovo Monastery of the Holy Great-Martyr George, the Victory-Bearer*], Просвета, София 2012, pp. 440.

For years Albena Georgieva's scientific research has been focused on the issues concerning Bulgarian folk narrative, such as the typology and its function, as well as its place in culture. The continuity of her scientific interest is confirmed by series of academic publications including the monograph dedicated to the genealogy of non-folktale oral narrative and the process of storytelling: *Етиологичните легенди в българския фолклор* (София 1990) [*Etiological Legends in Bulgarian Folklore*, Sofia 1990]; *Разкази и разказване в българския фолклор* (София 2000) [*Narratives and Storytelling in Bulgarian Folklore*, Sofia 2000], publications of source books such as the anthology of folk legend with a commentary *Когато Господ ходеше по земята. 77 легенди с тълкувания* (София 1993) [*When the Lord Walked the Earth. 77 Legends with Explanations*, Sofia 1993], and several articles published in periodicals, both domestic and abroad.

In her latest work, *Фолклорни измерения на християнството* [*Folk Dimensions of Christianity*], Georgieva once again undertakes the subject of the folk religiosity. The 440-pages-long publication consists of *Introduction*, six chapters, *Summary*, *index of interlocutors cited from unpublished materials*, table of sources, and the subject literature list, *Appendices* containing several texts included in the narrative process, and *Index of basic concepts*. Resources used in Georgieva's study were acquired through interviews and observations of the Bačkovno Monastery of the Mother of God Petritzonitissa and the Hadžidimovo Monastery dedicated to the Holy Great-Martyr George, the Victory-Bearer, as well as various places of cult in which the author conducted field studies since the 1970s up till now (for more informa-

tion see the impressive record of Georgieva's scientific researches – p. 11–14).

Georgieva's aim is to track the process of storytelling – “what and how we talk about faith” (p. 14) in communities agglomerated near the cult places significant for the Eastern Orthodox Christianity, along with communities which tend to gather in the places of cult exclusively during the major Christian festivals. Georgieva claims that the content of the stories indicates the occurrence of mutual influences and impacts existing between a community and its surroundings, as well as it constructs and sustains the sense of being affiliated with the place. Suddenly, on the margin of the central issue of the study emerges an argument concerning the significance of the storytelling process in ritual practices – the interpretation of their genesis, beliefs concerning their effectiveness and purposefulness, and, finally, the construction of specified ideological demeanor among the faithful.

The first chapter, *Устни религиозни разкази и фолклорна култура* [*Religious folk narratives and folklore*], p. 23–72, introduces the issue of the “folk Christianity”, a phenomenon defining the result of the centuries-old coexistence, mutual influences and the mutual infiltration of folklore (beliefs and practices) and official religion. Georgieva performs an overview of the terminology of the scientific discourse (*битово, народно, фолклорно християнство*), in order to define the most appropriate one for the undertaken deliberation (*фолклорно християнство, фолклорна религия, популярна религия*), contrasting and rejecting those elements which do not embrace the entirety of the phenomenon (*алтернативна религиозна култура*), as well as those which are

inadequate for the subject she focuses on (*народно християнство, синкретично християнство*) or even illogical in the consideration of the phenomenon (*битово езичество, езическо православие, битово православие*). Furthermore, Georgieva concentrates on the subject of assimilating and practicing Christianity in the local culture, discussing the role of religious oral narratives (*устни религиозни разкази*) mediating in the communication between folklore and the official religion. The author briefly explains her understanding of the concept of folk religious narratives, which, according to her, includes all the stories transmitted in the process of a direct voluntary communication, with plots containing elements (such as images, afterthought, world-views) connected with official religion and with everything that appears to be “extraterrestrial” and inscrutable. Georgieva concisely explains the silhouette of a “local saint” who as a person visible in the collective consciousness of a given community has a considerable impact on the formation and spreading of the miracle stories, oral tradition, and iconographic representation. Georgieva claims that all processes which occur between canonical faith and folk religion are always bilateral; motifs and biblical personae are being adopted by oral tradition which represents certain patterns, cultural characters, etc., resulting in peculiar diffusion of images and ideas.

