

**“This Is Our Professional Feast”: Religious Exopraxis
and Work Identity in the Rhodope Mountains of
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Detelina Tocheva

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Work Identity in the Rhodope Mountains of Bulgaria

Detelina Tocheva

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religion, especially Orthodox Christianity and (even more harshly) Islam, aiming officially to build a society without religion. At present, ironically, the protracted workings of this socialist legacy—the elevation of work identity—are expressed in the framework of a Christian-Muslim ritual that has developed under the auspices of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. The church has strong political support from nationalists in whose discourse anti-Ottoman and anti-Muslim motifs are closely intertwined. But de facto Muslim participation in a Bulgarian Orthodox feast attests to an alternative configuration of religious coexistence taking shape and becoming socially meaningful. This alternative configuration has been realized not by avoiding interaction with, or reference to, church and state. The ritual, rather, draws on those institutions while, at the same time, subverting their official discourses inconspicuously.² The flexibility of the Orthodox Church has been remarkable, in having found ways of including the loose forms of religious knowledge and observance that signal belonging to Orthodoxy, while leaving ample space for Muslims as well. In the framework of this celebration, as in that of a multitude of practices belonging to ritual and also to everyday life in the region, the mutual involvement of Christians and Muslims is regarded as intrinsic and is not framed in terms of tolerance or good interfaith relations, as it is in the public media and in official political discourse.³ The mutual care and support of the two religious groups are taken for granted and articulated in a way and at a level that are mostly invisible from the outside.

Discreet Divisions and Inconspicuous Boundary Crossings

I began fieldwork in 2009, mainly among Bulgarian Muslims,⁴ in a village located some 30 km from Smolyan, in the southern part of the central Rhodope Mountains.⁵ Bulgarian Christians form a tiny minority in this village but have been more numerous in the past. During my first year of fieldwork, my main focus was on the interactive metamorphoses of ritual and the local and domes-

2. Hence my analysis departs from the argument that such alternative configurations necessarily take place outside of official organizations. See Dragostinova and Hashamova, *Beyond Mosque, Church, and State*.

3. On religious coexistence in the Balkans, see Bryant, *Post-Ottoman Coexistence*.

4. In Bulgaria, according to the last census (2011 *Population Census*, www.nsi.bg), 10 percent of the total population identified themselves as Muslims; the actual proportion may be closer to 12 percent. The vast majority belong to the Sunni Hanafi tradition, a vestige of the Ottoman period. Ottoman domination was established in the late fourteenth century and lasted until the late nineteenth

century. Bulgarian Muslims, those whose native language is Bulgarian, are estimated at 130,000 out of a total population of around 900,000 Muslims (Clayer and Bougarel, *Les Musulmans de l'Europe de Sud-Est*, 18–19). Bulgarian Muslims form an ethnoreligious group distinct from the Turkish-speaking Muslim minority of the country. About Muslims in Bulgaria in the late socialist and early post-socialist period, see Neuburger, *The Orient Within*, and Eminov, *Turkish and Other Muslim Minorities in Bulgaria*.

5. The town of Smolyan has around 30,000 inhabitants; the municipality that also includes the neighboring villages is estimated at around 41,000. A demographic decline has strongly affected the region over the past ten years.

tic economy. Hence my specific interest in the Day of the Driver, whose ritual practices are profession-based. And working in a mainly Muslim environment, I was able to witness and assess one of the numerous Christian practices open to Muslim believers. When at work in the area, I ride, as do most of the locals, on the buses of Rhodope Travel (in addition to a private car).⁶ This company for passenger transportation is of great practical and symbolic significance in this mountainous area, though nowadays the company is but a shadow of the mass employer and transporter that it was in the late socialist period. Old drivers, some retired, some still working after having reached retirement age, passionately recall the old days and their pride in being professional drivers for Rhodope Travel under the old regime. Such nostalgic narratives are typical of this region. Also typical are the festivities that Rhodope Travel and other local transportation companies organize on the Day of the Ascension, here called *Den na sbofiora*—*Spasov den* (the Day of the Driver—Savior’s Day).⁷ The vibrancy of ritual life, and especially of religious rituals, is striking in this economically depressed area.

