

## **The Emergence and Development of Protestantism in Macedonia**

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Protestantism as we know it today began to penetrate into Macedonia in the second half of the nineteenth century. As long ago as the tenth century, however, the Bogomil movement, which I regard as a variety of Protestantism, took root in Macedonia due to specific social and economic conditions and the exceptionally difficult circumstances in which most of the population lived.<sup>1</sup> The official church had to a significant extent 'subjected itself to the secular authorities'.<sup>2</sup> The people turned spiritually to various heretical teachings, among which the Bogomil movement stands out as the most influential. The priest Bogomil based his teaching on dualism, on a belief in the existence of an opposition between good and evil, and completely rejected church hierarchy.

Protestantism as we know it today came to the Balkan region with the first missionaries from America in 1831, who founded their first missionary training centre in Istanbul. British missionaries were also present in Macedonia from the Church of Scotland and the Bible Society, but the founders of Protestantism in Macedonia were the American missionaries sent by the American Board of Commissions for Foreign Missions, founded in 1810–11. Its central body consisted of members of the Congregational Church, the Presbyterian Church and the Reformed Church of America. The opening of the first missionary headquarters in the Ottoman Empire made possible planned activities and the dissemination of Protestant ideas, primarily among the Christian population.<sup>3</sup> From the very beginning, the missionary centre in Istanbul was engaged in three areas of activity: literature, education and the teaching of the Gospel. Literature in the vernacular was needed, so the centre began printing brochures explaining the contents of the Bible. It was necessary to raise the cultural level of the people and to educate them if they were to understand these texts, so the centre opened schools and organised courses and seminars. The aim of the missionaries was not directly to convert the people but to encourage them to develop their own spiritual life.

Less than a decade after the founding of the first missionary centre in Turkey, the first Evangelical school in the Balkans was opened in Bebek, a suburb of Istanbul, in 1840. Its founder was Dr Cyrus Hamlin (1811–1900), a missionary in Istanbul. With funds donated by a rich merchant from New York, Christopher Robert, Dr Hamlin reconstructed the building and equipped the school with laboratories and instruments. Over the next 20 years the school grew into an important centre of progress and culture for the entire region. It developed into a college with a section for secondary

education and a university section and it was managed by a collective presidency, Turkish and American; there was a library and two museums.<sup>4</sup> The staff introduced obligatory missionary work as part of the educational programme. This was carried out during the summer holidays when the students travelled as missionaries to Asia Minor, Armenia, Greece, Bulgaria and Macedonia teaching the Gospel and distributing the Bible and brochures with Biblical texts in the respective vernaculars.<sup>5</sup> Their missionary work met with a good deal of success.

During the 50 years of the college's existence a significant number of young people received college degrees; they later returned to work in their native lands. The cultural predominance of the college was particularly unwelcome to the Greek patriarch in Constantinople: he protested to the sultan, who sent him to prison on the allegation that in trying to promote the interests of the Greek church he was working against the interests of the Turkish Empire.

For centuries national frames and subframes in Macedonia have created a specific religious environment that has not been favourable to religious harmony. The Bulgarian, Greek and Serbian churches have struggled to obtain jurisdiction over the Christians in Macedonia. In this tense situation, Protestantism has benefited.<sup>6</sup> Thus, Greek nationalist propaganda in Macedonia has been held to be especially to 'blame' for the emergence and expansion of Protestantism in Strumica.<sup>7</sup>

'The Balkans have rightfully been described as the powder keg of Europe,' wrote Adventist missionaries in 1980. 'People here are in constant strife. The politicians should not be surprised at all if a fire broke out here, whose flames would set the whole of Europe alight. Now, right now, is the time for the revelation of the Gospel if there is to be peace in the east of Europe.'<sup>8</sup>

As we have seen, the American Board of Commissions for Foreign Missions was originally based in Istanbul and its intention was to spread gradually into the European regions of the Ottoman Empire: via Bulgaria towards Macedonia, Greece and Albania. The American Board coordinated its work with that of the Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church and reached an agreement with the latter on a regional division of the Balkans. The Board of the Congregational Church, which was the most active member of the American Board, began working in the south, while the Methodist Church took the north, beginning in the northernmost parts of Macedonia, in the region of Pirin, spreading further towards the Vardar region and then moving on to the Aegean region.

The American Board began its mission among the Balkan population through education by opening schools following western models and standards. In 1860 the first Evangelical school for boys in Bulgaria (*Muzhkoto nauchno-bogoslovsko uchilishte*) began its work in Plovdiv. An American school for girls was opened in Stara Zagora in 1863. In 1871 the boys' and girls' schools were moved to Samokov, which, partially due to its pleasant climate, became an active 'recruitment' centre, providing training for the staff who later worked mainly in Bulgaria and Macedonia. The missionary training centre was later moved from Samokov to Sofia.

