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## **Out of the New Spirituality of the Twentieth Century**

The Dawn of Anthroposophy,  
the White Brotherhood  
and the Unified Teaching

Svetoslava Toncheva

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# Preface

Religion is a phenomenon which has accompanied Man since the dawn of his historical development – from the so-called ‘elementary forms’ of religious life to the complex and diverse forms in which it exists today in postmodernity.

During the process of secularization, the religious sphere undergoes major transformations, one of which is the emergence of *new spiritual/religious movements*, which in turn change the global religious landscape. Not surprisingly, these changes awaken an interest among researchers from various scientific disciplines such as psychology, sociology, theology, history of religions, anthropology, ethnology and folklore, each of which examines them in their own perspective and methodology. Apart from being of purely scientific interest, spirituality and mysticism continue to intrigue the imagination of Man, as they reveal a sphere that transcends the rational world and its pragmatic life.

In science, the term new religious movements implies ‘various organizations (...) that offer an answer to fundamental questions of religious, spiritual or philosophical nature’ (BARKER 1997). Despite the broadly discussed theory that the significance of religion has decreased considerably, the number of new religious movements during the 19<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> century is impressive. This phenomenon is mainly due to the ‘opening up’ of the world, and the migrations and arrival of many foreign (to local traditions) religious-philosophical systems. Of great interest are those new religious movements that have been *founded on native (European) soil*, and which are consistent with the cultural, social and national requirements of the epoch and the environment in which they emerge. Such are the three movements which are the object of research in the present work – the anthroposophy of Rudolf Steiner, the Teaching of Petăr Dănov and the Unified Teaching of Zor Aleph.

*Anthroposophy* is a movement created by Rudolf Steiner at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the German cultural sphere (Germany, Switzerland, Austria), and which has influenced numerous social niches (pedagogics, medicine, pharmacy, agriculture etc.).

The movement created by Petăr Dănov, also at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and known as the *Teaching of the White Brotherhood*, is a uniquely Bulgarian movement, whose basic aim is the transformation of the person.

*The Unified Teaching of Zor Aleph* (whose secular name is Anatolii Rudenko), is a contemporary spiritual movement that has arisen at the transition

from the 20<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> century, and which has developed into a transnational spiritual school with followers in Russia and Bulgaria, as well as in a number of other European and Asian countries.

All three new religious movements (NRM) are relatively unexplored by the Bulgarian scientific community, since the examination of new religiousness is still neglected and only now coming into focus. On the other hand, the public's attention towards it has become significant in recent years. Indeed, Petăr Dănov was voted into second place by the Bulgarian public during a national poll to find the 'Greatest Bulgarians' (a poll organized in 2006–2007 on the model of the BBC), provoking the Bulgarian Orthodox Church to declare him an antichrist (in the year 2011)<sup>1</sup>. Similar processes are observed in relation to the anthroposophical movement. On the one hand, events to mark the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Rudolf Steiner enjoyed official government support and public attention in Austria, Germany and Switzerland<sup>2</sup>, on the other hand, the movement is still the subject of endless criticism. Without any doubt, the great public interest in new religious movements requires appropriate scientific attention, and a comparative study developed within a European perspective is highly topical during the current period of constructing a united Europe.

The basis of the present book is the thesis 'New Religious Movements in Europe – National and Transnational Contexts'<sup>3</sup>, which examines the three movements in the context of the dyad national-transnational. Under *national context* we understand the cultural, social and national specificities, in which the different movements are established and developed.

In *Germany (Switzerland and Austria)*, anthroposophy developed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a period of great social and cultural transformations characterized by the rapid development of science and emergence of many social movements.

In *Bulgaria*, the Teaching of Petăr Dănov also developed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a period coinciding with the building of modern nation state and attempts at industrialization. Such a process required the construction of a new national paradigm, including shared mythology, symbols, signs, etc.

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1 Four more about these processes see Chapter Four.

2 The significance of this process is presented in Chapter Three.

3 Written in the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences in 2011.

In *Russia* (and almost in parallel within *Bulgaria*), the Unified Teaching developed in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, a period which witnessed the collapse of socialism and its ideology, and a reorientation and search for a new system of values to fill the resulting ideological vacuum.

The *transnational context*, on the other hand, refers primarily to the potential and the nature of these movements, which, as spiritual systems, are aimed at everyone and are universally applicable, and secondly to the community of followers that exist as transnational networks.