In May 2017, on the morning of the thirty-ninth day after Easter, in the town of Smolyan, some thirty out of the eighty employees, along with the director of Rhodope Travel, gathered in front of the company’s main garage. A ritual was to be held in preparation for the celebration of the Ascension on the next day. Beside the garage, a priest, the head of the neighboring Bulgarian Orthodox parish church, recited prayers and blessed the public by sprinkling holy water on them and on a large sheep tied up nearby. During the short service, about a third of the attendees, among whom the director and the few women who occupy high positions in the administration, crossed themselves in accordance with Eastern Orthodox tradition. Among those who did not make the sign of the cross, some were Sunni Muslims, and others Orthodox Christians. Everyone, in any case, stood silently and respectfully until the end of the service.

When this part of the ritual was finished, the priest and the people from the travel company moved to the entrance, facing a commemorative plaque. Placed on the wall the previous day, the plaque was dedicated to the memory of two employees who for many years had organized this celebration. The priest read more prayers and blessed the plaque with holy water. He then presented, to two women from the company, a pail of holy water and the bunch of geraniums that he had just used (in accordance with tradition) for sprinkling the water. One of

6. “Rhodope Travel” is a pseudonym that I use to protect the privacy of my informants.

7. In Bulgaria, the Ascension is known as Savior’s Day (*Spasov den*). A vast majority of the population thinks that there is a saint named Spas. No such saint has ever been recognized by the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, but the church nonetheless tolerates the popular nomenclature. More than a quarter century after the fall of the com-

munist regime and its failed attempt to impose scientific atheism—and despite the political promotion of Orthodox Christianity from above since 1989—the population is still barely versed in the norms of religious knowledge and observance. There is a historical pattern of “diffuse Christianity” in the central Rhodope region, and its relevance in the period of Ottoman rule is analyzed in Valtchinova, “Mount of the Cross,” 73–75.

the women, the one higher up in the administration, took the geraniums; the other woman received the pail. The group then went throughout the parking lot and garages, sprinkling the buses and the director's own car with holy water. The women explained: "We have never had a serious travel accident or a fatality. That is why we continue our tradition. We do it for health."

Meanwhile, four men were holding the sheep that the priest had blessed a few minutes earlier, while another man, a specialist in sheep slaughtering (not an employee of the company), was slicing through the throat of the sacrificial animal. Its blood had to trickle down to the main ramp of the garage. "This is the tradition," I was told. A dozen men—Christians and Muslims alike, along with the company's director—had brought knives from home and began cutting the meat into small pieces on tables cleaned and set the day before. The meat of this sheep and of one slaughtered the previous evening were to be cooked the next day. The cook works for Rhodope Travel as a bus driver and acquired his skills from assisting former organizers. The event lasted until noon. Every phase of the ritual and of processing the meat was executed with impressive agility. These people have enacted this ritual every year since the fall of the communist regime three decades ago.

The feast of the Ascension took place the next day on a hillside meadow, adjacent to a chapel in the vicinity of Smolyan, in view of the Rhodope forest. Although named during its consecration as the Chapel of the Ascension, its popular name, written on an arch over the main entrance to the chapel yard, is *Sveti Spas* (St. Savior). Surrounding the chapel, each of the largest transportation companies has its own roofed space, with long benches and tables set in place. Employees, members of their families, and guests enjoy a free meal in the festive atmosphere. A part of the covered space is reserved for locals not belonging to the transport companies. After a liturgical service in the chapel, a priest and a deacon said prayers outside and blessed the meal. Local politicians made short speeches from a stage. One commended the participants in the Ascension celebrations; the next appealed to St. Savior to bless drivers with safety on the roads; a third exhorted all to pray for good health and unproblematic travel.⁸ Finally, the mayor of Smolyan presented seven awards, two of which went to Rhodope Travel. Then the sacrificial *kurban* soup, cooked with mutton, was served, and the feast continued throughout the afternoon to the sound of local folk music. There are several other localities in the region where transportation companies get together on this day, but the gathering at the Chapel of St. Savior is the most popular.

