

The identity of the Bulgarian Church of God: Prophecy in word and melody

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Abstract. This study examines the song heritage of the Bulgarian Church of God (BCG) from its foundation in 1928 until the political transformations of 1989, while also considering later processes to a limited extent, and focuses on the intersection of prophetic speech and musical expression as a key marker of community identity. The research reconstructs the largely vanished practices of BCG hymnody through eyewitness testimonies and oral histories, combining both *emic* (internal) and *etic* (external) perspectives within an ethnomusicological framework. It explores how BCG followers interpreted their songs as divine revelation rather than mere artistic composition, and how this perception functioned within broader processes of group cohesion, identity formation, and cultural resistance. Special attention is paid to the church's distancing from mainstream Western musical models in favour of a distinctly Bulgarian, folk-like sound, as well as to the later transformation of worship under the influence of globalized gospel music and popular styles after 1989. Not least, the analysis conceptualizes the BCG's hymnal practice as a specific form of *theology in melody* – an audible manifestation of faith that mediates between the personal and the collective, the traditional and the modern, the national and the universal. The findings suggest that while musical modes of expression have evolved within BCG, the prophetic function of creating songs as vehicles of divine inspiration and communal identity remains a defining feature of the movement.

Keywords: Bulgarian Church of God, Evangelism in Bulgaria, oral tradition, folk elements in worship

I. Theoretical approaches

This study examines the song heritage of the Bulgarian Church of God¹ (BCG), with a particular focus on the period from its establishment in 1928 to the social transformations of 1989 and on the factors that render its repertoire

¹ The Bulgarian Church of God is a distinct Protestant denomination within the Pentecostal movement in Bulgaria, whose religious practices are marked by a strong

a subject of scholarly interest. This, in turn, calls for the reconstruction of practices that have, to a considerable extent, already receded into the past. Understandably, immersive participation or participant observation is precluded; such a reconstruction must instead draw on the testimonies and narratives of remaining eyewitnesses. The inquiry explores not so much the musical substance of the songs (in terms of stylistic specificities) but rather their function within the congregation, namely their potential to *articulate the BCG identity*, since its distinctive and remarkably idiosyncratic hymnody was understood by its followers as an essential marker of belonging to the community. Such an approach naturally activates an analytical optic akin to that employed in ethnomusicology – that is, a view of music “*as culture and within culture*” (Nettl 1980, 1). The central research motivation is to address questions, such as: What kind of song culture did the hymnody of BCG represent? How did it function? And in what ways did congregants themselves interpret it as a key factor in articulating their collective identity?

This foregrounds the need to distinguish between the so-called *etic* (external-analytical) and *emic* (internal-descriptive) perspectives discussed by Kenneth Pike (see Pike 1967, 37). In the text, emphasis is predominantly placed on the *emic* position, i.e. on how participants in the community themselves viewed and interpreted the musical component of their worship in the context of *their own narrative self-representation*. At the same time, however, a dialogical counterpoint is sought in the *etic* gaze of the “objective” researcher – where “dialogue is not understood as a conversation aimed at reaching a single conclusion, but as the integration of *emic* and *etic* perspectives, an inclusion within the research optic of both the construction of an objective picture from the outside and the subjective views of the insiders” (Dimov 2020, 310).

A further caveat is warranted: certain descriptive concepts employed by BCG in its own narrative self-representation (though occasionally encountered in the discourse of folkloristics and ethnomusicology) are not anchored in any system of criteria or terminology within scholarly disciplines. Thus, in many cases, it will be necessary to comment on, and at times even problematize, their usage. Participants in the community saw their songs as **vehicles for articulating their spiritual identity**. Of interest, then, is the functionality of the song culture within BCG and how it was engendered. Put differently, the auto-narrative element – the community’s self-telling – emerges as a central mechanism in constructing their collective “we”. A few core motifs arise in this regard.