## Aims, objectives and chronology

The aim of the present research is to present these three new spiritual movements, and to explore their meaning as well as their national and transnational specifics within the European cultural sphere. This involves a number of fundamental prerequisites. Firstly, a description and analysis of the leader of the new religious movements, i.e. the **spiritual teacher**, and his place within the social sphere, including answers to questions about his perception as a spiritual leader, as well as the means by which this specific image was created. Secondly, an examination of the **world view** constructed by these teachings, as a specific spiritual system and its functions and meaning for the life of its adepts. And finally, research into the **community of followers** of the particular movements.

In the context of the study of new religious movements and namely the aims of this study, the research focuses on an analysis of the creators, the philosophical systems and the communities of followers of these three movements both in their national (Bulgarian) and transnational aspects.

To place the research within a specific context, the *chronological framework* of the study needs to be pointed out. It covers the period from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. The geographical scope of the study includes the communities of followers of the particular movements in three European countries – Bulgaria, Austria and Russia.



## Theoretical framework and methodology

The research of an unstudied phenomenon in a particular scientific tradition faces a number of difficulties – both methodological and theoretical. Above all, it is the lack of scientific research dedicated to specific communities, as well as the poor study of the problem as a whole.

The lack of knowledge of the phenomenon requires relatively greater descriptivism. This is required so that the problem is presented in its entirety. Such an attempt requires consideration of a wide range of issues – the historical context at the time of the development of the three movements (in three countries), the cultural and social trends and ideas during this period, and the factors for change within the religious sphere etc.

In this regard, this book draws on appropriate methods from the fields of anthropology (anthropology of religion), ethnology, folklore, sociology and cultural studies. This approach reflects the freedom of the contemporary researcher who seeks methods, models and theoretical frameworks from the ocean of the humanities and social sciences.

Various approaches have been used in the research: sociological theories (Бегер 1994, WEBER 1920; PARSONS 1993; GELLNER 1983); the ideas of functionalism (MALINOWSKI 2004; LAYTON 1997); structuralism (LÉVI-STRAUSS 1962), etc. I also try to present the image and the understanding of the *community for itself, the worldview and the spiritual teacher*. This approach is close to the so-called anthropology of experience (created by Victor Turner and his students – TURNER & BRUNER 1986), which aims at revealing how individuals experience in reality and interpret the concrete culture.

The theoretical framework of the work is based on the analytical literature of religion, religiousness, esotericism and new religious movements (such as New Age, Theosophy, and Eastern spiritual movements, as well as those classified as occult or esoteric).

Fundamental for this study was Emile Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (DURKHEIM 1912), as well as general theoretical developments from the anthropology of religion (ELLER 2007, ALDRIDGE 2003, MORRIS 1995), the sociology of religion (CHRISTIANO & SWATOS 2002; GABRIEL & REUTER 2004) and the theory of secularization (BERGER 1969; LUCKMANN 1991).

I have referred to the abundant literature dedicated to new religiousness and esotericism, concerning issues such as the nature, emergence and development

of this new form of religiosity, as well as to particular new religious movements: BOCHINGER 1994, POLAK 2002, PONISCH 2006, TROMPF & HANEGRAAFF 1995, SUTCLIFF & BOWMAN 2000, BARKER 1997, MARINOV 2011. Very important for this research were the ideas of the German scientists Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch concerning the role of the Protestantism for the formations of the modern world (Трѐолч & Вебер 2006). The significance of changes within the religious field for the cultural and the social outlook of the modern world, that Troeltsch and Weber presented, can be used in the case of new religious movements, especially anthroposophy, which undoubtedly influenced both the European and world cultural and social landscape.

There are few works dedicated to the individual movements. **Anthroposophy** is analysed in the Helmut Zander's book *Anthroposophie in Deutschland* (Anthroposophy in Germany – ZANDER 2007), which is mainly concerned with its history, and briefly by KUBERSKI (2010). Anthroposophy remains unstudied in the Bulgarian scientific sphere (apart from two articles, dedicated to anthroposophical mentality and eurhythmics – Тончева 2011).

The Teaching of Petăr Dănov is examined in an article by KRASZTEV & KERENYI (2001), which touches on fundamental questions about the essence of this phenomenon – the aspirations for modernization of the Bulgarian people and the creation of a new spirituality for a new nation, as well as in the article of Гражина Шват-Гълъбова (2010), an article by ATANASOVA (2001) concerning the social adaptation of the movement during 1940s to 1960s and my own master thesis (TONCHEVA 2008).

During recent years, the German scientific world has also shown an interest towards the movement. Two PhD theses in the field of the religious studies have been dedicated to it: *Die Weiße Bruderschaft des Peter Danov. Entstehung, Geschichte und Lehre* (KOVACHEVA 2011) and *Alternative Religiosität in Bulgarien und Griechenland der Zwischenkriegszeit am Beispiel der Weißen Bruderschaft und der Delphischen Idee* (HEINZEL, forthcoming). Within Bulgaria, dissertations have mainly been written in the field of pedagogics and concern Petăr Dănov's ideas about education.