Before the ritual, I had addressed some of the employees of Rhodope Travel with the question: "Why do Muslim employees take part in this Christian event?"

8. Safety on the road has been a major concern in Bulgaria, because the number of car accidents has skyrocketed over the last twenty years.

I had been told previously that more than half their employees are of Muslim origin. My question was met with a mix of surprise and misunderstanding. It even raised some disapprobation: “We do not divide!”—as if by raising this issue I wanted to emphasize division, in the way in which the public media in Bulgaria sometimes do. I implied that exopraxis needed explaining, whereas it was taken for granted by my interlocutors: “Of course everybody attends,” one driver said. “This is our professional feast.”

I must stress that no external signs indicated the presence of Muslims during the rituals. Christian belonging is easier to recognize: a couple of women employees of Rhodope Travel wore crosses. Orthodox icons hang on a couple of office walls, including the company director’s. But wearing a cross may be less an expression of religious devotion than of one’s taste in jewelry, just as hanging icons may express one’s taste in office décor. Icons have spread so widely throughout the offices of private firms and public services in Bulgaria that they go almost unnoticed. To the degree that they are religious, they express a wish for protection, both for oneself and for one’s office colleagues (whatever their religious affiliations). Only a very limited number of people attended the Orthodox service in the chapel; most of those who went inside returned after just a few minutes. The employees of Rhodope Travel were mostly seated on benches, while others saw to matters of organization, set up the tables, and served the food. Only Christian men, thus far, have sacrificed the sheep and cooked the *kurban* soup, but this rule goes unvoiced.⁹ I was told that, in another company’s celebration, there is a woman who joins in making the soup, but her participation seems to be an exception. Preparing side dishes and serving at tables are the tasks reserved for women. As a whole, middle-aged and older men are overrepresented during the celebration at the chapel, although there are also women, children, and younger men who attend. Driving is a markedly male profession in this region, and on the Day of the Driver the religious distinction is overshadowed by the distinction between sexes. Religion provides the framework, but neither the personal nor the collective expression of religious devotion is essential to the day’s observances. It is the assertion of the drivers’ professional identity that is clearly at stake.

Profession and Religion Intertwined

Rhodope Travel has fallen on hard times, and the low salaries that it currently pays to its drivers contrasts with the prestige of the driving profession, which is a socialist legacy. The company was established in 1961 by the Bulgarian com-

9. Local Muslims perform some Orthodox rituals on special occasions. In villages near Smolyan, I have often seen Muslims lighting candles at the funerals of Christian friends, in accordance with the local Orthodox custom.

munist state (the other transportation companies in the area are creations of the postsocialist period). Even after the collapse of the communist regime in 1989, the company remained state property. In 1997 the Ministry of Transport gave all its shares in the enterprise to the municipality of Smolyan, which, in 2007, transformed it into a joint stock company, retaining only one quarter of the shares for itself and selling the remainder to a private holding company.¹⁰ Even before the privatization of 2007, the employees were faced with some painful restructuring.¹¹ Today, both former and current employees refer to the company by its socialist-era acronym, DAP (for “State Automobile Enterprise”). At present, the acronym has a negative resonance. Employees now speak of their “DAP salary” (*dapadziska zaplata*) as a synonym for inadequate payment. Most of the employees with whom I spoke are happy to have a stable job, given the deepening unemployment and proliferation of precarious jobs in the area, but they find that a DAP salary is not enough to live on. They rely on homegrown foods, typically potatoes and beans, and on remittances from children and relatives working abroad. Those who have reached retirement age but continue to work in the company receive an old-age pension in addition to their salary. It is only the combination of these sources of income and self-provisioning that allows them to remain in the region.

