IMMIGRANTS, RELIGIOUS ETHICS AND RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS IN BULGARIA: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY (2014-2025)

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Abstract

The article examines the attitude of religious leaders of traditional denominations in Bulgaria (Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim) towards immigrants who arrived in 2014-2025. It studies the perception of immigrants (refugees, temporary and permanent residents) by highly religious elites, having a good orientation in religious dogma and ethics and occupying leading positions in their religious communities, and the decision-making process based on these perceptions. Qualitative methods are used, i.e. standardized face-to-face interviews conducted by the authors with clergymen, heads of religious institutions and NGOs, and scholars in the field of religious studies. The paper comments on the relationship between religious moral values, the actions of religious organizations and state migration policies.

Keywords: immigrants, Bulgaria, religious ethics, religious institutions.

Introduction

Methodological framework. In the Bulgarian humanities and social sciences, the contemporary migration phenomenon and current processes is studied in detail by demography, statistics, sociology, economics, political science, and ethnology. However, it is not satisfactorily reflected in social and religious anthropology. Migration flows are known in terms of their main parameters, directions, trends and rates, they are linked to the labor market and their impact on domestic and international politics is predicted, but a number of questions concerning immigration still remain, the answers to which anthropology has not posed and found. The socio-cultural frameworks those immigrants must comply with in their everyday lives – and which have a significant impact on their communication with local confessional communities and their organizations – are among them.

Our article examines the attitude of believers from different denominations in Bulgaria towards immigrants in Bulgaria and towards the phenomenon of migration in 2014-2025. It studies the perception of immigrants in the country – refugees, temporary residents, permanent residents and naturalized foreigners – by the highly religious elites, who have a good orientation in religious dogma and ethics and occupy a leading position in their religious communities. The study is based on standardized in-depth interviews with religious leaders (clergymen, scholars in the field of religious studies, and heads of religious NGOs). The perspectives of the Orthodox, Catholics, Protestants, Jews and Muslims – the traditional religious groups in Bulgaria, are studied, and conclusions are drawn about the preservation of religious moral values in times of globalization and anomie, and about the state of the religious sphere as part of the public environment.

Working on the chosen topic, we decided to select a targeted sample of people with a high level of personal religiosity and a prominent leadership role within their denominations or in religiously oriented organizations. We conducted 12 in-depth interviews with 3 Orthodox, Catholics and Muslims each, with 2 Protestants and 1 Jew. The sample included 4 women and 8 men; 5 religious leaders (4 clergymen and 1 chairman of a spiritual council), 7 scholars associated with individual denominations or religious NGOs; 3 had their own experiences with immigration, and 5 had lived abroad for a long time. We conducted the interviews face-to-face in 2024-2025 with a specially designed questionnaire; two persons from our sample sent their answers by e-mail.

Historical and sociocultural context. Over the past 35 years, coinciding with the post-communist transition, Bulgaria had transformed from a sending migrant country into a transit country. The dynamics of this process intensified after its entry into the EU (2007) and particularly in the period 2014-2025, when it was affected by the immigration wave from the Middle East. By 2020, in line with EU policies, the country had received around 94,209 refugees, mainly from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, few of whom, however, remained as temporary or permanent residents (12,284), and most re-emigrated to Central and Western Europe. In 2022-2025 Bulgaria also received 114,596 political immigrants from Ukraine, many of whom also used it as a transit point, with only about 60,864 accommodated. Currently, according to official data, there are 202,980 people in the country with temporary protection status (Nikolova and Chernicherska, 2016)[1].