The BCG concept of folkness

The older, traditional songs of BCG bear features that distinguish them from the musical practices of other Evangelical communities in Bulgaria. The congregation is often described as a “unique, indigenous Bulgarian spiritual

emphasis on direct divine guidance through the Holy Spirit and by a locally inflected hymnody that sets it apart from other evangelical communities.

movement” (Ignatov 2006, 159), characterized by a distinctly national, or folk-like, sound. In the same vein is the testimony of Veniamin Peev, who recounts that the early congregants in BCG created songs drawing on Bulgarian melodic models, which bore a distinct folk-like character². Particularly telling in this respect is the tension between the song practices of BCG and its reception by other Evangelicals: BCG deliberately distanced itself from the Western hymn models widely adopted by other Protestant³ churches across the country. In this strategy of differentiation, one can discern the idea of “Bulgarian-ness” as a peculiar counterpoint to the “Western”, understood as non-Bulgarian – a dichotomy that may arguably be viewed as a form of religiously articulated nationalism. Such a perspective recalls the observations of American scholar Donna Buchanan, who reflects on the concepts of “folklore” and “folk music” in Bulgaria as expressions of nationalist motivations characteristic of the era (see Buchanan 2006, 36–37). In line with such sentiments (after the 1930s and in the following decades) was the gradual abandonment of the hymn collections used by other Evangelical denominations (largely based on Anglo-American or Western European models) in favour of songs created within BCG, which were believed to be prophetically revealed by the Holy Spirit and were often performed in states of ecstasy (see Ignatov 2006, 160). Their verbal content was frequently sharp in tone – either **condemnatory or militant-exhortative**. Such features perceptibly set them apart from the corpus of texts sung in other Evangelical communities, which tended towards a gentler, more lyrical and pastoral tone. BCG songs were also saturated with vernacular forms of address, such as “chado” (oh, my child), “chada moi” (oh, my children), “dusho moy” (oh, my soul), and similar forms of address – entirely absent from the vocabulary of other Evangelical communities.

They, for their part, tended to regard the folk-like character of BCG’s songs with a measure of condescension, occasionally expressed in pejorative remarks to followers of the community, for example, derisively saying “Ah, you with your old-fashioned harvest songs...”⁴. In fact, the rift between BCG and the other Evangelical churches in Bulgaria mirrored broader cultural dynamics typical of local societies in transition – on the one hand, centripetal, community-preserving tendencies that construct identity through adherence to inherited models; and on the other, centrifugal impulses seeking novelty, prestige, and affiliation with what was perceived as “the civilized world”.

In this sense, BCG songs (and the aesthetic orientations underpinning them) may be seen as embodying a specific form of *folklorism* – a conscious engagement with folklore-related elements, albeit on the part of individuals already living

² Author’s interview with Veniamin Peev, 14 October 2021 (Veniamin Peev is a theologian as well as a former pastor in the Evangelical Pentecostal Church).

³ The terms “Evangelical” and “Protestant” are used interchangeably within this study although on theological grounds some fine distinctions and specifications could be made.

⁴ Author’s interview with Pavel Ignatov, Sofia, 16 February 2023 (Pavel Ignatov is the third successive and honorary bishop of the Bulgarian Church of God).

outside premodern rural traditions. This reflects a deliberate striving for an inherently original Bulgarian-ness, expressed through a rejection of Western hymn prototypes and related practices. Thus, within Bulgarian Evangelicalism as a whole, the position of BCG projects the existence of two socio-cultural orientations – roughly speaking, a pro-Western versus an “anti-Western” position (with all the caveats such conditional descriptions entail) – with BCG representing the latter through the “pro-Bulgarian” stance. Further, the idea of a “true”, “original”, and “authentically Bulgarian essence” intertwines in a highly peculiar way with the notion of a living connection with the Holy Spirit, under whose inspiration the songs themselves were believed to have been given to the BCG believers.

The *etic* counterpoint

Viewed through a critical-analytical lens, the *emic* notion of BCG – namely, its distinctively Bulgarian folk-like mode of singing – invites qualification. Terms such as “folklore”, “folkness”, and “folk music” have been the subject of terminological debate for decades. From an *etic* perspective, seeking objectivity through established scholarly criteria, the thesis of a specifically Bulgarian, folk-based song practice reveals certain vulnerabilities. Yet, its very existence is of considerable significance, since it constitutes the self-narrated *emic* stance of the community. At certain points, I tend to validate this self-representation; at others, I call it into question – the narrative oscillates between these opposing perspectives.