This current situation is at odds with what locals recall as the company’s glorious past. Retired employees told me that the company used to employ over five hundred people in the 1970s and 1980s. It even had a football team, an old driver told me. Rhodope Travel is known to all local inhabitants not only because its buses connect the town of Smolyan to most surrounding villages but also because so many local people have worked for the company, sometimes two or three generations of the same family. The company contributed to the modernization of the region: during the first half of the twentieth century, the Rhodope Mountain area was regarded as backward, with underdeveloped infrastructure and underproductive agriculture.¹² Most villages, scattered around the hills, were difficult to access. Beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, the state undertook a titanic project for modernizing the region’s infrastructure, a project intertwined with socialist teleological slogans about progress and the radiant future.¹³ As a part of the process, buses were introduced for public transportation—a novelty viewed at the time as evidence that modernization would improve life outside the cities and that the Rhodope Mountain region would open up to the rest of the country. In those days,

10. This holding company is an important actor in various sectors of Bulgaria, ranging from wine production and fuel distribution to tourism, real estate, and banking. The holding company belongs to an influential business woman who has benefited from postsocialist privatization.

11. In 2017 the firm that I am calling Rhodope Travel, Ltd., was registered as a private company for passenger

transportation, with forty-one buses and eighty-four employees.

12. Damianov, “Sotsialno-Ikonomicheskoto Polozhenie na Srednorodopskoto Naselenie Prez Vtorata Svetovna Voina.”

13. Monov, “Ikonomicheski i Sotsialni Izmenenia v Rodopskiia Krai (1944–1977),” and *Rodopskiiat Krai*.

according to the villagers with whom I have spoken, buses traveled frequently even to the most remote villages and yet were always full. At present, the villagers regard the reduced number of buses and the diminishing numbers of passengers as one sign, among others, of their region's decline. The buses of Rhodope Travel are now worn; its buildings are crumbling, and its offices poorly equipped.

It could be argued that the Orthodox Church, in sponsoring the Day of the Driver, has taken advantage of this decline to insert itself into the professional life of the mountain people. After decades of imposed atheism, the church took a celebration that had been made symbolically meaningful during the socialist period and co-opted or, perhaps one should say, rescued, it. But the association of the church with this professional celebration is not as recent as it may seem, even if the rituals as currently conducted began only after 1989. Contemporary religious practice on the Day of the Driver builds on a presocialist, as well as a more obviously socialist, background. Indeed the gathering at the Chapel of St. Savior began in the decades before socialism. The chapel, which was built in 1637 under the Muslim auspices of the Ottoman empire, was fully renovated in 1937, in the style of an Orthodox revival then in progress, as Bulgaria became an independent state.¹⁴ By the 1930s, transportation workers already had gathered there to celebrate Savior's Day.

In the recently erected dining hall of the chapel, a dozen old photographs on exhibit show local car owners and drivers, all men, belonging to a group called the Economic Association for Automobile Transportation. Some photographs show a group of these men at the chapel celebrating the Ascension and being blessed by an Orthodox priest. The transport association was dissolved in 1948 by the communist regime, which had been established shortly before. Other photographs show priests in the early 1990s blessing a group of people on the site of the chapel while it was again undergoing renovation. What this small exhibit offers is by no means decisive historical evidence about the presocialist use of this religious site, and it would be wrongheaded to assume that the men in the pictures are presocialist predecessors of the transport professionals of our day. Pictures of socialist-era cars posted in the same place attest only that whoever arranged the exhibition wished to emphasize the continuing importance of the drivers, irrespective of the radical shifts in ideology and in the economy endured at each change in the national regime. But it would be wrongheaded equally to assume a lack of continuity in the support of the church for the drivers and their professional associations.

Under socialism, every officially recognized profession—those regarded as socially useful and ideologically correct—was celebrated on its own special day.

