

**TO THE ISSUE OF PROTECTION AND PROMOTION
OF ORTHODOX CHURCHES IN THE BORDER ZONES
OF BULGARIA (TOURIST ROUTES AND
ADVERTISING)¹**

Mariya Nikolova

University of library studies and information technologies, Sofia, Bulgaria
m.nikolova@unibit.bg

Vyara Nikolova

University of library studies and information technologies, Sofia, Bulgaria
viara_nikolova@yahoo.com

Denitsa Dimitrova

University of library studies and information technologies, Sofia, Bulgaria
d.dimitrova@unibit.bg

ABSTRACT

The paper, written by project number: ДН15/4 – 11th December 2017, funded by the Bulgarian Science Fund, looks at good practices of promoting and socialization of Orthodox monuments in multi-religious regions in the border zones of the Republic of Bulgaria. The town of Zlatograd is a particular choice. It is at the very border between Bulgaria and Greece, where most of the population are Muslims. The town is of tourist interest for two reasons: there is a border customs and check point and there is a unique ethnographic complex, where typical of the region crafts are demonstrated.

KEY WORDS: Orthodox Church, Cultural Heritage, culture, tourism, religion

¹ Review paper

INTRODUCTION

The project “Creating a Model for the Preservation, Promotion and Socialization of Orthodox Churches in Bulgaria” – ДН 15/4 - 11.12.2017 aims at exploring different policies and activities of the local authorities and individuals for preservation and socialization of the cultural heritage in our country. The town of Zlatograd is one of the areas selected for research because of its specific features such as location, history and diversity in the religious belonging of the population. The history of the preservation and socialization of the religious orthodox monuments in the town illustrates the role and importance of the individual person and the whole community for achieving favorable results.

In Bulgaria since 864 the main religious denomination has been Eastern Orthodoxy. Notwithstanding the various historical circumstances to this day, it has been a dominant religion.

Historically, the Bulgarian state has undergone various cataclysms that have left traces in the area of religion in certain regions of the country. In these areas, besides the traditional Christians, who are predominantly a majority, there are also Bulgarians who are Islamic. These are regions along our border with Turkey and Greece as the largest concentration of such a population in the Rhodope mountain range. It is very important to emphasize that in the Bulgarian conditions Christians and Muslims live in peace and understanding, treat each other as good neighbors and brothers. A striking example of such cohabitation is the inhabitants of the small border town of Zlatograd situated in southern Bulgaria in close proximity to our border with Greece. Too far away from the traditional tourist routes and located in a difficult mountainous area Zlatograd has preserved the centuries-old spirit and unity of the inhabitants and today is a popular tourist destination not only for the Bulgarians, but also for the foreigners, especially the Greeks. Only three kilometers from the town is the border crossing point Zlatograd-Teres, which ensures fast crossing of the border in both directions. The discovery of this point significantly improves the living conditions and prosperity of the inhabitants. For relations between Christians and Muslims, the editor of Zlatogradski newspaper Efim Ushev has said: “Zlatograd is a unique town situated in the most beautiful Rhodope Mountains, but not only with its location, but especially with its population, which is characterized by incredible tolerance between Christians and Muslims. It is a

unique city, even with its cemetery – common for Muslims and Christians. There is no other city in Bulgaria to bury Christians and Muslims side by side. None of us the locals even thinks about what religion our neighbors belong to. Sometimes, for political reasons, individual politicians try to bring about some division, but unsuccessfully”.²

Visitors to the town are interested not only in the possibility to quickly and comfortably cross the border. Zlatograd also offers many and varied places of interest that are unique to this region.

In 2001, with the cooperation of the Municipality of Zlatograd, the Ethnographic Area Complex “Zlatograd” was opened and worked in the town – an open-air museum, which is at the same time part of the city’s everyday life. It is attractive for visitors who can observe the work of various craftsmen – bagpipers, weavers, saddlers, waiters, etc. as well as to buy souvenirs. The complex is located in the architectural reserve “Zlatograd”, covering over 100 registered architectural monuments of culture. Typical of the city buildings are white walls, white round chimneys, wide oak doors. It is also possible to see the Revival ensemble, which takes the visitors to the time of the Bulgarian revival.

In Zlatograd there are also significant Orthodox temples declared to be monuments of culture. In the town itself these are the “Assumption of the Holy Mother” and “St. George the Victorious”.

The “Assumption of the Holy Mother” church is the oldest temple not only in the town but also in the Rhodopes. It was built in 1834. Low, dug into the ground, with a large courtyard, is surrounded by a tall stone wall because it was built in the 19th Century and should not be seen above the fence.

The church has been declared a monument of culture of local significance and there are wonderful examples of the early work of Zahari Zograf. Thanks to the efforts of the priest and the local population – Christians and Muslims the church has been maintained and active. It is known as the “old church”.

