

## **Table of Contents**

- ***80th anniversary of the rescue of Bulgarian Jews***
  - ***European Court of Human Rights: governments should not call minority religions "cults"***
- 

## **80th anniversary of the rescue of Bulgarian Jews**

### ***Patriarchal and Synodal message***

By Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church

[The European Times](#) (13.03.2023) - On the tenth of March, the institutions of the Bulgarian state and our public commemorate the day when, in 1943, in the darkest hours of the Second World War, when its outcome was not at all clear, with its collective efforts, our people stopped the deportation of our compatriots of Jewish origin, the Bulgarian Jews, to the Nazi death camps.

The role of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church in this work has never been forgotten and has always been emphasized, especially by the Jewish community, for which we are grateful. Therefore, there is no need, and it is not appropriate for the Church to point out its merits, even less for the fact that in a certain, difficult historical moment, it acted in the only way possible for it, namely - in harmony with the commandments of the Orthodox faith .

The truth is that when, on the night of March 9-10, 1943, Metropolitan Stefan sought an urgent meeting with the state leadership to express the Church's disapproval of the impending deportation, and Metropolitan Kirill entered the imprisoned Jews at the school in Plovdiv and told the guards, that if they were taken he would go with them, these were not isolated acts of civil position, but the result of a systematic, firmly held line of the Holy Synod. In accordance with the Christian teaching and the thousand-year-old practice of tolerance, empathy and love, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church has always rejected any form of anti-Semitism, racial or religious hatred towards the representatives of the Jewish community, as well as in principle towards every person. As early as the adoption of the anti-Semitic Law for the Protection of the Nation, in the minutes of the Holy Synod of 1940, the warning words of the Bulgarian bishops can be heard: "The Bulgarian Orthodox Church, which carries out among our people the saving truth and commandment of our Savior that we are all sons of a heavenly Father, cannot fail to draw attention to the factors responsible that this bill, in some of its decrees against the Jewish-Israelites, contains provisions which cannot be considered just... Every man and every nation must protect from dangers, but in this justified pursuit, injustice and violence against others should not be allowed".

And more: "The question of our attitude towards the Jews is clear. We are Christians, and as bishops of the Holy Bulgarian Church, we cannot but stand on the ground of the Holy Gospel and Christ's teaching about the equality of all people before God, regardless of origin, race and culture. Therefore, we must stand up for the Jews."

The Holy Synod declared this position as early as 1940, and it found its most vivid expression in the action of the ninth against the tenth of March 1943, as a result of which not a single Jew living on the territory of the canonical diocese of the Bulgarian Exarchy at that time, was not sent to extermination to the death camps.

This action would not have been possible if the Bulgarian people had not been churched, if they had not been firmly united around their metropolitans, if the voice of the Church had not been so strong, because it was the voice of the faithful, Christ-loving and philanthropic Orthodox Bulgarian people of God. Not someone else, namely the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, has nurtured in its people the strength and determination to oppose evil – qualities that are a manifestation of their belonging to the Christian faith and its values. The power of faith was demonstrated by the people, led by the bishops of their Orthodox Church, in the frosty days of 1943, and with their faith they saved their compatriots – Jews. People's power is impossible without the Orthodox faith, and this is a very important lesson that we must learn for ourselves today from the case of the tenth of March.

We cannot but mention with deep sadness that, despite this, more than 11 thousand Jews from neighboring territories, temporarily under Bulgarian secular administration, were still taken and many of them died in the flames of the Holocaust. We mourn for them. We regret that the Exarchate did not have the strength and opportunities to take care of the Jews in those dioceses that were forcibly separated from its body 30 years earlier, in the same way as for the Jews in [Bulgaria](#). We are sincerely sorry!

Usually, on this day, the names of only some of the metropolitans, who especially manifested themselves in the holy and philanthropic work of saving the Bulgarian Jews in 1943, are mentioned. However, we are obliged to recall the names of all worthy bishops who were members of the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Exarchy, who were gathered in the name of Christ and God was among them and blessed their work, and the Holy Life-giving Spirit dictated their decisions. These are: Metropolitan Neofit of Vidin – Deputy Chairman of the Holy Synod, Metropolitan Stefan of Sofia, Metropolitan Mihail of Dorostol and Cherven, Metropolitan Paisiy of Vrachan, Metropolitan Boris of Nevrokop, Metropolitan Sophronius of Turnovo, Metropolitan Yosif of Varna and Preslav, Metropolitan Kirill of Plovdiv, Metropolitan Philaret of Lovech, Metropolitan Evlogii of Sliven and Metropolitan Kliment of Stara Zagora.

Eternal and blessed be the memory of these ancestors of ours! Let their work be an inspiration and an example to us when we have to face contemporary manifestations of xenophobia, anti-Semitism or human hatred of any nature and against anyone. Their faith is our faith, their strength is our strength, their convictions are our convictions. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church will always educate its pious and Christ-loving people in love for neighbor, tolerance, solidarity and humanity. It has been so since [Bulgaria](#) became an Orthodox Christian state and, as far as it depends on us, it will be so here forever and ever.

May God forgive our archpastors who died blessedly, who helped save the Jews in the exarchian dioceses on the territory of Bulgaria and thus protected the dignity of the Orthodox Church and preserved the honor of our Motherland.

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## European Court of Human Rights: governments should not call minority religions "cults"

***The Court ruled in favor of three Bulgarian Evangelical churches, and said its case law has "evolved" since it refused to censor two French reports on "cults" in 2001.***

By Massimo Introvigne

Bitter Winter (30.12.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3ZuScJI> - Can a government call a minority religion a "cult" in its official documents? Or "secte," a French expression that should be translated in English as "cult" rather than as "sect," just as parallel words in many other languages derived from the Latin "secta"? No, said the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) on December 12 in the case of "[Tonchev and Others v. Bulgaria](#)."

