

## **Constructing New Spirituality in Modernity – the Case of the White Brotherhood in Bulgaria**

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The article is dedicated to a unique Bulgarian case of new spirituality or new religiousness, developed within the discourse of formation of a new Bulgarian nation in the beginning of the XX century. The structure of spiritual leader – worldview – community of followers is examined as specific spiritual culture aimed at facing the challenges of the modern world for the human of the XX–XXI century.

**Key words:** new religiousness, spiritual teacher, modernity, spiritual culture

The emergence of new religious movements at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century marks a significant transformation in both religious as well as social spheres of Europe (and the world). They could be viewed, in this context, as “efforts by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture” (Wallace 1956: 265).

The White Brotherhood, created by the spiritual teacher Petăr Dănov in early XX century, is a unique Bulgarian movement in the sphere of new religiousness/spirituality. Having emerged during a period dominated by the construction of a new Bulgarian nation (beginning of XIX century), it aims, first and foremost, at the “raising” (in Petăr Dănov’s words) of the Bulgarians through development of a specific religious culture. The ideas of Petăr Dănov, who graduated in the USA, are an embodiment of the new universal trends in this field.

The movement appears relevant not only during the period of its establishment, but also during the period of postmodernity, which saw Petăr Dănov voted as the second “The Greatest Bulgarian”<sup>1</sup> in Bulgarian history. Moreover, the movement attracts followers worldwide (in France, Russia, Germany, Poland, USA, etc.).

In the present article I will pay attention to some key points in relation to the three main elements, which, in our point of view, construct the phenomenon of the new religiousness – the spiritual leader, the spiritual system/worldview (established by him) and the community of followers. Having achieved this aim, I will try to outline some conclusions concerning the essence of the phenomenon and the necessity for existence of the new spiritual movements.

### **The Figure of Petăr Dănov (Beinsa Duno)**

The image of Petăr Dănov appears to be mythologized to a great extent by his followers. For them the stressed accent is not on the human Petăr Dănov or on his secular biography, but on the spiritual master known under the mystic name Beinsa Duno.<sup>2</sup> For this reason I will examine his biography from two points of view – secular and mystic.

#### **Secular Biography**

Petăr Konstantinov Dănov<sup>3</sup> (1864 – 1944) is born in the village of Hadarcha, today – Nikolaevka in Northeast Bulgaria. He receives his education in the Methodist scientific-theological gymnasium in the town of Svishtov, later in the Methodist Seminary Drew, in Madison, USA, and in the Faculty of Theology, University of Boston. After finishing the theological course, Petăr Dănov transfers to the Faculty of Medicine in the same university in order to complete a one year specialized course for missionaries. Having received a certificate for participating in this course in 1884, Petăr Dănov interrupts his study, for reasons still unknown, and returns to Bulgaria.

According to the biographies of Petăr Dănov, having returned to Bulgaria, he decides to fulfil his duty to Methodism and becomes a preacher at the Methodist church in Yambol. However, his attempt to apply some of his new ideas runs up against the unwillingness of the leaders of the local church to change. As a result, he withdraws and begins (in 1900) his phrenological and psychological research into Bulgarians, in parallel with his preaching. These investigations continue for 11 years. During this period he establishes the first organization of followers known as “The Network”.

1904 he moves to Sofia and takes up residence in the house of one of his followers. Here, when not travelling around the country, he delivers his Sunday lectures, which are the beginning of his organized activity.

1914 Petăr Dănov declares the start of the new era of Aquarius and lays the foundations of his first organized lectures. The school of the White Brotherhood is officially opened in 1922 and the lectures continue weekly until 1944.

Of particular importance for Petăr Dănov's activity is the establishment of a settlement known as "Izgreve" (in Bulgarian, meaning Sunrise) near Sofia where he lives with his followers until his death. It is seen as a realization of the idea of brotherly life. From the 1930s on the ideas of the White Brotherhood start spreading around the world and their message is carried by followers, which leads to the transnational distribution of the movement. Finally, on 27 December, 1944 Petăr Dănov's time on earth comes to an end.