In 1835, a courtyard school was opened in its yard. Also with the efforts of the priest Father Atanas Arolsky it was restored and it hosts a museum collection “The Enlightenment in the Middle Rhodopes”. It is also the oldest written monument of the Rhodope Renaissance - “Zlatograd’s letter” from 1852.

² Here and from now on, the citations come from the personal archive of Prof. Mariya Nikolova

The second Orthodox temple in the territory of Zlatograd is the temple “St. George”. Built in 1871, a renovation was made in 1912 and the temple has been the second working church in the city.

The history of the Orthodox temples in the city is closely related to the work of priest Atanas Arolsky (1919-2015), who for 52 years was the spiritual leader of the Christians in the town and whom the locals deservedly called “our bishop”. His personality and activity in Zlatograd deserve special attention.

In 1943, Father Atanas Arolski, who just graduated from the Seminary, was ‘temporarily’ appointed a priest in Zlatograd and his temporary residence lasted more than half a century. The years spent in Zlatograd were not easy for him and his family; they were filled with different difficulties, but that was where he found his vocation and dedicated himself to service for the people. To my question: “What will you remember for half a century in Zlatograd?” the priest said excitedly, “Keeping the peace between Christians and Muslims.. I was trying to do everything in my power to make Christians and Muslims live like brothers.” The Father precisely defines his role in the life of a mixed-town – the role of a spiritual pastor for all. Many people in Zlatograd remember 1992, when representatives of certain political forces arrived in the city. Georgi Marinski, a church governor in Zlatograd today remembers:

“They met with me and ordered me to inform my father that they wanted a meeting with him (he then traveled between Zlatograd and Hvoyna). I asked them what they were not saying. I met the priest and told him. He replied, “I am ready to speak, so say when.” The same day we met – we, the church trustees, Father Arolsky, on the one hand, and the mufti’s representatives headed by the Imam. The priest saw the Imam, began to embrace him, greetings – they were great friends. The Imam said it was time to divide the Zlatograd cemetery, erect a wall and know where the Muslims were buried, where Christians were buried. Father Arolsky looked at him and said, “Do you know when we know each other?” Ah, I do not remember for how many years. “Are we friends?” - More than brothers! “You know that these people who were buried from each other were also friends. Why, since they were together, divide them into the hereafter? The Imam looked at him carefully, thinking, and said, “You are right, you are right! I think we have not talked about this. Thus, in Zlatograd, the cemetery remained common.”

But in this city with a population of Christians and Muslims, it is natural to ask the question: What were his relations with the people of the other faith? All of

them unanimously replied that he had helped both Christians and Muslims, and that they all replied with respect and admiration. Father Arolsky himself tells how the people of Zlatograd helped him, working side by side with Christians and people who worshipped Islam. On his initiative and with the active support of the Church Board of Trustees and the residents of the town on the peak "St. Nedelya" a chapel is maintained built on the site of the monastery "St. Nedelya". The priest personally, along with the people of Zlatograd and the village of Starsevo, where Muslims live, wore cement, lime, on their shoulders; they wore logs from the ravine to preserve the beautiful oaks on the top. They all worked for free. Around the chapel, huts were built in which every citizen could rest and each summer he organized the replacement of the straw roofs. Thanks to the efforts of Christians and Muslims now Zlatograd on the peak "St. Nedelya" has beautiful houses around the chapel and this is the permanent resting place for the town's inhabitants. The ongoing repairs of the two churches in the city are mainly helped by the Muslims – the Bulgarians were threatened with dismissal if they helped the priest. He remembered: "They were forbidden to help me (the Bulgarians – note by Maria Nikolova). If anyone dared to help me, they risked their job, and so sometimes they came late in the evening. One day I climbed the roof of the church and "caught a drop" (the roof was leaking). No one dared help me. I had to deal with it myself. Then came my Muslim friends and we did the job.

Also one winter I said to one of them, Ahmed was saying, "Listen, it's very cold, please bring some wood in the church because one can't sit inside the cold, I can not serve. "Priest, why didn't you say so earlier?" The next day, he and another man brought fifteen loads of wood, chopped them and arranged them in the yard of the church"

Extremely modest, he did not understand why people, the media, the politicians were interested in him. He thought he did not deserve this attention: "I am the most ordinary village priest!" On this occasion he remembered something very curious: "There was a place in the courtyard of the church in Zlatograd which was overgrown with grass and weeds and I could not look at it. That's why I decided to dig it up. But I was not going to dig with the cassock, so I went home and changed clothes. And I bent and dug when there were two women in the yard of the church. Neither of them recognized me, though I was bearded. One of them asked, "Where is the priest, is he gone?" No, he went somewhere. - Tell

him we need him and ask him to wait, we'll come again. They went and neither of them could assume that the priest would dig in the garden. They thought he was supposed to stay in the church only and pray. "And we are ordinary people like everyone else." So modestly, Father Arolsky defined his place and role in the life of his congregation. In his activity, he saw nothing but the only thing that every priest had to do – to be among the people, to share their joys and sorrows, to help them.