The American Board sent a missionary from Sofia, Charles Morse, to work in the Razlog valley. In the course of his previous missionary work Morse had gained a reputation as a stout supporter of changes in the educational system and a stern critic of the Orthodox Church. Throwing himself with enthusiasm into his new task, together with his assistant Petur Musevich he soon gained a reputation as an interesting 'foreigner' preaching in Bansko (now in Bulgaria but at that time in Macedonia). Some objected to his 'propaganda', because he was constantly questioning their traditional faith and criticising the Orthodox Church. Nevertheless he succeeded

in converting several families and on 6 August 1868 an Evangelical community was founded in the village of Bansko, and was officially recognised as a Protestant minority. Thereafter Protestantism slowly gained more adherents in Razlog, Dobrinishte, Eleshnitsa, Yakoruda and Banya.

In 1873–74 a missionary training centre was opened in Bitola, one of the economic and cultural centres of Macedonia. From this bridgehead Protestantism was able to spread through the entire region in a planned manner. Local converts provided some of the staff of the training centre, which assigned them to other centres and planned their work; other staff members came from among the foreign missionaries who were now permanently working in Macedonia. The missionaries in Bitola opened an orphanage and a girls' secondary school in 1890. They also began regular Evangelical services, while the wives of the missionaries set up Bible classes and medical services.

In 1886 the Bitola training centre established an Evangelical community in Radoviš, where the preacher was Nikola Bojadžiev, and later in Rakliš as well. An Evangelical church was opened in the village of Monospitovo in 1884, and several years later an Evangelical community was established in Murtino. In 1898 the church in Monospitovo had 60 members, and Kostadin Gračanov became known for his dedicated work. The first Evangelical church in Kolečino was opened in 1899, and the first sermon was delivered by pastor Kimov from the church in Strumica, at the home of Mane Izev, on 19 May 1890. The first Evangelical church building in Kolečino was built in 1906 on land donated by Dimitruš Icev. After it was burnt down, another one was built on the site.

A missionary training centre in Thessalonica was opened in 1894, under the guidance of Dr John House, who became its administrator. The selection of Thessalonica was justified by the fact that it was a centre of economy and communications, and was linked with the hinterland via three main railway lines. This training centre was very much committed to work with Macedonian prisoners in Beas Kule.

An Evangelical community was established in Kukuš in 1885 as a result of numerous visits by missionaries from Thessalonica and the activity of the evangelical booksellers Hristo Zrnev, Dimitar Kardalev and Nikola Trenčev. Somewhat later, Evangelical communities were organised north of Kukuš, in Gorni and Dolni Todorak. In 1896 an Evangelical community was established in Voden, in 1897 in Drama and in 1898 in Enidže Vardarsko.

On 23 August 1899 the only conference of Evangelical activists from Macedonia was held in Thessalonica, under the leadership of John House, Edward Haskell and Ellen Stone. In addition to the missionaries, the conference was also attended by a number of Evangelical activists who had been educated locally in Macedonia.

In 1904 Dr House opened a school for agriculture and industry near Thessalonica. This school was attended by children whose parents had died in the Ilinden Uprising<sup>10</sup>. The purpose of the school was to promote methods for better treatment of the soil through the implementation of contemporary technology. The school was the first to bring the tractor to the Balkans. Its programme also included regular Evangelical services.

The most sensational event that captured the attention of the world was the abduction of the famous American missionary Ellen Stone. The story of her release was international news. She later proved to be a staunch supporter of the Macedonian cause and a critic of the Turks.<sup>11</sup>

The numerous Evangelical churches and communities established in Macedonia became a bulwark for the further dissemination of Protestant ideas, through the

fruitful work of the missionary centres, active oral propaganda and the weaknesses of the Orthodox church organisation. In Macedonia Protestantism took deepest root in the region of Strumica. Located almost at the centre of a triangle formed by Samokov, Bitola and Thessalonica (and also very close to Bansko), Strumica was a unique site where all important lines of communication crossed. Missionary 'campaigns', correspondence between the training centres and the missionaries, distribution of Biblical literature and humanitarian activities all constituted permanent spiritual mobilisation.

In the period that followed, the Balkan Wars (1912–13) and the First World War (1914–18) changed the course of Protestant history in the area. A large number of Evangelical communities and churches were facing difficulties in their work; some ceased to exist, and others moved to other regions. After the First World War Macedonia was divided into three parts, and so were the Evangelical churches on its territory. The American Board of Commissions for Foreign Missions opposed the division of the country on the grounds that it would break up the unity of the missionary work in the Balkans. The Protestants from the Pirin part of Macedonia joined the Evangelical Church in Bulgaria. In the part of Macedonia taken by Greece the Evangelical Church was annexed to the Greek Presbyterian Church, although it continued to work under the name of the Greek Evangelical Church. After Thessalonica was ceded to Greece the work of the missionary training centre there began to decline. The same was true of the centre in Korçë (now in Albania). The Vardar (north) part of Macedonia became part of Yugoslavia, and the work of the Evangelical Congregational Church was banned there. The church therefore united with the Methodist Episcopal Church at the latter's Second Annual Conference in Vrbas in May 1922.<sup>12</sup> As the Methodist Church of Yugoslavia, it was divided into north and south districts, and Macedonia came within the south district. Preacher Pane Temkov from Skopje was elected the supervising priest. Thus dozens of Congregational churches in Macedonia became part of, and began working under the name of, the Methodist Church of Yugoslavia.