After the destruction of the totalitarian regime in Bulgaria, communist atheism was put to an end and the democratic rights and freedoms of religious communities were restored. In the 1990s, there was even a boom in religiosity, especially among the Orthodox, Muslims and Protestants. Since the beginning of the 21st century, however, an opposite process of rapid secularization and social anomie developed. It reflected in several directions: an extremely low level of religiosity[2] (Karamelska, 2009; Evans and Baronavski, 2018; The Inglehart-Welzel World Cultural Map, 2023; Gallup International Balkan, 2023, 2024); weak reproduction of religious moral values, which were gradually replaced by secular ones; increased influence of occult ideas and practices; emergence and spread of diverse forms of hybrid spirituality (domestic religiosity, Neopaganism, et cetera) (Ivanova, 1995; Grebenarova, 2002; Kalkandjieva, 2008; Nazarska and Shapkalova, 2015; Bosakov, 2016; Ivanova, 2017; Garvanova, 2017; Metodiev, 2022; Toneva, 2024).

Immigrants and refugees in the "mirror" of religious doctrines and ethical norms

Our respondents knew very well the doctrines of their religions and the place of mercy in them. Therefore, they easily and competently explained what the attitude of religious people towards immigrants – co-religionists or non-believers should be.

The Orthodox referred to the Christian teaching that help should be provided to every person, regardless of race, ethnic origin or religious affiliation. This stems from the example of Christ himself and the desire to fill the loss of home and homeland (G.G., 52, f). An immigrant can be both a believer and a non-believer, "because God does not make distinctions, and we want to be like Him. We do not aim at selective helpfulness" (B.B, 49, m). However, the Orthodox emphasize that the Old Testament also prescribes that the foreigner be treated as a "guest", i.e. that he be shown mercy and hospitality, but without being allowed to interfere or impose his desires. The immigrant should not be served, but must instead comply with the traditions and customs of the locals, so as not to interfere with their salvation. Otherwise, he must leave the country, as in his own he can do whatever he wants (B.B, 49, m).

The Catholic respondents presented in detail the concept of mercy of their denomination. The main example in it was also the example of Christ, preaching kindness for every person in need, regardless of the reason for his troubles or his social affiliation (D.D., 55, f). Furthermore, the two clerics pointed to the contemporary papal encyclicals that encourage

support for children in extreme need and call for solidarity with the poor in the global South: Pius XII's "Quaemadmodum" (1946) and John Paul II's "Sollicitudo rei socialis" (1987). The latter document, which is considered a new theology of liberation and spiritual salvation, charts the path of autonomous action and cooperation with states. They also highlighted Pope Francis's guidelines for practical work with the poor, the disadvantaged and immigrants (E.E., 55, m; A.A., 45, m).

Like respondents from other Christian denominations, Protestants explained that God is mercy and love, so "Christians are called to share God's love through the practice of helping, empathizing, and caring for others, regardless of their situation, status, religion, ethnicity. This is a Christian imperative" (M.M., 75, m). They cited the Beatitudes recounted by Christ in the Sermon on the Mount (Heb. Matthew 5:3-7:12), such as temperance, meekness, mercy, empathy, purity of heart, non-maliciousness, peacemaking, justice, caring for the community (N.N., 80, m).

The Jewish respondent elaborated on the Jewish doctrine of mercy. He described "tzedakah" not only as charity in the classical sense, but also as help for people in need, which is a "good deed", a religious obligation, and includes both material and non-material expressions (time, energy). It is associated with building a righteous society and is given to both Jews and non-believers. The doctrine was developed in detail by Maimonides and refers to loans, grants, donations, assistance to the unemployed, the elderly, parents, children, and educational, religious or health organizations. In this sense, charity is a type of assistance accompanied by respect for the other person and must be done out of the kindness of one's heart (N.N., 80, m).

The Muslim interviewees responded in a similar spirit: that "every person is created by Allah and everyone has the right to live and to receive help", and that "when helping people in need, there should be no distinction in terms of their nationality, religion, gender, place of origin, et cetera" (K.K., 63, m). They added that one must necessarily show "mercy, compassion, to love others as oneself" (Z.Z., 53, f).