The question has a history at the ECHR, marked by two old decisions of 2001 and 2008, which seemed to have solved the question in favor of the governments that use such language. In 2001, the ECHR [declared inadmissible](#) an application by the French Jehovah's Witnesses, who had complained about having been called a "cult" (secte) in two French parliamentary reports of 1995 and 1999. In fact, the ECHR examined only the 1999 report, not the one of 1995 and its notorious "list of cults," since in respect to the latter it concluded that the Jehovah's Witnesses had filed their complaint too late. Rather than examining substantially the question of the term "cult" (secte), the ECHR based its decision on the fact that "a parliamentary report has no legal effect and cannot serve as the basis for any criminal or administrative proceedings." Should they feel discriminate in such proceedings, the French Jehovah's Witnesses were invited to file separate actions—which they did, eventually winning [a landmark case against France](#) about their taxes in 2011.

In 2008, in "[Leela Förderkreis e.V. and Others v. Germany](#)" the ECHR ruled against groups based on the teachings of "Osho" Rajneesh that had been called "destructive" "cults" (sekten) in reports by different German authorities. Unlike the 2001 decision on France, "Förderkreis" did pass judgement on whether the terms used by the government put the religious liberty of the Osho devotees in danger. The ECHR stated that "the terms used to describe the applicant associations' movement may have had negative consequences for them. Without ascertaining the exact extent and nature of such consequences, the Court proceeds on the assumption that the Government's statements in issue constituted an interference with the applicant associations' right to manifest their religion or belief, as guaranteed by Article 9 § 1 of the [European] Convention [on Human Rights.]"

However, the ECHR found that in the specific case the use of the terms "cult" (sekte) and similar, while inappropriate, was justified by provisions existing in the German law at that time that were not prima facie illegitimate. But the ECHR also said that the fact that "the

[German] Government undisputedly refrained from further using the term 'sekte' in their information campaign following the recommendation contained in the expert report on 'so-called sects and psycho-cults' issued in 1998" carried a weight in its decision.

However, in 2021, in the case "[Centre of Societies for Krishna Consciousness In Russia and Frolov v. Russia](#)," the ECHR ruled against a Russian brochure that had called the ISKCON, popularly known as the Hare Krishna movement, a "totalitarian cult" and a "destructive cult," and concluded that "by using derogatory language and unsubstantiated allegations for describing the applicant centre's religious beliefs" the Russian government [had violated ISKCON's freedom of religion](#).

On December 13, 2022, the ECHR decided the case "Tonchev and Others v. Bulgaria," resulting from the complaints of three Evangelical and Pentecostal churches from the Bulgarian city of Burgas, the Unified Bulgarian Good News Church, the First Congregational Evangelical Church, and the Evangelical Pentecostal Church Philadelphia. Together with the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, popularly known as the "Mormon" Church, they had been targeted in 2008 by a letter sent to all public schools by the City of Burgas. The letter asked the schools to explain to all pupils that the groups mentioned in the text were "cults" (секти, sektii), should not be confused with the legitimate Bulgarian Orthodox Church, were "dangerous," and exposed their members to "mental health problems."

In its defense, the Bulgarian government insisted on the ECHR 2001 decision on the French reports, and claimed that no negative consequences had affected the three Evangelical churches because of the letter. It also pretended that "sekti" in Bulgarian had no negative connotations, an argument the ECHR failed to consider.

Quoting the 2021 decision about the Russian Hare Krishna, the ECHR answered that "its case law subsequent to the above-mentioned [2001] decision 'Fédération chrétienne des témoins de Jéhovah de France' decision marks an evolution on the question of whether the use of disqualifying terms with regard to a religious community can be analyzed as an infringement of the rights guaranteed by Article 9 of the Convention." More recently, "the Court has considered that the use of hostile or derogatory terms in referring to a religious community in documents issued by public authorities, insofar as it is likely to have negative consequences on the exercise by its members of their freedom of religion, is sufficient to constitute an infringement of the rights guaranteed by Article 9 of the Convention."

In the specific case of Burgas, "the Court considers that the terms used in the circular letter and the information note of 9 April 2008, which described certain religious currents, including Evangelicalism to which the applicant associations belonged, as 'dangerous religious cults' that 'contravene Bulgarian legislation, citizens' rights and public order' and whose meetings expose their participants to 'psychological disorders,' may indeed be perceived as pejorative and hostile. It notes that the documents in question were distributed by the town hall of Burgas, the town in which the applicant associations and pastors were operating, to all the schools in the town, which were invited to bring them to the attention of the pupils and to report on the way in which the information was presented and the way in which the children reacted. In these circumstances, and even if the measures complained of did not directly restrict the right of the applicant pastors or their co-religionists to manifest their religion through worship and practice, the Court considers, in the light of its case law, that these measures may have had negative repercussions on the exercise of religious freedom by the members of the churches in question."

After “Tonchev,” it would become more difficult for governments to rely on the old 2001 decision about the French reports. “Tonchev” has now established that calling a religious minority a “cult” exposes it to negative consequences, and such slanderous language should be avoided by public authorities.

*Photo: The three pastors who started the “Tonchev” case at the ECHR: from the left, Zhivko Tonchev, of the Unified Bulgarian Good News Church; Stefan Krastev, of the Evangelical Pentecostal Church Philadelphia; and Radoslav Kiryakov, of the First Congregational Evangelical Church. From Facebook.*

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