14. Bulgaria became an independent state in 1878, but the region of Smolyan remained under Ottoman rule until 1912.

The socialist celebration of professions, notwithstanding its intrinsically atheist bias, made use of Christian piety in an original way. Galia Valtchinova argues that the communist authorities aimed to dislocate the strong traditional relationship between the social and religious meanings of the rituals by overstressing the work-related character of the celebrations and by suppressing explicitly religious practice, and yet, as she explains, the new calendar of socialist celebrations of work was implicitly correlated with Christian feast days.¹⁵ The date of the drivers' professional holiday was set for the last Sunday in June, a date close to the Orthodox feast of the Ascension. St. George's feast day was celebrated under the aegis of scientific atheism as the Day of the Breeder, St. Trifon's feast as the Day of the Vinegrower, and St. Elijah's as the Day of the Beekeeper. Clearly, socialism did not succeed in erasing religion. The Day of the Driver in Smolyan was celebrated, under late socialism, with a folk-dance contest, in which the winner was awarded a lamb or sheep. No Orthodox priest was present, but the religious symbolism was obvious to at least some participants, and, as a long-term employee of Rhodope Travel told me, even under the communist regime some transportation workers visited the Chapel of St. Savior on Ascension Day but kept it quiet lest the authorities suppress the practice.

In a way that is ironically analogous, the socialist traditions for celebrating the Day of the Transportation Worker have continued into the postsocialist era with the official endorsement of the state. Not only bus and truck drivers but also pilots, sailors, railway workers, and all employees in professions related to transportation celebrate their professional holiday on the last Sunday in June with the Minister of Transport, who lauds their achievements of the previous year.¹⁶ The popular celebration, however, takes place on Ascension Day. Participants shake hands and wish each other a "happy feast and travel without accident" (*Chestit praznik i bezavariino putuvane*). The discourse on this occasion emphasizes the secular, national, and work-related aspects of the celebration, which involves mainly official addresses, folk music, food, and dancing. As under socialism, the participants, when asked, stress the importance of professional identity over that of religion. Still, the institutional framework is now undoubtedly religious. Indeed, the director of Rhodope Travel told me that his company does not observe the official holiday, promoted by the central government. The transport companies of the Rhodope region, he said, "celebrate the Day of the Driver—Savior's Day," and they do so on the Orthodox feast of the Ascension. A commemorative plaque at St. Savior's testifies that, in June 1995, the Orthodox Metropolitan of Plovdiv consecrated the renovated chapel "on the occasion of the Feast of the Driver—Savior's Day." The socialist legacy of celebrating the professions had become part of a new celebration under religious auspices.

15. Valtchinova, "Orthodoxie et communisme dans les Balkans."

16. See, for example, www.mtitc.government.bg/save_pdf.php?id=3400.

Orthodox Christianity as Headline, Religious Coexistence as Subtext

The promotion of Orthodox religious practices by business managers, company owners, and heads of departments in the public administration has become typical in postsocialist Bulgaria. But why have such figures and the general public as well been so eager to do so? One major reason appears to be that the Orthodox Church hierarchy, despite its tendency toward rigor and traditionalism, finds unproblematic the improvisations of popular religiosity. Novelties of the post-socialist laity, however questionable theologically, are attended and blessed by Orthodox parish priests. Surely, it was the lay employees of Rhodope Travel, not the clergy, who introduced the slaughter of a sheep in the company's main garage on the Day of the Driver. The very definition of Christianity depends on the Crucifixion of Christ, as the Lamb of God, superseding permanently the animal sacrifices mandated in the Old Testament. The slaughter of a sheep for the drivers' professional feast may have begun, and still may be explained, as preparation for a communal meal—a simple act of butchering—but the requirement that the animal's blood spill over the ramp seems like apotropaic magic, and the presence of an Orthodox priest sanctions the ritual. But this ritual and the church's toleration of it has a significant past that also, in part, explains the unproblematic presence of Muslims at a celebration of Christ's Ascension. The transportation companies celebrate the Ascension with a *kurban*. In the Balkans, the *kurban* is a Muslim ritual that came to be adopted by Christians during the Ottoman period. The term, meaning "sacrifice," was adopted in the Bulgarian language from the Turkish. In Bulgaria, *kurban* is practiced at Muslim religious celebrations, on Orthodox saints' days, and on the feast days of different localities. The ritual is performed in some cases at the life-cycle rituals of either religion, and at personal commemorations (a *kurban* meal, to take one especially relevant example, may be offered to commemorate one's miraculous survival of a car accident). *Koli se kurban* means that an animal is slaughtered, cooked, and shared as a free meal with kin, friends, acquaintances, and others, and the ritual is sanctioned by an Orthodox priest or an Islamic ritual specialist. The animal is not necessarily a sheep or lamb; it can also be a calf, though in the Rhodope Mountains it is commonly a sheep. Different sorts of *kurban* continued under socialism, although they were not necessarily understood as religious practices by the participants.¹⁷