The second chapter, *Сакралният център и чудесното начало* [*The Holy Center and Miraculous Beginning*], p. 73–107, contains a discussion of the transformation processes fixed in human consciousness, permanent mythological images and the acquisition of pagan rituals by Christian practices and visions. Later on, Georgieva excerpts the threads undertaken by legendary tales from which she forms groups of stories containing various landscape elements that came into existence in non-typical manner. She distinguishes such methods of formation as creation due to saint’s doings, as a result of making a sacrifice, breaking a taboo, as an outcome of a *yunak*, or Bulgarian lords’ actions. This division aims at enhancing the connection between the surrounding nature and

the history of a place of religious cult which the local community discovers while telling a story.

Chapter III, *Сакралното пространство – средоточие на религиозна култура* [*Sacred Space – the Center of Religious Culture*], p. 108–138, focuses on the sacred place as a center of mutual cultural influences. Georgieva presents a series of interesting observations concerning a place where folklore and Christianity officially meet. According to her it is an Eastern Orthodox Church which, to a large extent, remained true to traditional values despite the political and economic permutations. Oral tradition proved to be an assistance, safe haven, and the explanation for the problems of common people. However, the question whether folklore helps to find God remains open. Georgieva externalizes personally with her casual thoughts on the subject of her participation in Eastern Orthodox Church celebrations at the time of implementing a research project. In Chapter IV, *Религиозните разкази* [*Sacred Narratives*], p. 139–202, Georgieva analyzes main thematic circles of non-magical folk prose; these stories focus on the Old Testament or evangelical events, charismatic personae, dreams (prophetic, redemptive, premonitory), prophecies, visions, miraculous salvations and the faith itself.

Chapter V, *Врата като жизнена стратегия* [*Faith as Life Strategy*], p. 203–230, contains personal stories of three of Georgieva’s interlocutors: Kamenka Genova from the Gubeš village, former amanuensis of the Bačkovo Monastery, Slavčo Kišov, and Father Mitrofan from the Bačkovo Monastery, all of whom she met during the fieldwork; faith and practice proved to be a life strategy for them. Georgieva decided to name the subchapters dedicated to a particular character using passages from their interviews or direct references to their statements, which turned out to be quite an interesting effort.

Lastly, Chapter VI, *Поклоничество – пътуване отвъд* [*Pilgrimage – a Journey from the Other Side*], p. 231–294, concentrates on the subject of pilgrimage to “holy” places. Georgieva discusses all components of folk religion (practices, places, objects) connected to the

cult of the local saint including the name day celebration, dedicating a monastery to a given saint which automatically makes it a “living icon”, healing water, remembrance of a sacrifice made, participation in church fairs, and shared dance (*choro*), as well as the fact of being healed through religious pilgrimage. Communities perceive pilgrimages not only as a chance of meeting God, but also the loved ones – close relatives, neighbors, members of the community. Fulfilling the ritual practices, both the official and unofficial ones, gives the opportunity to commune with *sacrum* and to sense the special closeness, equality, togetherness. A pilgrimage may symbolically be called a peregrination to find lost paradise, wherein the paradise represents a particular state of mental peace and reconciliation with the World.

In *Conclusion*, p. 295–306, Georgieva draws several proposals concerning the stories and their plots, as well as the process of creating and passing them on, the meaning and legitimacy of pilgrimages, and other practices.

Annexe, p. 351–437, include eighteen texts with a value of a folklore document to which the author was referring to in her scientific narration. The annexe were recorded by Georgieva herself (sometimes with the help of other researchers) in years 1987–2004, and arranged in chronological order (with the exception of one, which was recorded in the year 1998 and found after the story from the 1999). The texts are written mostly in a form of a dialogue aducing the life stories of clergymen or believers, places and objects considered holy, healings, etc.

The first thought that came to my mind after reading Georgieva’s book was the reflection upon the style of the individual research presentation, not only in regard to the existing literature on the subject, also the foreign-language literature, but foremost the scientific achievements of Georgieva’s colleagues, often considered to be the coauthors of conclusions. Georgieva invokes the names of the coworkers from her Alma Mater, presents their views, borrows their terminology (or openly polemicize with it), always mentioning those who participated in the field work with her. Even though *Фолклорни измерения на християнството*

remains an authorial and thoroughly original publication, one has an impression of “polyphonicness” of the work, which undoubtedly favors the substantiation of the thesis, but also creates a highly positive and professional image of the Sofia folkloristic community which Georgieva is a part of.