To begin with, not all songs within BCG can be neatly subsumed under the rubric of Bulgarian or folk-style singing. The congregation’s hymnody exhibits a range of stylistic currents that disclose various regional and cultural influences. Furthermore, an interesting trend can be observed: whereas in the earlier stages of the community’s development – the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s – the “folk” strand predominated, in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s other influences became clearly discernible.

A further consideration is that the functioning of music within BCG does not conform to academic notions of folklore – at least not in the sense of a traditional, premodern rural culture. Despite its claims and aspirations to embody a folk character, the community’s religious practices were far removed from the ritual cycles or life-calendar rhythms typical of preindustrial folk culture. Over extended periods, BCG followers consciously distanced themselves from all procedures, rituals, and cyclicity. In their own self-understanding, their church was conceptualized as “spiritual” rather than “ritual” – hence the deliberate avoidance of fixed liturgical patterns or ceremonial stereotyping.

Unlike other Protestant groups, which maintained at least a moderately structured order of Sunday worship, pastors within BCG purposefully refrained from pre-selecting sermon topics or songs. As Pavel Ignatov recalls: “Our people at that time would not accept the idea of a sermon prepared in advance – written out according to an outline or scheme, then read or declaimed later. They were strongly opposed to this. When someone came from among the other professional pastors of the Protestant denominations, and they gave him the

pulpit to preach, and he began with an introduction, exposition, and conclusion (following all the rules of homiletics), they would say, ‘This is not from God!’ [...] A person must speak in the Spirit – that is, to speak what the Spirit gives him at that specific moment!’⁵

Even the regularity of Sunday services was in question during the years of socialist rule in Bulgaria, when the community was persecuted by the state security services – gatherings were repeatedly dispersed, and adherents could be detained, which necessitated oral coordination for subsequent meeting times and places. It is no accident that in the past, BCG was informally referred to as the “Underground/Catacomb Church”. Worship unfolded in a largely spontaneous and improvised fashion – shaped by the inspiration of the pastor or whoever was believed to be guided by the Holy Spirit.

Preaching in song

As markers of communal identity, BCG songs were conceived of not as artistic creations but as prophetic, God-inspired utterances addressed to the faithful. Within this tradition, those who sang were perceived not so much as singers but as “singing prophets” (to cite P. Ignatov⁶). The songs themselves were viewed as living messages – acts of admonition, rebuke, or encouragement – bestowed upon the believers. In this sense, the songs functioned in the community’s consciousness not as compositions but as divinely revealed messages. For years, the followers of BCG understood their oral, spontaneous, prophetic hymn creation as a distinctive mark that set them apart from other Evangelical circles. It is not by chance that the Church of God rejected published hymn collections (containing translated Western material) in favour of songs believed to have been prophetically revealed. These were thus never regarded as authored works in the conventional sense. The underlying idea was that both melody and text were imparted by the Holy Spirit, with the “bearer of the song”⁷ serving as a medium for transmitting the message to the congregation, which then memorized and sang it collectively.

In this text, the narrative is less concerned with details regarding the musical content of specific songs (as conventionally examined) than with how they shaped the community’s worldview and encoded its models of behaviour. One characteristic feature was their comparatively long duration. Structurally, they were strophic, often without a refrain, and would comprise numerous stanzas – sometimes as many as eighteen – lasting more than fifteen minutes in performance. The reason for this expanded form lies not in any specific musical tradition per se, but in the songs’ functional role. Within the BCG congregation, songs were not merely melodies to be sung; they functioned as *sermons delivered*

⁵ Author’s interview with Pavel Ignatov, Sofia, 23.10.2025.

⁶ Author’s interview with Pavel Ignatov, Sofia, 35.06.2025.

⁷ The person presenting a new song to the congregation was not seen as its author or a performer in the conventional sense, but as someone to whom the song had been given.

through music. Each verse carried a spiritual message (be it an exhortation or rebuke) and its performance amounted to a kind of extended sermon or confession. Such length fostered emotional and spiritual intensity, engaging listeners not only on an auditory level but also within their spiritual experience and reflection. The song bearer was thus viewed as a conduit between the Holy Spirit and the congregation, with the stanzas functioning as spiritual instruction. It is quite indicative that a longer song text, developed over the course of an hour through the pastor's commentary, could subsequently serve as the basis for an entire sermon within the service⁸. This approach underscores the essence of BCG as a community in which music functioned as an instrument of immediate spiritual influence rather than a medium of aesthetic or artistic appreciation.