Meanwhile, it appears that government administrators, business managers, and workers are all content to be associated with religion since, in the vacuum left by the Communist Party, the Orthodox Church has become by default the

17. See Givre, "Un Rituel 'Balkanique' ou un Rituel dans les Balkans?"; Hristov and Sikimić, *Kurban in the Balkans*; Blagoev, *Kurbanat v Traditsiata na Balgarite Miusiulmani*; Hristov and Manova, "Noviat 'Star' Kurban"; Iankov, "Praznikat na Liaski Vrah"; and Kolev, "Zhertvoprinosh-

enie i Obredna Trapeza u Balgari-Hristiiani i Balgari-Miusiulmani." About the practice of *kurban* in the Rhodope region, see Iordanova, "Dva Kurbana ot Ustovo," and Stamenova, *Etnosotsialni Aspekti na Bitva v Iztochnite Rodopi Prez 70-te I 80-te Godini*, 137–86.

most prestigious institution in the country. To proceed, on the Day of the Driver, along the ritual path, from the crumbling Rhodope Travel garage to the lavishly renovated Chapel of St. Savior, is persuasive evidence of this conjecture. But there are deeper historical reasons shaping this specific relationship between the church as an institution and popular practice. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, all levels of the Orthodox hierarchy were more involved in the tasks of nation-building, supporting the consolidation of the Bulgarian nation-state, than in normal ecclesiastical occupations.¹⁸ Postsocialist governments have continued to promote the idea of a symbiosis between Orthodoxy and the state. The 2002 Confessions Act, while affirming the individual's right to freedom of conscience and religion, also states, in article 10, that Eastern Orthodoxy is the traditional religion of Bulgaria. This clause replicates article 13.3 of the postsocialist constitution, adopted in 1991, which states that, while "(2) the religious institutions are separate from the state, (3) the traditional religion in the Republic of Bulgaria is the Eastern Orthodox confession."¹⁹ This policy contributes to deepening a much older political tradition, intimately related to the idea of a Bulgarian Orthodox nation. When Bulgaria became an independent state in 1878, the political elite decided to eliminate every remnant of the Ottoman past. In line with this ideology, the Muslim population was repressed before and during the socialist regime, and their religion was stigmatized as a residue of Ottoman oppression. The Muslims of Bulgaria became victims of numerous attempts at forced assimilation.²⁰ Both socialist and contemporary Bulgarian Orthodoxy is densely populated with myths of martyrdom and heroic resistance against the Ottoman empire, and the denizens of the Rhodope Mountains offer a plethora of such stories and characters. Commemorative plaques in churches and inscriptions on monuments in Smolyan glorify the resistance of Bulgarian Christians against "the Turks." A monumental cathedral, partly funded by an influential businessman, was erected and consecrated in 2006 in the name of the martyr St. Vissarion of Smolyan, an Orthodox bishop of the seventeenth century who, according to his official hagiography, was tortured to death by the Ottomans. This consecration was carried out even though historians have demonstrated that Vissarion is an early twentieth-century fabrication.