The substantive content of the publication is impressive, starting from the introductory theoretical chapter which allows to become sufficiently acquainted with the topic of the study, through the presentation of the results of the field work and textual analysis which leads to conclusions often more universal than the name of a subchapter. The overview of the relations between folklore and Christianity is methodical and based on various sources, therefore it does not ignore any elements of the local religious culture, such as religious tales, the process of their creation and transfer, religious practices, pilgrimages, places and objects of cult. Georgieva metaphorically opens the eyes of a reader; certain the elements which up till now were staying in the shadows, aspects of the storytelling process, using the tale as a method of communication between the believers, and as a treasury of certain truths about the surrounding reality which are significant for a given community and should not be forgotten (or forsaken, when it comes to practices) slowly become visible. From the beginning Georgieva changes the focus from the plots of the stories to the very process of storytelling and the phenomenon which occurs during the storytelling; the folk community is not build, developed, and maintained through one specific story (or even a group of stories), but through the process of storytelling and passing them on.

Religious folk narratives occurs to be a contemporary genre, remarkably active in the process of constructing local tradition. The stories told in various situations and by different people representing distinct social statuses, with various life experiences tend to support, give an example, motivate to take action, and influence the feeling of attachment with a community; for the researcher they constitute a base for the better understanding of the group of believers. As Georgieva concludes, the social groups that

exist and are related to a particular place of cult, where tradition of religious storytelling is still present, prove not to be in need of protection or outside support (as, for example, from the authorities or programs subsidizing the *national heritage*) as its existence is guaranteed by the needs of community so the art of storytelling could flourish and be passed on.

The stories and storytelling support the construction of religious communities and places of cult related to it, for they create a narrative of the Holy center, its beginning and crucial elements of its development. In turn, the threads undertaken by Georgieva legitimize particular elements of landscape; the stories that are considered more obsolete bring back the “traces of nature”, more contemporary ones pass on such subjects as the discovery of a miraculous icon, healing water, building of a monastery, etc., as they focus predominantly on objects. The narration of a fictional event may have a symbolic meaning for the community, but the stories might serve as myths. Some of them provide an explanation and justification for the religious practices (which is highly significant for the original and uncommon actions characteristic for a particular place of cult, such as methods for childlessness from the village of Gorni Voden) which is a matter of great importance for the community youth and foreigners.

However, while I remain greatly impressed by Georgieva's publication I would like to express my doubts concerning it.

In my opinion the clarity of Conclusion might increase if the extractions (p. 295–306) were arranged differently. Bold parts of the text do not always correspond with the content which should expand their meaning, and in several cases they double (cf. *Наративната ситуация в този смисъл е и форма на обучение*, p. 301; and (...) *разказването до голяма степен е и процес на възпитание*, p. 302). Nevertheless, the construction of Conclusion somehow replicates the structure of the publication, therefore, it is not surprising that the extractions which mention the “construction and supporting the community” reiterate, for they refer to various elements forming the local religion:

storytelling, regular practices, knowledge transmission concerning the place of cult, and other.

Another subject about which I have reservations is the division of threads presented on the pages 80–81. The classification criterion here is the landscape element, often of an atypical appearance or behavior, a certain kind of natural environment phenomenon (specific shape of a stone, tint of rock) which occurred due to special circumstances. As far as the ‘водоизточник’ [water source] is a simple criterion to extract, the difference between the ‘природни образувания’ [work of nature] in reference to the stones or rocks which are to remind of breaking a taboo, and ‘природни образувания’ as the tracks of the Saints' activity (according to the cited source stones are also applicable) is not. It seems as the better selection of a classification criterion (for example the cause for the formation of a given landscape's element) would serve as an improvement to the organization of threads into thread groups.

From the point of view of a person always hungry for folkloristic sources I would wish to encounter even more expanded annex together with the attachments. It seems as not every text mentioned in the publication found its way into it, and some of them were introduced only in short passages while their accessibility is limited to the archive of the Institute of Folklore Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Science, remaining hard to reach for the outsiders.

To sum up, Georgieva has managed to make *Фолклорни измерения на християнството* remarkably straightforward by combining the lightness of a professional scientific reasoning with an easily accessible for a literary amateur content, valuable through the interdisciplinary approach, and even more interesting due to the personal reflexions, which the author does not avoid.

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