### Mystic Biography

On the other hand and with much higher importance for the followers of the White Brotherhood, is the figure of the spiritual teacher Beinsa Duno. The first elements of mysticism in Petăr Dănov's biography appear from the very beginning with his birth which, according to his biographers, was linked to divine intervention and signs of being chosen by God. This is a traditional motive in a number of biographies of saints or so called "religious experts" – prophets, clairvoyants (see for example Vălchinova 2006) or founders of religious movements. It is the category of the so-called "special" people, traditionally defined as mediators (intermediaries) or messiahs (personifications of god) who establish contact between the profane and the sacral. Their life is marked by a series of miraculous events, which are seen to prove their special position and guarantee their ability to communicate with the supernatural world.

The childhood of Petăr Dănov is also described in an almost fairy-tale-like or legendary manner. He possesses unusual characteristics: his health is delicate; he doesn't speak until the age of three, or according to other sources, the age of six. He is a clairvoyant who predicts that his sister's forced marriage would fail, warns villagers

of an approaching storm, etc. His most mystic life period could be described by the following important key points:

**Initiation** – this is a central moment of Petăr Dănov’s life described personally by him. He uses the term “implantation” (of the Holy Spirit) to describe the process of establishing his connection with the divine and by which the man Petăr Dănov transforms into the spiritual Master Beinsa Duno. The initiation proceeds in three phases over a relatively long period.

**Legitimation** – or the conversations with God. The initiation of Petăr Dănov finds legitimation in an interesting document – his personal notebook (Dănov 1999). We are able to distinguish a few symbolic categories in this document: conversations with God by means of which a message is transmitted; the passage through a test; signs and visions. In the part of the notebook carrying the intrigue title “Seven Conversations with God’s Spirit”, there is described the test he needs to pass in relation to the mission of transmitting the teachings of God to the world. In order to be able to do this, Petăr Dănov needs to be born from God and to receive an initiation.

**Mythologization** – as mentioned before, the image of the spiritual teacher Beinsa Duno is mythologized to a great extent. The myth of Dănov displaces his secular biography to such an extent that such logical questions as: What did Petăr Dănov do for a living? Who was his mother? Etc. either do not arise or else remain unanswered amongst his adepts.<sup>4</sup> Undoubtedly this situation is the result of Petăr Dănov’s charisma which makes such “profane questions” meaningless (compare Weber 1922).

Among the community of followers are numerous stories of miracles and healings performed by him, which define him not only as a spiritual leader, but also as a magician and a prophet (following Weber’s terminology). These charismatic qualities provide a motivation for many to become his followers: Petăr Dănov personally accepts numerous visitors who are drawn to him by the stories of his abilities and provides answers to questions about people who have gone missing during the wars (a typical function of clairvoyants) as well as questions connected to health and other problems.

### **The teaching of the White Brotherhood**

Petăr Dănov (The Master), as already mentioned, arrives in Bulgaria from the USA having experienced a world very different from the one he returns to. Even today (when globalization has, to a large extent, unified the world), visits to the USA are very often referred to as a “cultural shock”, so one can imagine how great the contrast was in Dănov’s time. Petăr Dănov sets himself other goals, influenced not only by the triumphant march of science and the variety of spiritual teachings in the 20th century, but also by both the Bulgarian reality and the spirit of Protestantism which undoubtedly determines to a large extent the concrete, practical purpose of his teaching.

Petăr Dănov defined the spiritual system created by him as a teaching, calling it the New Teaching. It is declared divine, a Teaching of love, one that shows humanity a new path, and which is equivalent to the teachings of Christ. Petăr Dănov focuses precisely on the term teaching, distinguishing it from religion: “I do not give you religion but a teaching about life”; “I do not profess any religion, but I talk about the good life. My science is about the life that people lost.” (Dochev 1998: 11) Here, apart from teaching, science is talked of – Dănov supports the ideas of the age as an essential link between religion and science.

Another important term for this spiritual system is school (and namely spiritual school), where practical knowledge about the spiritual world is taught: “One of the qualities of the Great School of Life – the School of the White Brotherhood or the so called Divine School – is this: it sets out everything based on experience” (Konstantinov 2005: 46). In other words, the practical background, applied in all elements of everyday life, defines the spiritual system created by Petăr Dănov as a Teaching. A key principle of the Teaching is the practical applicability – i.e. theory and practice are inextricably linked (a detail less noticeably present in anthropology, which, along with individual improvement, is realized in a number of public fields, as will be seen later).

