

The Bulgarian Evangelical Society (1875-1958) and its contribution to the development of Protestantism in Bulgaria

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Abstract

The Bulgarian Evangelical Society (BES) was the first organised initiative of Bulgarian Evangelical Christians to take part in evangelising the Bulgarian people. Founded in 1875, the BES survived several wars and internal problems, until it was dissolved by the Communist regime in 1958. Apart from printing and distributing literature and providing financial aid to preachers and pastors, one of its major activities was to support unity among Evangelical Christians. The annual meetings of the membership proved to be an important platform for its different ministries. As an interdenominational organisation that enjoyed the broad support of a major part of the Bulgarian Evangelical community, the Bulgarian Evangelical Society played an important role in the development of Protestantism in Bulgaria.

The Bulgarian Evangelical Society (BES)

The Bulgarian Evangelical Society,² founded in the mid-1870s, played a special role in the history of Protestantism³ in Bulgaria through its initiatives in the area of organised Evangelism. At that point in time, Bulgaria – a tradi-

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² The Bulgarian name is *Bylgarsko evangelsko druzhestvo*. Between 1900 and 1935, the Society used the additional adjective "charitable" (*blagotvoritelno* in Bulgarian) in the title of the organization. Throughout this article, the shorter name will be used, as was common in the English correspondence during the entire existence of the BES.

³ In this article, the terms "Protestant" and "Evangelical" are used as synonyms, analogous to the usage in Bulgarian – as was common in the early (and present) history of Protestantism in central Europe.

tionally Eastern Orthodox country – had already been part of the Ottoman Empire for almost five centuries. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church gained independence from the patriarch of Constantinople in 1870 and the country became politically independent in 1878.

Bulgaria's earliest known contacts with Protestant teaching came about through travelling colporteurs sent by the British and Foreign Bible Society during the first half of the 19th century. The first residential workers to arrive in 1857-1858 were sent by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) and the Mission Organization of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the USA. At that time, the goal of both mission agencies was to work towards reform of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, rather than to establish separate Protestant churches. As a result, the first Bulgarian Protestant churches were established, not by foreign missionaries, but by Bulgarian believers who called themselves Protestants. The first formally established Evangelical church was founded in 1871 in the town of Bansko, today in south-western Bulgaria. Others soon followed their example.

During this period, as the battle for political independence from the Ottomans intensified, and while there were still less than 200 Bulgarians in the recently established Protestant churches, Andrey S. Tsanov (1842-1933) – a passionate teacher – founded the Bulgarian Evangelical Society (BES). He was supported in this work by the first two ordained Evangelical pastors, Ivan A. Tondzhorov (1845-1922) and Nikola T. Boyadzhiev (1841-1891). All of these men were from churches that later united to form the Congregational denomination;⁴ but despite the fact that they all came from the same church tradition, they decided to establish the BES as an interdenominational organisation. People supported the BES in two ways: either by becoming a member and paying an annual membership fee, or by making donations to the work of the organisation. From the beginning, people were encouraged to make even small donations or, where even that wasn't possible, to donate goods to be sold at the annual meetings.

Insight into their motivation for founding the BES is evident in the constitution of the organisation: "The object of this society is to seek to spread the pure Christian faith and good morals among all mankind, especially among our Bulgarian nation" (*Ustav* 1875:§ 2). Fifty years later they added the following phrases: "to do charitable work" and "to work for the unification of the Bulgarian Evangelical movement" (*Ustav* 1925:§ 2). In

⁴ Founded in 1889, the official name of the denomination resulting from the work of the American Board was the "Union of Evangelical Churches". Around the middle of the 20th century, the adjective "Congregational" (in Bulgarian *syborni*) was added (Kulichev 1994, 239). To avoid confusion, the adjective "Congregational" will be added when talking about this group of Evangelical Christians.

their efforts to reach these goals, the BES began to publish Christian books and magazines and to distribute them through colporteurs, as well as through their own bookstore in Sofia. In addition to printing and distributing literature, they began to contribute to the salaries of pastors of local churches that were unable to support their pastor or preacher. The Society also invested in the training of (future) pastors and other Christian workers. Supporting social projects was of minor importance and only became of some significance in the 1930s. From the very beginning, the Society held annual conferences for the membership and other interested people, a decision that turned out to play a very significant role in enabling the Society to reach its goals, especially in promoting and developing practical unity among Evangelical Christians.