The movement of the famous spiritual teacher, healer and magician Zor Aleph, which undergoes dynamic contemporary development, seems to attract greater interest in Bulgaria and Russia. It is covered in the articles of ANASTASOVA & SEDAКOVA (2010) and АНАСТАСОВА (2011), whilst the magical element in Zor Aleph's teaching (under his secular name Anatolii Rudenko) is mentioned in Димов & Пейчева 1993.

The lack of analytical literature is in strong contrast to the abundance of emic sources. The heritage of Rudolf Steiner is estimated at around 6000 lectures and significantly greater number of his own works. They are systematically arranged and published in 354 volumes of 'Collected Works' (Gesamtausgabe or GA). Also huge is the body of emic (anthroposophical) literature concerning all niches of anthroposophy – conceptual, historic, as well as that dedicated to different sub-streams of the movement: Waldorf Pedagogy, medicine, bio-dynamic farming, the Christian Community, etc.

Largest of all, however, is the amount of preserved lectures (talks) of Petăr Dănov – over 7000, not fully published. They are delivered in a specific way – in the form of shorthand records made by followers – a type of record in which only a certain percentage of content is transmitted (there are only three works written personally by Petăr Dănov<sup>4</sup>). Moreover, there is also a large number of preserved stories of followers, often highly mythologized, which present the vision of their authors about their meeting with Petăr Dănov. The transmission of this information – in the form of stories, tales and myths – has a *folkloric character*. Vast also is the amount of preserved archival material concerning the life of the community, including protocols, photos, and interviews with Dănov and others. These, along with the Dănov's personal diary, recreate his self-vision about the most mystical period of his life – his transformation into the spiritual teacher Beinsa Duno – and are essential for the construction of the image of the new spiritual master.

Considering his young age, Zor Aleph (born in 1976) is also a prolific author. So far he has published 12 volumes devoted to both the conceptual foundations of his teaching and the magical treatment methods.

A third type of source, standing as a foundation for this work, is **fieldwork**, on basis of which I have attempted to provide a new, more comprehensive look at each of the particular spiritual communities. They are based on several approaches – participant observation (of events organized by the community of followers) and monitoring participation (a qualitative method in the social sciences<sup>5</sup>), both accompanied by photographic and video documentation, as well as interviews (structured and informal – free conversations) and surveys.

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4 Дънов 1999, 2006, 2003/2007.

5 See more in Маринов 2006.

The fieldwork covers a relatively broad area:

- In Bulgaria: long term research into the White Brotherhood (in connection with my master's thesis) periodically from 2004/2005 until 2012 (of particular significance for this particular research was fieldwork undertaken at the Seven Rila Lakes in August 2010); investigations among followers of the Unified Teaching (in Sofia and Belogradchik, where their so-called initiations take place, etc.); research within the Anthroposophical Society (mainly in Stara Zagora, which is the centre of the anthroposophy in the country);
- In Austria: research into the Anthroposophical Society within the project '*Waldorf Pedagogy in Austria (The Educational System of Rudolf Steiner)*' undertaken between September 2010 and January 2011<sup>6</sup>; observation of some of the events dedicated to Rudolf Steiner's 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary in Vienna during May 2011<sup>7</sup>;
- In Russia: research into the Unified Teaching (in particular participation in the so-called Sacred Therapy<sup>8</sup>) in Moscow during May 2010<sup>9</sup>.

## Basic concepts

Here I should explain the sense in which I use some basic concepts. The research is performed within the logic constructed by the tetrad *world – spiritual teacher – teaching – community of followers*. The 'world' is used not only literally, but also figuratively as 'spirit' of the age (Zeitgeist) – i. e. the specific atmosphere of the particular era. The three movements do not occur at the same period, they have their temporal specificity. The first two – anthroposophy and the Teaching of Petăr Dănov refer to the modern period (the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the first half of

.....  
6 Thanks to the Austrian scholarship *Ernst Mach Stipendium (Austrian Federal Ministry of Science and Research)*. I would particularly like to express my gratitude to Prof. Klaus Rieser, Graz.

7 With special thanks to the organizers (and in particular Stephan Sieber) for their invitation and their support during my participation in the event. See more about these events in Chapter Three.

8 The essence of the phenomenon is described in Chapter Two. I am sincerely grateful to Zor Aleph and his father Alexander Rudenko for their help during my research into the Unified Teaching.