Dănov offers a “purification” of its misunderstood elements, which have become embedded over the centuries. Here the focus is directed towards the “esoteric” Christianity (the terms occult and esoteric

are considered as synonyms in the Teaching) and the idea of the coming of Christ in a non-material form, as an “inner light in the minds and hearts of men”.

Another important element is the introduction of a divine archetype – the so-called Universal White Brotherhood. According to members of the White Brotherhood, it guides world culture in its entirety, and has existed since the creation of the universe. It is a community of beings who have accomplished their earthly evolution, and become teachers of humanity; their leader is Christ. The Universal Brotherhood has appeared throughout the course of human history in the so-called occult schools that existed before the birth of Christ.

According to Petăr Dănov the Teaching unites the whole wisdom of humanity: “I want you to study the teaching of the White Brotherhood. You will find it scattered throughout occultism, in Theosophy, in Christianity, everywhere you will find it” (Daskalova 1996: 181). The Teaching suggests that all geniuses, great teachers and artists are its representatives, i.e. culture in its entirety is a product of its work and created under its inspiration. It is also regarded in the same sense. Its ideas are defined by the community as the “Word”, with a divine character, and transmitted by the figure of the Master along a divine – earthly chain, i.e. inspired by the spiritual world.

On the one hand, the Teaching of Petăr Dănov develops in the context of Protestantism, and on the other, in the context of new spirituality/new religious movements, which attracts more and more followers during the period which Petăr Dănov spent in the USA. In his methodology he can be seen to use some obvious influences from Protestantism (particularly from Methodism) such as missionary practice as well as sermons called talks/lectures. Another obvious analogue can be drawn between the fundamental principle of Methodism – the practical implementation of Christian duties (Slavkova 2007: 48), and the pragmatism of Petăr Dănov’s Teaching.

The connections between the Teaching and esotericism are also very strong. They are visible in a number of ideas, terms, and practices. During the period spent by Petăr Dănov in the USA, public attention turns towards theosophy, spiritualism<sup>5</sup> and new spiritual movements. In this way, the Teaching of Petăr Dănov is especially

topical for the period in which it appears, introducing new elements into the Bulgarian spiritual sphere.

Summarising, we could describe Petăr Dănov's system as consistent with the spirit of the modern times. It seeks to renovate and modernize the religiosity/spirituality of the Bulgarians<sup>6</sup> and the Man as a whole. In this connection, the Teaching offers ideas of all kinds, including solutions for seemingly small, everyday problems (but extremely important in the context of the so-called "cultural nations"). It differs from other forms of official religion and alternative religiosity that were known in the Bulgarian sphere. As a new phenomenon, it involves confrontation between old-new (tradition-modernity), offering a new spiritual system – a new vision of the world, a reinterpretation of traditional Christian models, combined with Eastern ideas, in synchrony with developments taking place in the European cultural sphere at the time. In this way, the Teaching of Petăr Dănov can be defined as a specific religious-cultural system which attempts to answer new questions about Man himself (first and foremost about the Bulgarians) as well as about the surrounding (modern) world. Placing Man at the centre of his universe (recreated using the symbol of Pentagram – a model of human development and improvement), the Teaching defines its goal as the creation of the "new Man", the Man of the new culture and the new world who will possess a new way of thinking, culture, social role, etc. Transforming Man, the Teaching aims to change the world through the establishment of a new society, built on the basis of the idea of brotherhood between people.<sup>7</sup>

### **The community of the White Brotherhood**

The community – *dunovisty* (etic term), White Brotherhood (emic) – formed around Petăr Dănov constructs the spiritual school created by him. It is the social environment, the micro-society where the concepts of the spiritual teacher are being applied.