The historical development of the BES

The history of the BES mirrors most of the significant events in the history of the Evangelical movement in Bulgaria up to 1948. The Society also went through the typical phases of development of a voluntary organisation.⁵

Despite the ongoing wars of independence (from the Ottoman Empire) over the first two decades of its existence, the BES was not only able to consolidate its literature work, but to support a new church plant in Sofia, the capital city. The Society at that time had a stable membership of about 200 individuals and between 300 and 600 additional financial supporters. Most of the latter, as well as almost all of the leaders within the organisation, were from Congregational churches, as at that time it was by far the largest Evangelical denomination, followed by the Methodists and then the Baptists. The organisation remained stable despite the loss of two of its founding members in 1891 and the continuing political and economic turmoil in the country.

The next phase began with the BES handing over its role in the newly founded church in Sofia to the American Board, freeing up its resources to be used more widely around the country and to develop a Christian center in Sofia, including a bookshop. However the bookstore proved to be a bigger financial burden than was originally anticipated. They creatively dealt with this in two ways: members made no-interest loans to the BES and, secondly, they cut back on their literature work until their debts were paid off in 1910. Widespread economic problems in the country led to stagnation in the number of members. However, the rapidly increasing number of donors (about 1 600 per year in 1912) suggested that there was still significant

⁵ According to Brackney (1997, 86-87) these are: 1) incipient phase – gathering of people around an urgent objective or a charismatic leader; 2) efficient phase – establishment of rules and protocols; 3) formal phase - preoccupation with form and structure; 4) disorganization or disintegration – decline followed either by death or reorganization.

interest in the Society. When Tsanov stepped down from the leadership of the board of the BES in 1914, a new generation of leaders took over the Society.

The Society reached its peak membership level just after World War I, with more than 2 000 Bulgarians involved in financing its work, including over 1 600 members. These numbers are very significant, as about 30% of the total membership of the Bulgarian Evangelical churches at that time was involved in some way. In 1920 the BES took over the responsibility of running the oldest religious periodical in the Bulgarian language, *Zornitsa*. Many considered this the most important project of the Society. The 50th anniversary of the founding of the BES was enthusiastically celebrated in 1925. By this time the BES had become increasingly organised and was involved with various financial projects, the setting up of funds for special purposes and the establishment of regulations for their use.

These changes were accompanied by a growing conflict with the liberal ideas of some of the American missionaries working among the Bulgarian Evangelicals, mostly within the Congregational Union. In particular, there was disagreement among the members of the BES concerning whether these liberal ideas should be given a platform in the weekly newspaper, *Zornitsa*, or not. These tensions, combined with other factors, led to the discontentment of many with the leadership of the BES and, in particular, with its president, D.N. Furnadzhiev (1866-1944). These disagreements, among other things, exploded into a scandal at the annual meeting of the BES in 1932. Most members of the Baptist Union decided to withdraw and form their own Evangelical society. However, this did not lead to a long-term decline in membership or to a decline in funding. Within a few years, the replacement of several board members and reconciliation with the Baptist Union led to a brighter future for the BES.

The new enthusiasm of the now larger and more united BES was soon challenged by the increasing restrictions imposed by the government on literature work, both before and during World War II. Membership peaked again in the mid-1940s, but in 1948 the Communists arrested most of the leading Evangelical pastors, including the majority of the board of the BES. For the next ten years, the BES existed only on paper and was finally dissolved by court decision in 1958.