The majority of interviewees stated that, at present, religious values are threatened by technological innovations, materialistic thinking (Z.Z., 53, f; D.D., 55, f), liberalism, postmodern individualistic thinking, and secularization (M.M., 75, m). However, a certain group of values pertaining to the attitude towards immigrants – including charity, sympathy,

and empathy – have been preserved and transmitted within religious communities, especially through work with children and youth.

Immigrants and refugees in the personal experience and everyday life of religious figures and organizations in Bulgaria

The respondents were well acquainted with the doctrinal foundations of their denominations, and some of them had lived abroad for many years as immigrants (students, doctoral candidates, and hired workers), or even currently reside outside Bulgaria for longer periods. However, they turned out to have little experience in the practical application of their religious views and values.

Only two of them (a Muslim woman and a Catholic woman) spoke about their direct and purposeful contacts with immigrants: the first as a volunteer at the Registration and Reception Center (refugee camp) in Harmanli, and the second as a trustee of the "Caritas" Catholic organization. The Muslim woman shared that she is truly concerned about the problems of migration and is driven by personal motives and a pacifist attitude. She sees her work with refugees as her mission and calling, which "never tires her", and she is convinced that refugees need not only protection, but also genuine empathy ("they need us to put ourselves in their shoes, to approach them with humanity, to take on their pain and not think about the differences" - Z.Z., 53, f). The second interviewee did not explain why she participated in "Caritas", nor did she give details about her activity there. It was obvious that this had been merely an episode in her life which she considered insignificant, and which did not have a profound impact on her (D.D., 55, f).

The remaining respondents spoke about their sporadic and accidental contacts with immigrants, including refugees: Syrian hitchhikers they had picked up in their cars; Syrian refugees to whom they had provided professional consultations at the request of mutual acquaintances; Ukrainian refugees working in large retail chains; et cetera (M.M., 75, m; B.B, 49, m; N.N., 80, m). However, the descriptions of the situations themselves show a lack of interest, passivity in relation to the refugees' needs, and even avoidance of in-depth relationships. While for some of the respondents that may be explained by their busy professional schedules, for many others it is surprising, given their high-ranking position in the management of Bulgarian religious denominations or their commitment to religious issues. This

indifference shows, on one hand, the weak commitment of the respondents themselves and their religious communities, and on the other hand – the declarative nature of the positions they express, but seldom put into practice, and thus their severely "eroded" religious values.

When asked specifically how their own religious community has been supporting refugees and immigrants over the past 10 years, the interviewees gave rather laconic answers. Our respondent, a Protestant pastor, admitted that he had only a "faint idea" about this, mentioning the involvement of Baptist churches in Sofia in providing food, clothing, medicine, Bulgarian language lessons, and support for the education of children and adults, but he was unable to recall any details (M.M., 75, m). The trustee of "Caritas" seemed to mention the organization's initiatives for providing logistical support, filling out paperwork, and securing documents from the local and central administration only in passing, thus omitting some of the NGO's large-scale contributions to the refugee communities over the past decade. She also seemed to describe in passing how, at the height of the 2013-2014 political crisis, Bishop Hristo Proykov personally offered shelter to a family from Iraq who then remained at the headquarters of the Catholic Exarchate in Sofia until they received legal status (D.D., 55, f). We received a surprising final answer from an Orthodox respondent who stated that, according to Orthodoxy, giving alms should be personal rather than done through organizations (as it is in Catholicism and Protestantism), because the latter option would compromise the act. According to him, immigrants have different needs and each donor should establish personal contact in order to "consider what to give, according to what is requested". This answer sums up well the Bulgarian Orthodox Church's passive attitude towards immigrants: "When you give to your neighbor, God will not let you perish for having helped him" (B.B., 49, m). According to the same respondent, each temple in the BOC is autonomous and the level of engagement is therefore left up to the priests, who are probably involved in many initiatives without necessarily advertising them, just as there are many ordinary believers who do good deeds anonymously (B.B., 49, m).