9 Within the project 'Russia and Bulgaria in Contemporary Linguistic and Social Discourse' (2009 – 2011). Leaders – Ekaterina Anastasova and Irina Sedakova, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences – Russian Academy of Sciences.

the 20<sup>th</sup> century), which was important for the development of European civilization. Zor Aleph's movement emerges much more recently, at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that is in postmodernity and in the post-socialist sphere. All three movements continue to the present day, enabling a comparative analysis.

In this historical context the triad *spiritual teacher – teaching – community of followers* forms a peculiar structure that I define as **spiritual culture**; in other words, a specific spiritual culture, existing within a micro society with its own mechanisms of existence. These three components: *personality* (creator) – *model of the world* (cultural system) – *individual/community* (realization of this cultural system) are interpreted as indivisible in the study, as none of them exists by itself. In the interrelations between them, the national and the transnational contexts in which the whole research is performed, are being formed.

The term **new religious movements** (NRMs) is used as a synonym for the terms **new spirituality** or **new spiritual movements** (NSMs), which are more frequently used in the German scientific sphere, and more rarely in the English. In the German scientific sphere the term spirituality (*Spiritualität*) refers both to Christian piety and mystical religious experience, as well as to new religious movements and different types of post-modern religiosity. The German school emphasizes the mystical and gnostic striving for unity and spiritual consciousness in NSMs (KÖRTNER 2006: 18). According to Bochsinger new spirituality has certain essential characteristics:

- It calls for direct, personal irrational experience;
- It reflects the entry of religion into the inner space of the human/ private sphere;
- It is a universal concept which erases the boundaries between religions, nations, cultures;
- It refers to God within the human;
- It denotes a step from faith to direct knowledge;
- It develops in parallel with the scientific perception of the world, a progress which it attempts to reflect (BOCHINGER 1994: 389).

These characteristics very accurately reflect the movements that are the focus of this work, and thus warrant use of the concept **new spirituality**, reflecting furthermore the free nature (the weak institutionalization) of these movements.

Basic concepts used in the course of the study are *spiritual teacher, initiated, evolution, mentality, supernatural, occult, sacred* and others. They point to one irrational sphere (a spiritual/extrasensory world), central to the religious con-

sciousness. Hence come the difficulties. As some researchers note: 'there can be no doubt that the content of the religious beliefs and experiences is out of the ordinary (...), which creates specific difficulties in understanding them. The resources of imagination and the insight that the neutral scientist must apply are much larger than in the description of other aspects of human life' (BYRNE 1991: 24).

Already here one could say that the main challenge for such a study is the maintenance of analytical distance and 'critical mind' in the face of the magical charm and mystique that unfold in front of the eyes of the researcher.



**Section One.**  
**Teachers and Teachings**





# Chapter One. Spiritual Leaders (Biography – between Reality and Mysticism)

To begin the process of research into new spirituality I will start by focusing our attention on the key figure responsible for the creation of similar movements – the *new spiritual teacher*. This is an object of interest for several reasons: firstly, the image of the teacher is *new* (although following some traditional ideas it has been created in modernity/postmodernity); it is an emanation of *dynamic changes* in the religious and the scientific fields from the 19<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> century, which are reflected both in his figure, as well as in the created spiritual system; and last but not least – it is a reflection of the idea of the image of this new teacher amongst the community of his followers.

I am going to look at the image of the teacher via the interaction of two elements – biography and religiousness/spirituality. Biography, in general, is a story of a lived/experienced life (NASSEHI 1995). Spirituality/religiousness, on the other hand, is a term, related to an irrational, sacral sphere, very important for the spiritual leader and his followers.

Here I should make several preliminary statements. The relation between religion/religiousness and biography is studied in the field of sociology in two major aspects, related to the functions of religion. The first one is connected to its ritual function, which is important in periods of passage and crisis for the individual (*lebensgeschichtlich-ordnende Funktion*), and the second one – to its reflexive function, as a motif and means for giving meaning to one's own personality (*Selbstthematisierung* – WOHRLAB-SAHR 1995). Here, apart from these two aspects, the relation between spirituality and biography will also be viewed as a communication between two dimensions – *real and mystical*. This relation we call *reflexive spirituality* (which has various nuances) – i. e. reflection of the idea of spirituality in the image of (biography) and self-image (autobiography) of the spiritual teacher<sup>10</sup>.

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10 We use a term introduced by the American researcher Wade Clark Roof (1999) – *reflexive spirituality*. In his opinion this is a popular form of individual religiousness in USA, a way of individual attitude towards religious symbols and practices in the attempt to find **personal sense in religion and introducing spiritual sense in one's private life**. Reflexive spirituality is related to mysticism, as a main method of performing contact with the transcendental.