According to the followers the White Brotherhood (WB), it is a mundane realization of the "spiritual community" of the Universal White Brotherhood, which is conceived as "permanently existing in the spiritual world." Idea of such otherworldly community – a

heavenly archetype is very strong among the White Brotherhood. Thus, for the followers, the WB exists on several levels:

- \* Heavenly archetype (Universal WB);
- \* Spiritual community (the spiritual network of WB);
- \* “Mundane” unification of the community during the meetings on certain occasions (WB).

The structure of the community during the life of its founder is built on the basis of the separation of the followers into different classes (according to the categories of lectures which they are allowed to participate in). They outline a scheme traditional for a religious/spiritual community, reflecting the levels of initiation (from neophytes to the core of the dedicated):



*Figure 1. The Summer Spiritual Camp of the White Brotherhood.  
Rila Mountain, Bulgaria. Photo by Svetoslava Toncheva.*



*Figure 2. Sunrise at the Peak of Prayers, Rila Mountain.  
Photo by Svetoslava Toncheva.*

1. public/external circle;
2. intermediate level/middle circle;
3. central circle.

Petăr Dănov himself classifies the path of followers, whom he defines as **listeners**, **catechumens** and **students** (in modern times such levels do not exist because of a lack of authority to define them).

The specifics of the community – its consolidation and communal life during Petăr Dănov’s lifetime (in the Izgrev settlement) create conditions for a **living and practical spiritual school**. The whole life is seen by the followers of Petăr Dănov as work in a spiritual school – an idea applied today on individual level is seen as work with Dănov’s lectures or on one’s own self. The “Sunrise” settlement is an attempt for practical and social application of the ideas of the

Master in the life of a micro-society, creating traditions, many of which are still alive today.

The tradition of communal life from the period of existence of the “Sunrise” is the reason for the importance of a society (as a community) or social interaction nowadays. Even in the paneurythmy<sup>8</sup> (Duno 1938: 69) which is group practice, the importance of the community is visible – the symbol of the circle and the play in couples are important there.

The main spaces for group practices are the periodic meetings of the community (at least of part of it) – the so called assemblies. They are local (in the towns of Arbanassi, Ruse Karnobat, Pernik, etc.), hosted by local groups, culmination of which in the spiritual Summer School – the assembly at the Seven Rila lakes. These allow for the continuation of common practices like group prayers, meeting the sun, playing paneurythmy, common (brotherly) lunches, singing songs, lectures, concerts. This most visible shared space of the



*Figure 3. Paneurythmy. Seven Rila Lakes.  
Photo by Svetoslava Toncheva.*



*Figure 4. The Circle of the Paneurythmy above the Lake “Purity”.  
Photo by Svetoslava Toncheva.*

followers of the WB is transnational – at Rila assembly adherents come from various national groups, which leads to interactions between them.

On other side stands the work of followers at an **individual level** – significant today, when, in spite of the continuation of the tradition, the community is not consolidated. This application is in synchrony with the principle, laid in the new spiritual movements – taking responsibility for one’s own spiritual development or the “privatization” of the religion/the religious (Berger 1967, Luckmann 1967). For this purpose, there are a number of adequate methods, left by Petăr Dănov – various exercises for meditation and establishment

of connection with the spiritual world, affecting by doing so physical and mental health, songs, prayers, etc.

Generally, the collective activities within the community are considered more significant – a result of Petăr Dănov's ideas and the real experiences for their implementation in the "Izgreve" settlement. The idea of a communal way of life is not foreign during the period of the construction of "Izgreve" – in Bulgaria there are communes of followers of Tolstoy, alternative followers of Petăr Dănov outside the WB (temporary communes in Arbanassi, Karnobat – see Slavov 2010: 117), as well as attempts by anarchists and communists to create communes – all of these have short period of existence. The settlement of the followers of Petăr Dănov is particularly sustainable precisely because of his authority – whether it would still exist today if it had not been destroyed by the socialist government, remains an interesting question. Commune ideas continue to inspire



*Figure 5. Lecture in astrology at the Seven Rila Lakes.  
Photo by Svetoslava Toncheva.*

the followers until today, but, however, second “Izgrevev” does not appear. This desire manifests itself in the great significance of the organized assemblies (especially at Rila mountain) as a kind of application of the community life.<sup>9</sup>