Social preconditions

A social factor comes into play here: the genesis of BCG is rooted in the social strata described by Rozmary Statelova as “the socio-cultural underclass” (Statelova 1993, 9) – with all the reservations such a formulation entails. A similar notion is conveyed by the English term *grassroots* – that is, people at the local level, removed from “foreign” influences and elitist attitudes. In the case of BCG, it is essential that its social base consisted of individuals from rural and semi-urban backgrounds: villagers, inhabitants of small towns – members of the working and artisan classes. All of this played a crucial role in the community's genesis and attested to the fact that, by the first half of the twentieth century, the Evangelical movement had already reached the lower social strata of Bulgarian society. The folk-like character of BCG's singing stemmed from the more rural origin of its followers – that is, people who had come into contact with older layers of the intonational repertoire of village-related songs, transporting their elements into a newer, urban environment.

This characterization, though, should be taken with some reservations, since it does not refer to a homogeneous group but rather an aggregate of social strata (villagers and inhabitants of small towns, e.g., livestock breeders, farmers, and artisans) united by shared cultural dispositions. It is precisely this social profile that determined a number of traits in the spiritual profile of the movement, at least in its early stages. On the one hand, its hymnody bore the imprint of a folk-like tradition marked by immediacy and directness of verbal expression. On the other, it reflected the community's aspiration toward self-affirmation and spiritual elevation under the conditions of peripherality. For many believers, BCG functioned as a form of symbolic compensation for their social marginality: through participation in its spiritual life, they gained recognition, meaning, and identity otherwise unattainable within the hierarchies of society.

The song, as a spontaneous and democratic form of spiritual expression, became a key instrument for this collective self-empowerment. Bearing the imprint of this idea was the community's pejorative attitude toward institutionalized

⁸ Author's interview with Pavel Ignatov, Sofia, 23.10.2025.

forms of Christianity and formalized cultural expressions. The understanding of singing as a direct inspiration from the Holy Spirit expressed a particular kind of anti-elitism – the notion that spiritual gifts are not contingent upon formal education or ritual formality, but upon the purity of the heart and the strength of faith. This explains why, in the earlier decades of its development, BCG deliberately distanced itself from translated and well-established Anglo-American song collections, favouring instead the oral and spontaneous hymn-making of its unsophisticated followers. This position, moreover, was not merely an aesthetic choice but a profoundly social gesture – a manifestation of distrust toward cultural centres and institutions inaccessible to those “from below”.

From this perspective, the song creativity of BCG may also be viewed as a form of resistance to social and symbolic hierarchies. It affirms the notion that genuine spiritual experience does not belong to “high” culture, but to the community (*the grassroots*) living in direct contact with everyday life, labour, and suffering. The songs were conceived of as a collective testimony of sonic creativity, cultural memory, and a mode of self-affirmation.

The new type of worship music

Of particular interest is also the manner in which the community’s older, traditional hymn repertoire was replaced by a new mode of musical thinking, influenced by Western popular music styles typical of evangelical worship groups from North America and Western Europe. Both sociopolitical and generation-based psychological factors played a significant role in this process. It should be noted that the shifts unfolding in the late 1970s and 1980s – and even more markedly in the early 1990s – culminated in the eventual displacement of the old BCG’s traditional hymn practice.

II. Stylistic influences

The *etic* counterpoint to the claim of a typically Bulgarian, folk-based mode of singing is largely due to the various influences upon the BCG hymnal tradition and the heteroglossia inside the community’s musical idiom. This raises the question as to the roots of this diversity – what they are, where they point to, and what they reveal about the development of BCG over time. These influences, moreover, possess certain chronological markers: at different times and in different places, the community’s song repertoire has been shaped by impulses from multiple directions. No less significant is the issue of whether, despite the various stylistic currents that “flow into” the community’s hymn-making, there remains some sort of “invariant” preserving identity continuity.