The distinctive characteristics of the Bulgarian Evangelical Society

Interdenominational character

Even though the BES had no clear statement regarding its interdenominational character in its constitution, from the beginning it became obvious that the Society wanted to work on an interdenominational basis and, in fact, to

include all Evangelical Bulgarians (Gradinarov and Stefanov [1921]:16). They made this clear by banning from public discussion all doctrinal issues disputed among the various Evangelical denominations, leaving such questions up to the conscience of the individual and their denominational leadership. For example, when the Baptists wanted to discuss baptism at the annual meeting in 1877, the assembly voted unanimously against granting this request, stating that this was rightly the business of churches, not of the BES (Tsanov 1932:18). Also, in the 1920s, the BES did not discuss the rapid growth of the Pentecostal movement, despite the fact that this was a burning issue in the churches at the time.

It must also be kept in mind that at the time of the founding of the BES, there were as yet no official Evangelical denominations in Bulgaria. There were, however, three distinguishable groups of Evangelicals: 1) those churches under the influence of the American Board, later to become the Congregational Union, 2) the churches under the Methodist mission in northern Bulgaria and 3) a few small groups adhering to the Baptist tradition. From its founding until the beginning of the 20th century, Congregationalists predominated in the Society. However, early in the 1900s a special effort was made to incorporate more Methodists, an attempt which became successful only after the end of World War I. Baptists hardly ever formed a significant part of the Society because of the small size of the denomination. Many of the early leaders of the moderate wing of the Pentecostal movement (later to become the Pentecostal Union) joined the BES (for example Nikolas Nikolov, Siyka Drianova and Pavel Rakhnev), but later when the movement began to undergo significant growth, the membership in the BES from the Pentecostal churches did not grow in proportion to the increase in numbers in the denomination.

Another way to look at the interdenominational character of the BES is to note how it distributed its financial resources. During the first four decades of its existence – with few exceptions – the BES gave its financial support only to churches connected with the Congregational Union. However, as membership and support from the Methodists and Baptists increased, their churches also began to benefit from the support of the BES. The underlying understanding was that financial aid should correspond to the level of active support from the respective denomination (Sechanov 1925:26). Up until 1928, the money was sent directly to the local churches. After that time, the four denominations received support in proportion to their membership in the BES and passed it on to local churches in need.

During the first three decades of the 20th century, the BES also supported evangelistic and revival campaigns throughout the country, giving financial aid to travelling preachers from all denominations, without respect to the denomination of the churches organising these events (*Otchet* 1935:2).

After World War II, the interdenominational character of the BES became even more pronounced. About 10-15% of the members of each of the three oldest Evangelical denominations in Bulgaria (the Congregational Union, the Methodist Church and the Baptist Union) were either active members or donors to the BES. Only the Pentecostal movement was under-represented in comparison to its enormous growth in numbers over the previous decades. By that time, the board of BES was composed of members from all of the different denominations as well.

The annual meetings

Even though annual meetings were not mentioned in the constitution of the BES (except regarding their administrative function), they proved to be one of the most significant features of the Bulgarian Evangelical Society, if not the “fundamental” one (Tsanov 1909:42). The annual meetings were held for four days on the weekend after Easter in different places around Bulgaria. Especially during the first years, when the Evangelical movement mainly consisted of small communities widely scattered all over the country, these early nationwide Evangelical meetings were of great importance. The Bulgarian Evangelicals could meet each other and could see with their own eyes that the Bulgarian Evangelical movement was much bigger than their own small –and often harassed – local community seemed to indicate. This was a great encouragement for the still young Evangelical movement.

In addition to the necessary administrative meetings for the membership, the annual conference also included prayer meetings, lectures and presentations, as well as a Sunday morning worship service open to everyone. The evening events, with their apologetic, educational or biblical lectures on relevant topics, often drew hundreds of people. Apologetic lectures gave the Evangelical listener arguments and explanations useful for discussions with their Orthodox or secular neighbors. At a time when education was still the privilege of a minority, talks about child-raising, personal budgeting, biblical views of social issues or the relationship between science and the Bible were all of considerable interest to the public.