The citizens of Zlatograd – both young and old, remembered him with awe. He received recognition not only from them but also from a spiritual and secular authority.

In order to get a glimpse of the warmth and respect that the inhabitants of the town remembered in order to feel the love, the respect and the admiration for him, one must see the film on his visit to Zlatograd for the summer Atanasov Day on 1st - 2nd May 2009 Again Georgi Marinski, an activist of the Church Board of Trustees, very emotionally talks about it then: "Many people from the town wanted to congratulate him on his names day, so we decided to invite him to Zlatograd and celebrate with him together. We sent a car to the village of Hvoyna (the birthplace of the priest – note by Maria Nikolova) to bring him. All residents, young and old, were around the church. And when the car stopped at the beginning of the street, the bells solemnly struck, people stood on both sides of the street and rolled a colored carpet in front of him. For a long time, he walked down the street to the church-everybody stopped him, wanted to hug him, to kiss his hand. Then he and Father Emil served a solemn liturgy."

The Chairman of the Municipal Council of Zlatograd says that unanimously the municipal councilors accepted the proposal of the Church Board of Trustees to award Father Atanas Aarolski honorary citizen of Zlatograd - "for years of contribution in the promotion of spirituality and human values in Zlatograd and in connection with his 90th anniversary". For his part the Plovdiv bishop rewarded him with the high church order "St. Erm", thus the priest Arolski became the first spiritual person to be awarded this high distinction. At a special ceremony in the church "St. Prophet Elijah" in the village of Hvoyna, the medal was given to him by the Constantine Bishop Antonius with the following words: "Let Atanas Arolski be an example, inspiration and encouragement for all the younger priests to have his jealousy in the performance of his pastoral duty." Bishop Anthony and priests from the entire Smolyan region held a prayer for the health and well-being of the oldest priest in the region.

His dedication was recognized even earlier. On 29th December 2005, a list of those honored with the title “The Worthy Bulgarians” was published in the “24 Hours” newspaper. “Father Atanas Arolski – the priest from the village of Hvoyna who walks 20 km per day on foot to serve the temples in the area.” “It is not easy to be a priest because the road is narrow, tough and very long, with many trials and barriers. The bell must awaken people’s consciousness and know that they must adhere to God’s principles - faith, hope and love.”

The personality and activity of Father Arolski is part of the history of Zlatograd. His name is related not only to the existence of the temples in the city and its surroundings, but also to the many experiences and memories of the inhabitants of Zlatograd. Each of them, with love and reverence, speaks of him and concludes that he was not only a spiritual shepherd of Christians, but also a close and good mentor to the Muslims. His work embodies the unity of men, regardless of the religion they worshiped.

Nowadays, Zlatograd attracts tourists not only with historical monuments in the town but also with attractive sites in its surroundings. The most remarkable is the eco-trail from Zlatograd to St. Nedelya chapel. It was built by the municipality and offers tourists a walk of three hours in the picturesque surroundings of the town. The final point is the restored chapel “St. Nedelya”, from where in good weather one can see the Aegean Sea. You can also visit the “Beloto Kamene” area, where the Thracian sanctuary of God’s Sun is the largest on the Bulgarian lands.

Although a small town located in the most southern part of the country, Zlatograd is an attractive place for tourists and for nature lovers. The local authorities, individual business representatives and the entire population of the town are trying to implement different ideas and endeavors to make their town known and popular. Exploring the cultural heritage of the city and its popularization enhance the tourist interest and contribute to the development of cultural tourism in the area.

REFERENCE:

1. Читалищният музей в село Павелско – пазител на културно-историческото наследство / Мария Николова, Вяра Николова. – София: За буквите – О писменехъ, 2015. – 53 с.

2. Николова, Мария. На земята човек сам си отваря или затваря вратата към рая. // *Обществото* на знанието и хуманизмът на XXI век: Осма национална научна конференция с международно участие, София, 1 ноем. 2010 г. – София, 2011, с. 252–257.
3. Музеят и музейният фонд към читалище „Ал. Константинов” в с. Павелско – настоящо състояние и бъдещо развитие / Мария Николова, Калина Минчева, Вяра Николова. // *Обществото* на знанието и хуманизмът на XXI век: Тринайста национална научна конференция с международно участие, София, 1 ноем. 2015 г. – София, 2015, с. 248–259.
4. Personal archive of the authors.
5. Website of the Project <http://cho.unibit.bg/>