A general characteristic of the BCG older practice, at least over a relatively extended period (from the 1930s to the early 1980s), is that the songs were almost invariably monophonic and performed without any instrumental accompaniment. Instruments were rejected as it was believed that they distract from the central figure of worship – that is, God – and that musicians, through their skills, might do just that (see Ignatov 2006, 247). A certain resemblance to folk practice lies in the fact that nothing was notated: a new song would be

sung by the person to whom it had been revealed⁹, and the others would learn it by ear and then sing it collectively. This persisted until the early 1980s, when Pavel Ignatov, in his capacity as the community's spiritual leader, gradually permitted the use of certain instruments (accordions and acoustic guitars) in church services¹⁰. Several concrete stylistic currents of the period in question become apparent in the following analysis...

The believers' social profile not only shaped the theological and thematic emphases of the songs but also left a tangible imprint on their musical and linguistic features, which helps explain why **urban-rural songs with intonation reminiscent of the Bulgarian National Revival Era** (Buleva 2005, 118) represent one of the strongest (and conceivably earliest) influences on the early BCG repertoire. This tradition can be characterized by the diatonic construction of its melodic line and the folk-inflected quality of its verbal expression. The songs, built upon the so-called *Revival-era melodies* (see Kaufman 1968, 38), display traits typical of the urban-rural song repertoire of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This intonation model corresponds to a conditional (or rather, ambivalent) Phrygian-like mode constructed upon the Phrygian scale. Its structural logic presupposes an internal relation to the major system, in which the first tone is treated as the third scale degree of a major mode (Hlebarov 1977, 227). Its formation exhibits a specific modal duality or indeterminacy resulting from "the treatment of the leading tone of the major system as the fifth degree of the Phrygian mode" (Hlebarov 1977, 228). Such modal ambivalence – oscillating between major-based orientation and Phrygian colouration – is characteristic not only of Revival-era repertoires but also of many urban-rural song examples across Bulgaria, and, accordingly, of a significant part of the older repertoire of the Bulgarian Church of God.

In some cases, rural folk melismatic patterns could be discerned, attesting to its deep-rootedness in the local environment. At the linguistic level, BCG songs often combined biblical vocabulary with the expressive immediacy of oral folk speech. The texts display a tendency toward repetition of key words and short formulas (folk-reminiscent forms of address, such as "chado" (oh, my child), "chada" (oh, my children), "dusho" (oh, dear soul), as well as the use of archaic or vernacular Bulgarian words. The organization of verses follows speech patterns, often with metrical irregularities, rather than the strict schemes required by traditional versification. This register of expression privileges affective clarity over literary refinement, aiming less at stylistic ornamentation and more at emotional impact and collective resonance. The presence of dialectal forms and regionalisms, particularly in the older layers of the tradition, further emphasizes the local and folk character of the singing.

Examples with a more distinctly "Bulgarian" sound can be found in the songs of the folk singer Magdalena Morarova, a BCG follower since 1962. According to contemporaries, her singing reflects the folk-song style of the early

⁹ The words "revealed" or "given" are typically employed in BCG self-narratives.

¹⁰ Author's interview with Pavel Ignatov, Sofia, 18.09.2024.

to mid-twentieth century approximately in the spirit of the secular repertoire she herself performed. Many of her songs bear the traits of the urban-rural tradition of the Pirin region – understandably so, given that the singer was born in the town of Bansko. She was raised in a musical environment in which these stylistic features were part of everyday vernacular practice, and was immersed in its idiom from an early age.

Some songs reveal **Russian influences**, more specifically the Russian urban romance, which is not coincidental. It is quite probable that in the early 20th century, the first preachers and founders of the Pentecostal movement in Bulgaria (within which BCG also emerged) – the Russians Dmitry Zaplishny and Ivan Voronaev – not only brought with them theological ideas but also introduced certain features of Russian urban singing. From this, it could be inferred that Russian melodic patterns – common in that period – might have had some impact on the BCG hymnody.

Another possible explanation lies in the geographical and cultural connections of Northern Bulgaria, where the BCG community initially took shape. The northeastern regions of the country are geographically close to areas such as Romania, Moldova, and Crimea, between which there has long existed a vibrant cultural exchange. In this sense, it is entirely plausible that certain melodic patterns were transmitted along this route: from Crimea, through Moldova, to Northern Bulgaria, where they found fertile ground in the early Pentecostal milieu.