\* \* \*

Not taking into consideration the specific national context which also determines the appearance of the spiritual movement of Petăr Dănov, we could conclude that it is part of the world’s spiritual tendencies of modernity and postmodernity. Scientific progress and the withdrawal of religion are preconditions for new challenges, which the modern man is meant to face. Such challenges include disorientation, new public roles, necessity for a new worldview (way of thinking), adequate for the new cultural situation. The new spirituality (or the new religious movements) claims to be able to fulfil this niche, or the vacuum between strive and reality (see Bruce 1995). The movement of Petăr Dănov is, in this context, a successful one judging by the number of its followers and its vitality (it is still current today and attracts new adherents). It offers a worldview corresponding to the new world tendencies in the period of its establishment (as well as today) and manages to create a community, which shares the postulated ideas. This is possible, however, due to the figure of its creator, whom we could describe as a new spiritual teacher – a figure, as we already saw, combining traditional qualities like charisma (Weber 1922) with very good modern education (Gellner 1983). For the community of his followers, these are attractive characteristics, which support the formation of a peculiar spiritual culture and specific mentality.

Finally, taking into consideration the three elements – spiritual teacher, worldview (philosophy) and community of followers we could go deeper into the research of the phenomenon I discuss here, referred to as spiritual culture.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> “The Greatest Bulgarians” was a campaign of the Bulgarian National Television (licensed by BBC). It took place from June 9, 2006 to the end of

February 2007. To the surprise of many Petăr Dănov was ranked second after the national revolutionary hero Vasil Levski (Biblioteka “Triägälnik”).

<sup>2</sup> Beinsa Duno is the name that Petăr Dănov receives after his initiation as a spiritual master or the so called inoculation (*vselyavane*). The etymology of the name is controversial. Some believe that it has roots in Sanskrit and means “One who brings the good word”. According to other interpretations, it comes from a language called “vatanski” which, according to Petăr Dănov, is the original language of mankind. The theologian Svetoslav Ivanov believes that Beinsa Duno is an occult name that reflects the spiritual and the creative interaction between God, Master Petăr Dănov and his disciples in their collaboration over text, music and Paneurhythmy (<http://triangle.bg/books/1935-09-22-10.1998/1936-01-19-10.html>; Radev 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Biographies of Petar Dănov are available only in Bulgarian. See: Georgiev 2005, Konstantinov ja Boev 2005, Krалеva 2001, Slavov 1998, Slavov 2010, Khristov 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Only in recent years do we see attempts being made to reconstruct Petăr Dănov’s real biography – see Khristov 2012.

<sup>5</sup> The Teosophical Society is founded in New York in 1875 by Helena Blavatsky (traveler, philosopher, writer, occultist and spiritualist), lieutenant colonel H. S. Olcott and the lawyer W. Q. Judge. The society aims: to form a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste, or colour; to encourage the study of Comparative Religion, Philosophy, and Science; to investigate the unexplained laws of Nature and the powers latent in man. H. Blavatsky is an author of “Isis Unveiled” (1877) and “The Secret Doctrine” (1888). Reactions towards her, as well as towards her works, are, even today, controversial (ranging from admiration in some to an evaluation by others that she is a charlatan and her books “trash”).

<sup>6</sup> The Modern Spiritualist movement dates from 1848 when the Fox sisters of Hydesville, New York produced knocking sounds that were alleged to be messages from a spirit. Spiritualists claim to be able to communicate with the spirits of the dead.

<sup>7</sup> More about these ideas see in Krasztev & Kerenyi 2001.

<sup>8</sup> Here I don’t mention the messianic ideas of Petăr Dănov in relation to the future of the Slavic nation. Concerning these ideas see more in Heinzl 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Paneurhythmy is a complex of dance moves performed at dawn, in the nature and accompanied by music in the period between March 22–September 22. It contains the basis of the spiritual system of Petăr Dănov.

Paneurythmy contains a number of semantic levels associated with the various movements. Etymologically it means “supreme cosmic rhythm or movement of universal harmony”. The aim of Paneurythmy is to recover the missing connection to nature and the harmonization of the universal life. See more about Paneurythmy in Duno 1938.

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