Since the BES followed the principle that the annual meeting would be held wherever it was invited, the conference often took place in more remote areas, instead of in the major cities. Especially for the smaller communities, this proved to be a big event and a significant encouragement, which was exactly the motivation behind this practice (Furnadzhiev 1915:1). After 1926, the annual meetings were deliberately alternated between a location in northern and southern Bulgaria, in order to reach more people.⁶ This

⁶ This is another proof of its strong interdenominational orientation, since in northern Bulgaria there were mostly Methodist churches, and in the south, mostly Congregational churches.

highlights additional goals of the annual meeting: public relations and evangelisation. More Evangelicals became familiar with the work of the Society by this means and hence more supporters and new members could be recruited.

The non-Evangelical population was also targeted during the annual meetings. The evening talks and special presentations with the “magic lantern” (the predecessor of the slide projector) were attractive to the general (mostly Orthodox) population, particularly in smaller towns. These were often the first real contact of non-Evangelical people with the Evangelical community. Prejudices and barriers between the two groups could then be broken down. For example, in the city of Burgas in 1912, several non-Evangelical visitors confessed their totally wrong idea of what Protestants might be (*Missionary Herald* 1912:327). Also, the necessity of the local community being called upon to host the visitors during the annual meetings was a way of bringing various parts of the population together. At the 50th anniversary in 1925, one of the speakers expressly mentioned the openness of “not a small number of Orthodox homes [...] that were ready to take [Evangelical guests] into their homes” (Sechanov 1925:23). It was a very special experience for all involved when, in 1947 in Hotantsa, a village with about 120 mostly Orthodox households and a small Evangelical community hosted around 400 guests from all over Bulgaria for four days (Kozhukharov 1947).

High level of involvement of pastors

In looking back at the development of the Bulgarian Evangelical Society, it is striking to note how many of the Evangelical pastors were involved in its activities. During the first decades, this was especially true of the Congregational pastors, but later it became true of pastors from the three other registered denominations as well. Since 1909, the Evangelical churches had been united under the umbrella of the “United Evangelical Churches” (in Bulgarian *OEC*), which functioned as the representative organ of the Evangelical movement to the government.⁷ The OEC’s representative to the government (always one of the leading pastors) was also a member of the board of the Bulgarian Evangelical Society and, frequently, its president.

In contrast to similar organisations in the West (Beyreuther 1960:239; Walls 1988:150-151), the leadership of the BES, in the form of the board of the BES, was firmly in the hands of pastors. With the exception of its founder, Tsanov, no other layperson ever had significant influence in directing the Society. This domination by pastors within the BES, as

⁷ In 1909 the OEC represented the Congregational Union, the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Baptist Union. The Pentecostal Union joined the OEC in the year 1932.

“spiritual experts”, was not really questioned by the membership. Frequently, the only layperson among the members of the board was the treasurer.

The important role of women within the BES

The BES was innovative, but perhaps not revolutionary, in its involvement of women. During the first decades of the BES's existence, Evangelical women were distinguished in society by their high level of literacy, something that was particularly noticeable in the rural areas. In contrast to the lack of available role models for women in Bulgarian politics, or even in the foreign-led mission organisations working in Bulgaria at that time, from the beginning the BES was open to female members, who had the same right to vote as the male members.⁸ The constitution also allowed women to be elected to the board or to other positions within the Society. However, this remained only a theoretical possibility until after World War I. Before that, only one woman, Bogdana Iv. Kasyrova, served in the administration of the BES for several years, during the period 1898-1909, working in roles such as financial auditor. By the 1920s, more women had begun to take on official positions within the Society, for example as a member of the literature committee. In 1947, the first woman, Pavlina Nikova, was elected as a member of the board. In its slow progress towards including women in public offices, the BES was in line with Bulgarian society as a whole.