At the same time, however, at a level of social life unrepresented in monumental architecture, the public media, or the grand narrative of nationalist historiography, a trouble-free and taken-for-granted religious coexistence of Muslims and Christians is inbuilt into the daily routine. It is at this level that modest, resil-

18. Kalkandjieva, "The Bulgarian Orthodox Church and the 'Ethic of Capitalism.'"

19. Accessed from www.government.bg/cgi-bin/e-cms/vis/vis.pl?n=4&p=0034.

20. See, for example, Gruev, "Ot 'Proletarskia Internatsioanlizam' do 'Edinnata Sotsialisticheska Natsia'"; Lory, *Les Balkans*; Neuburger, *The Orient Within*; and Ragaru, "Faire taire l'altérité."

ient, domestic, and local rituals, like those practiced on the Day of the Driver, strengthen social bonds across religious boundaries, without ever suggesting that to do so is a conscious objective.²¹ In the fluid, transitional space between the church hierarchy and canon law, on one side, and local practice and belief, on the other side, the affable coexistence of Christians and the so-called heirs of Ottoman oppression is not only possible but already intrinsically an element of Bulgarian religious and social life.

Kerim Pasha's Pipeline: A Conclusion

Employees of Rhodope Travel told me that it was the director of the firm who had first proposed that running water be brought to the Chapel of St. Savior. When I asked him about his reasons for this initiative, at first he downplayed his personal contribution, mentioned colleagues who had been involved, and emphasized that the effort had been collective. Then he added that, “for four hundred years, there has not been running water on the site of the chapel.” The director further explained that, “especially for men, the greatest achievement is to build a house, create a family, and build a fountain.” I expected him to mention fountains: the Rhodope Mountains are strewn with fountains, which the locals build in accordance with a traditional belief that bringing water where there is none is the best way to do good and wash away sins.²² But I did not understand to which “four hundred years” he had referred.

In explanation, the director told me this story:

A legend tells that, during the time of the Turkish yoke, sometime in the fourteenth or fifteenth century, Kerim Pasha settled temporarily in the place where the chapel is now. He suffered from a skin disease. The Turkish doctors did not know how to help him. A woman from Chokmanovo [a neighboring village] took him to a spring close to where the Chapel of St. Savior now stands. She told Kerim Pasha to pour the water on his skin and let it dry. He did so and quickly recovered from the disease, then went to thank the woman. He said: “Tell me what you want—gold, or anything you wish.” The woman asked only for permission to erect a Christian chapel on this site to glorify the Ascension. At that time, building a Christian church was possible only if one was granted a permit [*ferman*] by the Ottoman authorities. Kerim Pasha managed to obtain a permit from the Sultan, and that is how the first chapel was built here. Later on, in the eighteenth century, a rich man [*chorbadjiia*] renovated and extended the old one. It is Kerim's water that

21. See Tocheva, “Kurban: Shifting Economy and the Transformations of a Ritual.”

22. See Lubańska, “Life-Giving Springs and the Mother of God Zhivonosen Istochnik/Zoodochos Pege/

Balükliyska. Byzantine-Greek-Ottoman Intercultural Influence and its Aftereffects in Iconography, Religious Writings and Ritual Practices in the Region of Plovdiv.”

our company brought up to the chapel a few years ago. We built a pipeline from the small lake up to the site of the chapel.

This legend about the origin of the chapel is a story of the mutual support of Orthodox Christians and Ottoman Muslims in Bulgaria. The woman from Chokmanovo cured Kerim Pasha using water from a natural spring of which, as an alien, he was unaware. Kerim responds by obtaining permission from the Ottoman Sultan to build an Orthodox Christian chapel on the site. The director of Rhodope Travel identifies a “small lake” nearby as “Kerim’s water” (rather than the Christian woman’s), so that the “pipeline” that Rhodope Travel built from the lake to the chapel would recall the Muslims’ gift to the Christian community in gratitude for one Christian’s aid to a Muslim “oppressor.” That there is an alliance between the Orthodox Church and the Bulgarian nation is part of the official narrative, but it is important to realize that that story does not exclude other alliances that are less prominent and explicitly acknowledged but also more efficient in organizing social life, both pragmatically and symbolically. Strong and proud professional identities—a legacy of an atheist ideology and its protracted workings—cut across religious identities in Bulgaria and, abetted by extraordinary flexibility on the part of Orthodox clergymen, have unwittingly encouraged Muslim exopraxis at Christian sites that, as some locals know, are associated with legends that bespeak Christophilia on the part of Muslims and Islamophilia on the part of Christians.

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