Our respondent, who holds a high position in a large international religious organization, linked the indifference of Bulgarian religious communities on the migration issues to various factors. First, he pointed to the lack of experience, which countries such as Italy, Spain or Germany have had, especially in the second half of the 20th century. He emphasized the small number of immigrants in Bulgaria[3] and the differences between economies – some attracting

foreign workers, others marked by serious internal unemployment. He pointed out the legacy of communism, which completely took away socially beneficial activity from confessional communities and turned it into a state monopoly (cf. Nazarska, 2022). He also highlighted the role of the Catholic and Protestant churches, which are influential institutions in Western Europe. They traditionally cooperate through inter-church, trans-religious forums, associations, and platforms; they have their own accommodation buildings, food banks, and legal advisors; they operate in partnerships with large international organizations (UNHCR, Red Cross and Red Crescent). The interviewee noted the differences in national legislation, which provides more reliable material assistance to immigrants in Western Europe than in Bulgaria. Last but not least, he pointed out the role of social stereotypes, which have been shaped historically under the influence of Orthodoxy and can be especially negative towards Muslims, thereby contributing to the public condemnation of assistance for Muslim immigrants whilst simultaneously strengthening the public approval of assistance for Orthodox Ukrainian refugees (N.N., 80, m). We received a negative response to our question whether the organization "Religions for Peace – Europe"[4] has its own strategy for working with immigrants and whether the several NGOs working on interregional dialogue (of which our respondent is a member in Bulgaria) are taking a similar direction (N.N., 80, m).

A Muslim woman from Haskovo, who has been volunteering at the refugee center in the neighboring town of Harmanli for 10 years, including during the pandemic, provided the most detailed account of the initiatives organized by her religion. According to her, the Grand Mufti's Office in Bulgaria was engaged in a wide range of activities to help the refugees in the center. It granted a one-time financial aid upon arrival, which supplemented the state's monthly cash assistance; it distributed food products and blankets free of charge; it provided Qurans and prayer rugs; it paid for translators, psychologists, and medical doctors; it also cooperated with NGOs in order to provide psychological and psychiatric help (Z.Z., 53, f).

According to the respondent, a number of Protestant pastor-missionaries from the Haskovo Evangelical Church and activists from the "Wings" Mission – an NGO with a Protestant center in Stara Zagora[5] – have carried out remarkable initiatives in the Harmanli center. The respondent believes that the activity of the Protestants was undoubtedly aimed at converting the Muslims there, but, at the same time, it greatly improved the health care and psychological support available to the refugees. She told about a Moroccan woman – a victim

of violence who adopted the Protestant faith in her desire to receive adequate psychological care (Z.Z., 53, f). The Baptist clergyman – who was also among our respondents – declared that "to use human need, vulnerability, and material aid for evangelistic purposes is wrong and contradicts religious morality" (M.M., 75, m), but he allowed it to happen, because "the main religious faiths in our country have a missionary attitude". The other Protestant respondent also approved of these initiatives, citing the example of Germany, where quite a few Muslim refugees had converted to Christianity, because "during such times religious organizations help people, show love and concern, and immigrants and refugees often have the opportunity to hear and understand the faith of the people who help them" (I.I., 60, m). Only the Orthodox respondent did not make excuses for the conversions – both because he was unaware what was happening in the refugee centers and because he follows the doctrine of Orthodoxy that a person in trouble should seek the church and its faith himself instead of being "recruited" by the Church (B.B, 49, m).

Our respondents were not only unaware of the initiatives of their organizations, but also encountered difficulties listing non-governmental organizations operating in the same field. Only two of them presented detailed accounts of the work of UNHCR, UNICEF, 'Doctors Without Borders', the Bulgarian Red Cross, the 'Asset' Support Center, the 'Nadya' Center, and others. (Z.Z., 53, f; D.D., 55, f).