Despite their lack of formal leadership roles, there were a large number of women among the members and donors during the whole history of the BES, suggesting that Evangelical women themselves approved of and identified with the goals of the Society. Their engagement increased from 20% of the membership during the first two decades of its existence to 40% after World War I, highlighting the important role women played in the financial support of the Society. This is particularly astonishing when one takes into account the fact that membership in the BES required a financial commitment and that most women at that time were completely financially dependent on their husbands. The willingness of women to support the BES in whatever way they could can be clearly seen in the lists of donations to the Society, which show that during the first 50 years of its existence, up to 70% of the different donations were made by women, often in the form of handmade goods that were sold to the benefit of the BES at the annual meetings.

⁸ The constitution of the BES states explicitly that “members from both sexes are accepted” (*Ustav 1875*, § 6).

The significance of the BES for the Evangelical movement

Different people have attested to the major role the Bulgarian Evangelical Society played within the Evangelical movement in Bulgaria. On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Society, Tsanov (1925: 3) called the BES "one of the important forces of Bulgarian Protestantism". Some leading pastors of the BES called the Society not only the oldest, but also "the biggest and most significant Evangelical organization" in Bulgaria (Kulichev 1994:132). Missionaries shared this assessment: in the year 1908, the Evangelical community celebrated 50 years of Evangelical mission among Bulgarians. A whole evening of this seven-day celebration was devoted to the history and activities of the BES (*Missionary Herald* 1908:502).

This positive judgment was well founded, as my research has borne out: the BES was a remarkable initiative of a still very young and small Evangelical movement. The BES was accepted by a wide range of Evangelical believers, it had a long and fruitful existence, and the annual meetings played a significant role in promoting unity among Bulgarian Evangelicals. All in all the BES proved to be a significant factor in Bulgarian Evangelical history until its disbandment in 1948.

The BES as an early initiative of a young Evangelical movement

The initiators and founders of the Bulgarian Evangelical Society came from the first known group of Evangelicals in Bulgaria. In 1875, the founding year of the BES, the Evangelical movement in Bulgaria as a whole consisted of about 200 registered Evangelicals in a handful of organised churches (i.e. with ordained pastors), as well as a few smaller Evangelical communities without pastors. The founding of the BES by nationals suggests that there was a high level of spiritual maturity in the young movement, as they were not dependent on the "rich, experienced and enabled" foreign missionaries. Tsanov (1925:8-9) noted that "we Bulgarians have to take initiatives and make sacrifices for this most-noble and enjoyable work and not only to wait for help from abroad". The American missionaries welcomed and supported this taking of ownership by the national believers.⁹

It is especially noteworthy that this Society was not the work of a small elite group of people (e.g. the graduates of the American schools), but, in fact, involved almost the whole early Evangelical movement. It had 132 members in 1876, but six years later in 1882, the membership of the BES had increased to over 200 people, plus about the same number of individual donors.

⁹ See, for example, the report about the founding and first annual meeting of the Bulgarian Evangelical Society in the *Missionary Herald* 1876, 259-260.

The founders of the BES showed a willingness to take risks for God's work when they founded the Society in a time of political and social turmoil, rather than waiting for "a better time". The looming uprising against the Ottoman rule, which was occurring around the time of the first annual meeting in 1876, didn't keep 27 members of the BES (some with their families) from attending the meeting as planned in Samokov (*Missionary Herald* 1876:259). Neither the retaliation measures instituted by the Ottoman Empire nor the subsequent Russian-Turkish War (1877-78) on Bulgarian territory hindered most of the activities of the BES; neither did they prevent the development of the Society as a whole, nor the further engagement of the members.

The wide acceptance of the BES within the Evangelical movement

As already mentioned, during most of its history, the BES was supported by a wide range of Evangelicals. During its peak years after World War I, about 30% of Bulgarian Evangelicals were engaged in supporting the work of the Society. Twenty-five years later, after the scandal in 1932 and yet another war, there were still more than 10% of the now much larger Evangelical movement actively supporting the BES as members. Hardly any other Evangelical organisation could boast such a strong level of support.

