The Ring Metaphor and the Spirit of Sofia

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Nathan. . .
We must, we will be friends. Despite my nation,
We did not choose a nation for ourselves. Are we
our nations? What’s a nation then?
Were Jews and Christians such, e’er they were men?
And have I found in thee one more, to whom
It is enough to be a man?

G.E. Lessing, Nathan the Wise, 1779

Nearly a century prior to the unification of Germany, the playwright and philosopher Gotthold Ephraim Lessing published his famous ideological ‘Ideendrama’, the epic poem Nathan der Weise, translated into English as Nathan the Wise. This play is the last great production of Lessing; it was his medium to express his ideas following the explicit order of the Brunswick authorities to renounce to his controversial writings. The moral of the play is spiritual freedom and tolerance based on friendship.

1. The author is grateful for the support of Professor Dr Arch. Vesselin Rousseva Troeva, Department of Urban Planning, Faculty of Architecture, University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy, Sofia. Thanks are also due to the University of Malta which financed his research on the Bulgarian Capital.

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   All five acts have each three scenes except for the first two which have two scenes each.


Lessing, a former student of theology and medicine at Leipzig, became a leading representative of the German Enlightenment. A central theme of his philosophical and theological writings is freedom and religious tolerance. His prime mover is not faith but the spirit of religion. He advocated the right of freedom of thought of the faithful and that all faiths share a set of moral values which were obscured by the theological differences of the various religious denominations. Following Voltaire, Lessing considered the test of religion to be conduct.

A contemporary capital city which figuratively manifests Lessing’s utopian vision on the harmonious co-existence of the monotheistic faiths in Europe is Sofia. Its living spiritual heritage is witness that these religions impart an array of values common to all. The objective of this paper is to illustrate the parable of the ring narrated in Act III of the play as a valid metaphor to comprehend the spirit of this national capital. The play is developed around this parable “much in the manner of weaving and sewing a coat to suit an intricate, shiny button which he had found by chance”.

The Ring Parable

The play was performed on Easter of 1778 and published a year later. It is set in Jerusalem at the time of the Third Crusade and involves Jews, Moslems and Christians. The three protagonists are Nathan, a virtuous Jewish merchant, Saladin, an enlightened Saracen sultan and a young German Templar. Nathan is dubbed “the Wise” by the members of all faiths, Saladin is the honest Muslim ruler whilst the Templar is the Machiavel. The play maps how the three bridge the differences emerging from their respective monotheistic faiths, Judaism, Islam and Christianity.

7. Sofia was established as the capital of Bulgaria nearly a century and three decades ago, following the liberation of the country from half a millennium of Ottoman occupation. Since Liberation, the city grew from a small town of a few thousand inhabitants to a metropolis of the Balkans.
Maurer is critical of Lessing’s approach in developing the plot of the play (ibid.).
9. The character of Nathan is modelled after Lessing’s best friend, the Jewish-German philosopher and the founder of Reform Judaism Moses Mendelssohn. Lessing, a Christian, and Mendelssohn were staunch critics of Christian and Jewish dogmas respectively.
The narrative centres on Nathan, bestowed by God with wisdom and riches, the greatest gift and most worthless gift respectively. On his return to Jerusalem after a business trip, he finds out that his house was burned down and his adopted daughter, Recha, who was inside, has been rescued by a young German Templar, a captive of Saladin, who has been spared because he resembles the sultan’s brother. Nathan goes to thank the Templar. The youth at first ridicules him and his reward and then agrees to borrow money from him to purchase another mantle which was burnt when rescuing Recha. When the Jew takes the burned cloth, the Templar sees a tear falling on it. Astonished, he asks Nathan whether good Jews exist. The Jew replies with a wise answer: Good men exist everywhere. They do not choose their race. Jews, Moslems, Christians, all equally are men. The Jew concludes by stating that he trusts he has found a man in the Templar. The Templar expresses regret and takes Nathan’s hand as a sign of friendship. The encounter is cut short as the Jew is called by the Sultan, who requires a loan. Amazed by the gentleness and wisdom of the Jew, the Sultan spontaneously asks him what in his opinion is the truest and best faith. The Jew replies with a parable of a ring, the focus of the play.

An heirloom ring, endowed with the power to win the love of God and mankind, had been inherited for a number of generations from father to his favourite son. When the ring descended to a father who loved his three sons equally, he promised it to each one of his sons. He was undecided as to whom he should give it as he loved them equally. Thence he made two exact replicas and, on his deathbed, he gave a ring to each of his sons. They subsequently fought among themselves, each maintaining to have the original ring. This scenario, Nathan remarks, is identical to Jews, Moslems and Christians who wrangle amongst themselves about their respective faiths. Nathan makes reference to the wisdom of the judge to whom the sons went. The judge ruled that, given that each son received the ring from his father’s hand, let each believe that the ring given is the authentic ring. He argued that their father loved them all equally and that it was his wish that all should love one another. The Moslem is astonished. He proposes to Nathan to go in peace, but the Jew offers the loan, stating that he has to withhold part of it to settle his debt with the young Templar.