Immigrants and refugees at the intersection of state and religious policies and practices

During the in-depth interviews conducted, all respondents argued that religious organizations should have a place in resolving migration crises and making decisions regarding immigration (M.M., 75, m). Their reason for this was primarily faith, which can motivate the search for moral solutions to difficult issues related to identity, family, and personal destiny (D.D., 55, f; I.I., 60, m). One of them even pointed to the example of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, whose decision to accept Syrian refugees he said was due to the fact that she was the daughter of a Lutheran pastor (I.I., 60, m).

Two respondents – a Catholic clergyman and a Muslim leader – emphasized that the work of religious organizations and leaders must necessarily be coordinated with state authorities (A.A., 45, m; K.K., 63, m), but did not comment on the relations of their

denominations with said authorities. Other religious leaders criticized the state migration policy and practice. According to them, the isolation experienced in centers had marginalized refugees (M.M., 75, m), and was therefore to be considered a sign of inhumane, discriminatory treatment pointing to the lack of an integration policy (L.L., 68, m).

The majority of respondents could not offer examples of cooperation between public and religious structures, which exposed a lack of coordinated efforts (M.M., 75, m; D.D., 55, f). Very few of the interviewees had their own position. According to some of them, the state was doing enough with its means, but the implementation of laws and measures was compromised by local authorities, who were unprepared to respond adequately to such global crises, sometimes despite their own good intentions. Other respondents sharply criticized both the state – which applied a double standard to Syrian and Ukrainian refugees, providing the latter with accommodation in hotels, long-term financial assistance and priority employment – and the structures of the State Agency for Refugees, which mismanaged the accommodation centers in Sofia, Harmanli, Pastrogor, and Banya. They gave examples of inappropriate mixing of ethnic and religious communities, of single and family people, of selecting inappropriate food in view of the cultural traditions of immigrants. They also identified serious flaws in the child protection departments of local municipalities, which failed to resolve the issues of unaccompanied children and minors[6] (Z.Z., 53, f). The Orthodox also criticized the state, albeit from extremely conservative or populist standpoints: they were dissatisfied by the separation of church and state in modern times, and they complained that there is a lack of politicians professing religious values (B.B, 49, m).

Immigrants and refugees, religious communities and the public environment

The interviewees were unanimous that the attitude towards immigrants in Bulgaria is negative, especially towards Syrians and Iraqis coming from the Middle East. According to them, “there is a lack of support and understanding” (M.M., 75, m) for a number of reasons – language barrier, cultural differences, xenophobia, populism, and nationalism (M.M., 75, m; D.D., 55, f). Their main thesis was that the fear of the ‘cultural Other’ escalates into hostility and violence. The interviewees cited the following examples: the notorious cases of mutilation of Syrians and Afghans by so-called “Dinko from Yambol”[7]; the protests of the VMRO Party in front of the refugee centers in Harmanli and Sofia (2016); the reluctance of the residents of

Harmanli to rent out housing to refugees; the purposefully spread rumors that the refugees were weapon-carrying drug dealers who were raping Bulgarian women (Z.Z., 53, f; B.B, 49, m).

The lack of reflection among religious elites on the above-described cases testifies both to the anomie of Bulgarian society, in which basic values are disappearing, and to the encapsulation of Bulgarian religious communities. There are only two exceptions. The Muslim respondent stated that she admired refugees for demonstrating humility, gratitude, respect, kindness, and a determination to preserve their traditions even in extreme conditions (Z.Z., 53, f). She also described how in Harmanli many people help those in need with clothing, food, medicine, et cetera. (Z.Z., 53, f). During the interviews, the Orthodox attributed the xenophobia, hate speech, and hostility towards ethno-religious diversity to the lack of compulsory religious (Orthodox) education in public schools[8], which he believed would ensure the cultivation of religious values and, consequently, a more adequate approach to immigrants, especially among young people, who are currently only acting on aggressive impulses (B.B, 49, m).