The decline in the number of Protestants became obvious at the beginning of 1912. The churches in Kavadarci and Dojran closed down. Some Protestants emigrated to America. After the Vardar part of Macedonia was ceded to Serbia in 1913, the rate of decline became ever more apparent. The influence of the Bitola missionary training centre was significantly reduced and that of the missionary training centres in Thessalonica and Korçë could now hardly be felt at all.

The decline in interest in Protestant ideas is also connected with developments within the churches themselves, marked by a growing influence of more liberal currents. Liberal interpretations of the Bible, based on contemporary scholarly research, encountered strong resistance on the part of the traditionally-orientated and conservative missionary circles that had already taken root in the Balkan region.

Several years before the outbreak of the Second World War, in 1934, the American Board withdrew its missionary staff from the Balkans: with its living heart removed, Protestant activity continued to decline. The period between the two World Wars was also marked by an overt policy to diminish Macedonian self-awareness and influence, which made the work of the churches and missionaries significantly more difficult.

During the Second World War conditions rendered the spiritual work of the Protestant churches and missionaries almost impossible. After the War the German population left Yugoslavia and the Methodist Church of Yugoslavia (in Vojvodina) suffered a significant fall in numbers. And now communism appeared on the scene,

hostile to all religion. Macedonia became an atheist republic and all denominations lost adherents. Since the end of communism the number of Protestants in Macedonia has risen again. They are located in various parts of the country, most strongly in Strumica. With the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia Protestant church organisation in Macedonia underwent certain changes. The Protestant communities in Macedonia had previously been linked with those in other parts of Yugoslavia, but the independence of the Republic of Macedonia has imposed the need for independently organised Protestant communities and their direct linkage with world associations.

## Notes and References

- <sup>1</sup> 'Protestantism' has been defined as comprising all those Christians who accept the following principles as part of their religious affiliation: 'a. The Bible is the sole source of revelation; b. the study and the interpretation of the Bible is based on personal judgment; c. religious rites are reduced to the necessary minimum; d. all that is understood as religious life is communicated in the vernacular.' Aleksandar Birvis, 'Plodovi protestantizma', *Kultura* (Belgrade), nos. 13–14, 1971, pp. 124–37.
- <sup>2</sup> Slavko Dimevski, *Istorijata na makedonskata pravoslavna crkva* (Makedonska kniga, Skopje, 1989), p. 69.
- <sup>3</sup> The missionaries decided to work with the Christian population because Turks who renounced Islam were punished by death.
- <sup>4</sup> Hristo Andonov Polyanski, *The Attitude of the US towards Macedonia* (Macedonian Review Editions, Skopje, 1983), p. 34.
- <sup>5</sup> Paula Mojzes, *Metodizam: kratka istorija metodističke crkve* (Sekretarijat Metodističkih crkava FNRJ, Novi Sad, 1962), p. 69.
- <sup>6</sup> It is interesting that Eastern-Rite Catholicism was once a significant phenomenon in Macedonia. Very much like Protestantism, it is free from specific Balkan national identification. See Slavko Dimevski, *Makedonskata borba za crkovna i nacionalna samostojnost vo XIX-ot vek (Unijatskoto dvizhenje)* (Naša Kniga, Skopje, 1988).
- <sup>7</sup> Manol Pandevski and Dj. Stoev-Trnkata, *Strumica i strumičko niz istorijata* (Strumica, 1969), p. 188.
- <sup>8</sup> *Glasnik hrišćanske adventističke crkve*, no. 4, Belgrade, 1980, p. 18.
- <sup>9</sup> Mane Izev played an important role in the development of the Evangelical Church in Strumica. Together with Trajko Kovačev, he was a psalm reader in the Orthodox church in the village; the liturgy was celebrated in Greek. Having come across the Bible, he read it very attentively, and often studied it with his friends. At that time, Dimitar Kardalev was selling Biblical literature in the village, and he spent the night at Izev's house. He gave Izev a copy of the Bible and two other books. Izev began to preach in Macedonia because, as he explained, very few people understood Greek, and they were neither Greeks nor Bulgarians. Izev and his followers came under pressure from the authorities, who were suspicious of their work, but this did not divert them from their course.
- <sup>10</sup> The Ilinden Uprising began on St Elijah's Day, 2 August 1903. Some 30,000 rose in arms against the Turks. The rebellion was finally put down in October; thousands were killed or taken prisoner and over 200 villages were burnt.
- <sup>11</sup> In 1894 a secret revolutionary organisation was founded to fight for Macedonian autonomy in the Turkish Empire. Its practice was to capture people and hold them to ransom. In September 1901 it seized the American missionary Ellen Stone and her escort Katherine Tsilka. They were released the following February for 14,500 golden Turkish lire. See Manol Pandevski, *Jane Sandanski i Mis Ston* (Misla, Skopje, 1992).
- <sup>12</sup> Gligor Cekov, *110 godini od evangelskoto delo vo selo Kolečino* (Evangelisko-metodističkata crkva Kolečino, Kolečino, 1990), p. 6.