Traces of the sentimental **old urban Bulgarian song style** from the mid-twentieth century are also discernible. This undercurrent can be explained by the fact that it shaped the primary intonational landscape of the small towns from which many of the early believers originated. Despite the community's aspiration to distance itself from "the world", as they themselves often emphasized, it was inevitable that certain intonational and performance models of the surrounding urban tradition would be absorbed. These are characterized by adherence to the traditional major-minor system¹¹, without the modal ambivalence of the Revival-era model. Thus, in some BCG songs, one can discern expressive features typical of some older urban Bulgarian songs: a heartfelt, sentimental manner of phrasing, with abundant *rubati* and flexible rhythm enhancing the emotional immediacy of musical expression. This stylistic affinity with old urban singing is not merely a superficial resemblance but rather evidence of the way in which BCG's singing styles incorporated elements of the period's popular culture.

A number of songs carry a distinctly **Romani character** – evident primarily in gypsy-related melismas, but also in certain modal (scale-based) features associated with Oriental music. It should not be overlooked that the Bulgarian Church of God was particularly successful in integrating Romani communities into its religious life. A telling example in this respect is Zhanna Milanova – a longtime follower of BCG and the source (though not "the author" by her own

¹¹ The traditional major-minor system is generally typical of all the other stylistic influences under consideration.

admission) of numerous songs performed during worship services. Zhanna hails from a well-known Romani family of musicians called Chincharovi, and she is a close relative of Hasan Chincharov, regarded as “one of Bulgaria’s most accomplished Romani violinists and creators of Romani songs” (Peycheva 1999, 129). All this testifies that the “lower” social strata, including the Bulgarian Romani minority, contributed to the church’s musical identity, deeply rooted in the Bulgarian cultural soil.

In the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, new approaches began to take hold – ones associated with the **Bulgarian Estrada**¹² **music** and **the so-called politically engaged song**¹³. Over the course of the 1980s, the BCG music styles underwent noticeable change: new generations joined the community, bringing with them musical tastes that necessitated an update of the musical idiom. Accordions, acoustic guitars, and occasionally synthesizers were now permitted. A stylistic shift took place – melodies began to sound in the spirit of the Bulgarian *estrada*, the Bulgarian political song, the American gospel style, as well as other idioms of expression. The song *Skoro, Mnogo Skoro Shte Vidim Gospoda* (Soon, Very Soon, We Shall See the Lord) is sung in unison without instrumental accompaniment (in line with older traditions), yet it already reveals a distinctly different intonational landscape – one shaped by English-language song culture and, more specifically, by American gospel music. This tendency is even more pronounced in *Bez Nego Sam Nishto* (Without Him I Am Nothing), which displays stylistic features and a manner of performance typical of the Bulgarian *estrada* during that period. *Blagosloven E Tozi Chovek* (Blessed Is That Man)¹⁴ already employs a synthesizer and a musical-expressive idiom cast in a Western European tone, echoing the spirit of the politically engaged songs from the final years of the socialist regime. This turn in the intonation palette was due to the community’s increasing contact with the surrounding media environment – cinema, radio, and television – forms of entertainment that had previously been disapproved of or outright forbidden within BCG circles as a result of their ascetic and isolationist mindset prevalent in previous decades.

The fall of ideological and communication barriers after 1989 opened the Bulgarian Church of God to new musical models that were adopted within congregational practices alongside the globalizing wave of **Contemporary Christian music**. The influence of Anglo-American pop and modern gospel styles proved particularly strong in the first years of this transition. The influx of younger age groups into the community led to a transformation of the restrictive filters that had characterized previous decades, and BCG – overcoming its former insularity – had to open itself to modern musical currents widely popular in the English-speaking world.

¹² Popular music in Socialist Bulgaria after the 1960s was often referred to as *Estrada*, or *Estrada music*, which carried the connotations of higher aesthetic values and professional craftsmanship.

¹³ A particular strand within Bulgarian popular music in the 1980s.

¹⁴ The songs were obtained through private channels and are not available to the general public.