The increasing acceptance of the Bulgarian Evangelical Society among the existing denominations, as well as the important involvement of women in the BES, has already been described. Even though we do not have much detail regarding the membership, it has been testified that "old and young, women and men, rich and poor" were engaged in the activities of the BES (Sechanov 1925:22). The few details about the members and donors that we find in the annual lists support this statement. Often the names of whole families (including children) are listed, as well as students from the Evangelical schools. The lists also include people both with and without formal education, as well as residents of the bigger towns and smallest villages. So it seems that in this respect the Bulgarian Evangelical Society was truly an organisation for all Bulgarian Evangelicals.

The long-term existence of the BES

Another indicator of its importance is the long-term role played by the Bulgarian Evangelical Society in the history of the Bulgarian Evangelical movement. According to Gavrilova and Elenkov (1989:24), most of the voluntary Bulgarian societies that were founded before the independence of the Bulgarian state didn't last very long. After an enthusiastic beginning, very often discouragement and decline of support followed. However, the BES

continued to exist for over 70 years, including many years of war. This suggests that it was able to convince several generations of believers of the importance and relevance of the Society. It is of particular interest that after the difficult years during the 1930s and before and after World War II, the numbers of supporters of the BES again increased significantly and key positions on the board of the BES were occupied by people in their early 40s, showing the ongoing support the BES had within the Evangelical community. Unfortunately, this new flourishing of the Society was suddenly halted by the Communist regime. The dissolution of the Society was therefore not a result of failure due to lack of unity or financial support, but due to external factors beyond its control.

The efforts towards unity among Evangelical Christians

The efforts of the BES and, especially, its annual meetings provided a steady impetus towards unity among Evangelical believers. The BES contributed to this unity by introducing and promoting the interdenominational principle, even before the division of Bulgarian Evangelical churches into denominations became fixed. In so doing, the Society countered the unfortunate tendency of Protestants towards ever greater division. The BES was an ongoing example and reminder to the Evangelicals to focus on what they held in common and not on theological and practical differences. As might be expected, this didn't work perfectly throughout its history, but it is still remarkable that other than the discussions about liberal theology, no theological discussions had a visible impact on the Society.

It is especially in the work of the board of the Society, as well as its different work groups, that we see cooperation among believers from different traditions made concrete. Many of the reports and memoirs of participants with respect to the annual meetings (with the exception of the difficult years before and after the scandal in 1932) show a real joy and excitement about the contacts made between believers from different backgrounds and the feeling of unity among all present. All of this had a positive influence on the pastors as well as the laity.

At the annual meeting in Varna in 1915, two churches proposed to the membership of the BES that the Society work towards a unification of the Evangelical churches into one united Evangelical church in Bulgaria. This vision was adopted by the Society and promoted during the following years in the American mission organisations, as well as among the churches (*Otchet* 1916:11; *Otchet* 1929:19). In the 1925 version of its constitution, the BES even added as a goal that the Society would "work towards a unification of the Bulgarian Evangelical movement" (*Ustav* 1925:§ 2). In 1928, the two main denominations (the Congregational Union and the Methodist Church) began official negotiations to this end by setting up a committee to work

towards that vision. Although from this point on, the BES – as an organisation – was not involved in the negotiations, the Society continued to report on the progress of the committee and to support the idea whenever it could. Unfortunately, because of the actions taken against the Evangelical movement by the Communist regime, among other reasons, the unification was never finalised.

Summary

We have seen that the Bulgarian Evangelical Society reflected a high level of maturity and devotion to the cause of evangelism in the first generation of Bulgarian Evangelical Christians. The history of the BES exemplifies the fruit that an interdenominational organisation is able to bear, its opportunities as well as its challenges.

The Bulgarian Evangelical Society is an example of how, even in difficult circumstances and uncertain times, a small but mature group of believers can, by a concerted effort, make a significant contribution to the spreading of the gospel.

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