Conclusion

Bulgarian religious elites treat immigration issues as secondary (with the exception of the Muslim and Catholic denominations), and their attitudes are shaped not so much by age, gender or occupation, but rather by social framework pressure. Post-totalitarian society has preserved negative stereotypes regarding foreigners and Muslims, and is strongly influenced by left-wing and national populist appeals to social exclusion.

The studied religious values related to immigration, such as mercy, charity, solidarity, and empathy, are fundamental to the Abrahamic religions and to the six traditional denominations in Bulgaria. However, religious elites currently interpret and apply them on an ad hoc basis, not always respecting religious dogma. This applies especially to Orthodox elites, whose views are influenced by the religious nationalism (Hayes, 1960; Juergensmeyer, 1993, 2008) currently propagated by the Russian Orthodox Church.

The conducted anthropological study using qualitative methods confirms the findings of the last 10 years about the prevailing secular-rational values and survival values, which dominate over traditional and self-expression values in Bulgarian society (The Inglehart-Welzel World Cultural Map, 2023; Karchina, 2021). This profile, stemming from a combination of factors – unfinished modernization, remnants of communism, difficulties of the post-totalitarian

transition, and globalization – reinforces the existing xenophobic and anti-immigrant sentiments, and preserves the low level of tolerance and interpersonal trust in society (cf. Pamporov, 2009). A novelty compared to previous studies is the conclusion that secularization increasingly affects religious elites. Although for the 61-80 year-old cohort who lived under communism this may be natural, for the 41-50 year-old cohort it is a symptom of the emergence of a new type of religious leadership, which has weak ties to denominations and brings to the fore not traditional values, but secular ones. According to our research, the current bearer of traditional religious values is just the 51-60-year-old cohort, which continues making an effort to implement these values in practice.

Appendix. List of respondents

respondent	gender	age	denomination	occupation	immigrant experience
A.A.	male	45	Catholic	Priest	Pole
D.D.	female	55	Catholic	Artist, journalist	
E.E.	male	55	Catholic	Priest	Pole
N.N.	male	80	Jewish	Engineer, businessman	U.S., Germany, Spain
Z.Z.	female	53	Muslim	Theologian	Saudi Arabia
K.K.	male	63	Muslim	Priest	Saudi Arabia, Turkey
L.L.	male	68	Muslim	Philosopher, writer	
B.B.	male	49	Orthodox	Medical doctor	
V.V.	female	50	Orthodox	Cultural scientist	Hungary
G.G.	female	52	Orthodox	Theologian, teacher	
I.I.	male	60	Protestant	Theologian	U.S., Africa
M.M.	male	75	Protestant	Engineer, theologian	Russia, Netherland, Slovakia

Respondents are anonymized.

Notes

[1] https://aref.government.bg; https://mvr.bg/%D0%BC%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%80%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%BE/programni-dokumenti-otcheti-analizi/%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0/%D0%BC%D0%B8%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0

[2] According to the European Values Survey (2008), nearly two decades ago the level of religiousness in Bulgaria was 35%. According to the Pew Research Center (2018), in 2018 it was 18%, in contrast to Romania (55%) and Serbia (32%). According to Gallup, it was 52% (2014), then 51% (2018), then 53% (2023). According to the Inglehart-Welzel World Cultural Map (2023), Bulgaria is one of the most secular post-communist countries, along with Estonia (https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSContents.jsp)

[3] The number of Ukrainians in Bulgaria is 60 864, while in Germany and Spain there are 1.25 million and 320 000 Ukrainians, respectively.

[4] https://rfpeurope.org/

[5] https://missionwings.bg

[6] In 2021, minors made up 3172 of refugees, mainly from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria.

[7] Bulgarian wrestler, businessman and TV star, leader of a paramilitary formation that illegally arrested illegal refugees crossing the Bulgarian-Turkish border (2015-2023).

[8] Since 1997, secondary schools have offered an elective subject titled ‘Religion (Orthodoxy or Islam)’.

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