Thus, in the early 1990s, recordings of so-called contemporary *praise and worship music* began to circulate in Bulgarian churches. Songs by *Hillsong*, *Integrity Music*, *Hosanna*, *Vineyard*, and other Evangelical communities introduced a new type of musical spirituality founded on professionalism, emotional expressivity, and modern pop sound. The influence of Anglophone music became especially tangible through the rhythmic and harmonic models of soft rock, pop ballads, and R&B adapted to the Christian context. This influence was not only sonic, but also behavioural – manifested in the manner of singing, stage presence, and even the bodily expression of worship (e.g., raised hands, closed eyes, swaying to the rhythm of music).

Reception of the “new” music

These new models were perceived by younger believers as a mark of emotional immediacy and spiritual modernity, while older generations often regarded them with suspicion as excessively “worldly”, noisy, and intrusive. As a consequence, a distinct intergenerational rift emerged within the community with reference to the “old” prophetic singing versus the “new” gospel-style worship. For older BCG followers, this represented a clash between two different worlds. The oral, monophonic and prophetic tradition (where song functioned as an immediate spiritual experience) began to coexist with a new kind of music: harmonized, rhythmically structured, and often electronically amplified. The introduction of electric guitars, keyboards, microphones, and amplifiers symbolized not merely a technical renewal, but a cultural transformation – a shift from collective, spontaneous singing to a more performance-oriented mode of worship. For many, this new sound carried a sense of Otherness, perceived as “noise from the world” – an acoustic and symbolic pressure intruding into the community’s sacred space, disrupting the austere and contemplative atmosphere to which old congregants were accustomed. This “noise” was viewed as both a sonic and a spiritual imprint of secular entertainment, broadly speaking of “the world”, which provoked a feeling of estrangement from traditional, collective acts of worship. At the same time, younger generations embraced the Western popular worship style as a fresh expression of faith, promising participation in a broader spiritual togetherness.

The process had further consequences. The professionalization of musical activity, the demand for stage preparation, and the emergence of worship teams gradually transformed the structure of communal participation in worship. Spontaneity and prophetic impulse gave way to rehearsed forms and prearranged musical settings. As a result, music that once embodied a collective spiritual act shifted toward a product, bearing the marks of mass culture. It arguably continued to fulfil its function as a spiritual mediator, creating a sense of belonging to a broader, transnational Christian community. At the same time, however, it called into question the previously established identity of BCG (i.e., its Bulgarian-ness), since its musical and aesthetic parameters shifted entirely from its local tradition – something that distanced the older generations. The immediacy and folk-like character of the earlier monophonic songs began to be replaced by structured compositions, featuring defined harmony, meter, and

rhythm, accompanied by electric guitars, keyboards, and percussion. “The noise from the world” manifested itself in intonational and metro-rhythmic patterns imported from outside, foreign to what was once considered the church’s “proper” spiritual-aesthetic orientation.

All of this was also linked to a new worship practice, where a group of musicians was positioned in front of the congregation, displacing the older tradition of collective, community-wide singing by all believers in the prayer house. The introduction of global musical models carried the risk of eroding the traditional song character, replacing spontaneous and prophetic musical experience with an aesthetic product governed by ready-made pop formulae. This led to a certain professionalization of musical activity – requiring musical skills, rehearsals, microphones, sound equipment, and a stage – all of which gradually displaced the “horizontal” structure of communal singing. Understandably, tension emerged between the ideal of collective spiritual participation and the newly established musical “hierarchy”, in which worship teams and soloists assumed central roles.

Nonetheless, the Bulgarian Church of God gradually integrated elements of contemporary Evangelical *praise and worship*, frequently not through direct imitation but as adaptation. Songs were translated into Bulgarian and frequently reworked to preserve the community’s distinctive spirit – softer timbre, restrained instrumental expression, and a more prayerful tone. In some cases, BCG musicians composed original pieces in a similar style, combining Bulgarian texts with Western harmonic patterns and rhythms. This produced a syncretic layer in which local spirituality and global musical idioms converged into somewhat cohesive sonic unity. The song *Bog Da Pazi Bulgaria*¹⁵ (May God Watch Over Bulgaria) exemplifies this process, blending BCG’s patriotic ethos with the charismatic expressivity of contemporary gospel and pop. In this respect, the community can be seen as an emblem of the transition from a locally rooted faith to a universalized religious expression in an attempt to preserve its core identity.

III. Conclusion

These syntheses outline the broader trajectory of song creativity within the Bulgarian Church of God – from local melodic patterns toward a universalized musical language that strives to preserve its spiritual profile within a global cultural environment. The development of BCG hymnody can be viewed as a particular form of *inculturation*, re-interpreting a spiritual tradition within a local socio-cultural context. Chronologically, the songs reveal a movement from insularity to openness, from unrefined spontaneity to musical professionalism, and ultimately from locally determined taste to a globalized aesthetic. This dynamic could indeed be conceptualized as a kind of erasure of “authenticity”¹⁶,

¹⁵ Tsvetkov, Dimitar. *Bog Da Pazi Bulgaria*. YouTube video, music and arrangement by Dimitar Tsvetkov. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sh6nom-lGyKc> [Accessed: 20 December 2025].

¹⁶ “Authenticity” understood as faithful adherence to “the old ways”, which were seen as something genuine and spiritually consecrated, carrying the weight of historical continuity.

insofar as an initially closed spiritual-musical practice becomes, at some point, replaced by contemporary Western models of worship.

Yet, such a reflection does not exclude the possibility that a **spiritual invariant** within the community – the belief that word and music inspired by the Holy Spirit can function as prophetic expressions of communal faith – still endures, even amidst the influx of modern popular music practices. Certain continuities remain – less in the songs’ musical idiom, and more in their function. In place of the long, multi-stanza hymns of traditional BCG worship, contemporary church bands now perform extended musical sequences that similarly occupy a significant portion at the beginning of the service. The conviction also continues that both word and music are inspired by the Holy Spirit. Thus, as in a spiritual *palimpsest*, beneath the new musical worship style one could still discern the ethos of the old, traditional practice – erased in form, yet preserved in content.

Such an ongoing thread reflects the community’s pursuit of a conceptually grounded authenticity, in which external influences are re-signified through the congregation’s value system, absorbing new elements while seeking to preserve its spiritual essence. The hymn-making of BCG reflects not merely the “evolution” of a spiritual community, but also broader cultural tensions within Bulgarian society – between tradition and modernity; between the notion of an inherent, “true” Self and the foreign, yet provocatively intriguing Other; and even between the historically grounded national and the culturally expansive global. In this respect, the songs of BCG constitute a valuable source for grasping the way in which music (as a form of collective memory and an articulation of spiritual stance) continues to express the stability of cultural identity within an increasingly globalized world.

Ultimately, isolation from the intonational milieu surrounding Bulgaria’s younger generations, be it “in the world” or in the church, proved impossible. This inevitably resulted in the adoption of more topical and desirable musical models – a process marked by ambivalent attitudes: rejection yet curiosity, opposition yet adaptation. The trajectory recalls the cultural dynamics already observable since the Bulgarian National Revival Era, mirroring the broader transformations within the surrounding society. What distinguishes the Bulgarian Church of God, however, is that its initial conservatism and insularity acted as a moderating brake upon this process, causing its internal musical-cultural development to unfold considerably more slowly than in Bulgarian society at large.

Viewed from the perspective of its identity function (at least in the perception of its adherents), the song creativity of BCG could also be conceived of as some sort of *theology in sound* – a spontaneous yet reflective mode of spiritual expression in which music, word, and the community’s cultural profile remain inseparable. It not only accounts for its musical expression but also legitimizes its past (and conceivably its present) as a manifestation of a “folk” spirituality – untouched by academic, institutional, or ecclesiastical constraints. Over the years, the community was able to construct a distinctive cultural model in which a practice once regarded as musically “peripheral” (local, non-Western, unpolished) became the new “centre” (age-old, “authentic”, Spirit-breathed), proclaiming through song its rightful place in the spiritual landscape of Bulgaria. Through

its dialogue with contemporary pop and gospel music since 1989, BCG has now succeeded in inscribing its communal identity within the broader context of the global Christian world.

In the final resonance, the song creativity of the Bulgarian Church of God represents an enduring cultural-musical phenomenon in which the inherited and the newly embraced, the traditional and the modern, the local and the global converge in a continuous process of spiritual striving and identity resilience.

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