Following the departure of Nathan from the Sultan’s court, another scene opens where a lay brother arrives at the Jew’s house. This brother was sent by the Christian patriarch to secure information on the Jew. The patriarch resolved on this plan following the Templar’s confession that Recha, whom the templar was
in love with, was in fact a Christian raised by a Jew, a crime punishable by death. Upon arrival at the Jew’s house, the brother identifies him. The conversation unfolds: soon after the Christian kid came under Nathan’s custody, the Christians massacred the Jewish community in Gath including his wife and seven sons. Thereafter, he swore everlasting hatred of Christendom. He seized the Christian child, kissed her cheek and accepted her as God’s gift to make good for his loved ones. The conversation further reveals that the young Templar and Recha were brother and sister. The father of Recha was the Sultan’s brother who took the German name of Von Filneck to hide his identity upon falling in love with a German Christian girl, Recha’s mother.

The play ends by Saladin summoning Nathan together with Recha and the young Templar to his palace. He agrees to the marriage of the young couple and asks Nathan’s for his consent. This reconciliation at the Sultan’s court runs parallel to the parable of the three rings: the Jew, the Muslim and the Christian have a common bond, the bond of a Christian child and a Muslim child who have a Jewish guardian and a Muslim uncle respectively.

The Spiritual Heritage of Sofia

Since the Liberation of Bulgaria, four master plans for Sofia were developed. The onset for the subsequent annihilation of the historico-traditional urban fabric of the city was mapped in the final years of Ottoman rule when a new planned transport network was imposed on the existing organic street layout. This urban planning exercise set the tempo for the successive transformations of the city, inspired by the ruling political ideology of the country, which led to the systematic loss of place within the city. Despite the havoc in the cultural landscape of the city, inspired by utilitarian, functionalist or socialist ideologies, three buildings survived in relative proximity to one another in the centre of contemporary Sofia. These are the Church of St Sofia, the Sofia Synagogue and the Banya Bashi Mosque, the main functioning centres of worship for the Christian, Jewish and Islamic faiths respectively (Figures 1 and 2). These monuments, which lie along a

Figure 1: Central Sofia: The location of the Church of St Sophia, the Sofia Synagogue and the Banya Bashi Mosque is denoted by a triangle, a square and a circle respectively. Alexander Nevsky Cathedral Church is denoted by a cross.

Figure 2: View showing proximity of the Sofia Synagogue (dashed) and the Banya Bashi Mosque (dotted)
northwest-southeast axis, are located at the centre of the city and have remarkable architectural and cultural significance. They are contemporary landmarks of the spirit of the city of Sofia. This axis is further reinforced by the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral Church (Figure 3).\footnote{Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, the seat of the Patriarch of Bulgaria, has been a monument of culture since 12 September 1924. It is a cross-domed church designed by Alexander Pomerantsev and erected in Neo-Byzantine style. It is the second largest cathedral in the Balkan Peninsula. Its construction commenced in 1882 but most of the construction works were undertaken during the period 1904-1912. It is named after Saint Alexander Nevsky, a Russian prince, and was built to commemorate the Russian soldiers who fell during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878. For the period 1916 to 1920 the cathedral was dedicated to St Cyril and St. Methodius.}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Alexander_Nevsky_Cathedral_Church}
\caption{Alexander Nevsky Cathedral Church}
\end{figure}

The present day St Sophia Church, rebuilt during the Second Bulgarian Kingdom, was founded during the era of Justinian the Great in the middle of the sixth century AD and thus it is a contemporary of the church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople.\footnote{St Sophia Cathedral in Kiev was founded in the early decades of the second millennium.} The plan of St Sophia Church is in the form of a cross with a three-nave cupola and two towers on the east (Figures 4 and 5). It consists of a three-sided apse, three...
Figure 4: The Church of St Sophia at the beginning of the twentieth century

Figure 5: The Church of St Sophia, after reconstruction and as at present
altars and a narthex. These characteristics have a bearing on both the interior and the exterior of the building.\textsuperscript{13} The width of both naves is equal and form a square at their crossing. Its length and width are circa 47 metres and 20 metres respectively and the central dome, supported by four columns, is circa 19 metres in height and 9 metres in diameter. It is erected in red bricks welded together by strong mortar.

The church is the second oldest in Sofia\textsuperscript{14} and one of the finest surviving examples of early Christian architecture in southeast Europe. It is the fifth place of worship erected on this site, long associated with sacredness.\textsuperscript{15} Earlier places of worship date back to the period of Ancient Rome when Sofia formed part of the necropolis of the town of Serdica, later renamed Sredets. Former structures were devastated by successive barbaric invasions.\textsuperscript{16} The town of Sredets gained significant importance and the church of St Sophia was raised to metropolitan status, a role it fulfilled until Ottoman occupation when it was converted into a mosque and minarets were added as per decree of Selim I.\textsuperscript{17} The mosque was abandoned in the nineteenth century following structural damage inflicted by two earthquakes. It was reconverted into a Christian church in 1935.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{13} The floor of the church is adorned with mosaics dating to the early Christian period, possibly to the second church which was completed by the fourth century AD. Excavation in and around the church had unearthed several tombs, dating to the time of the first and/or second church built on site, some of which are decorated in frescoes.

\textsuperscript{14} The oldest surviving monument in Sofia is the Church of St. George, a red brick oval form rotunda built in the fourth century AD which was converted into the Rose Mosque during Ottoman occupation as per declaration of Selim I. It is renowned for its outstanding twelfth to fourteenth century frescoes of twenty two prophets running through the 2 metres high drum of the central dome. These frescoes were discovered during restoration works undertaken in the twentieth century when the white paint, with the name of Allah and his Prophet inscribed in blue applied by the Ottomans during conversion of the building into a mosque, was removed. During these restoration works, a number of layers of frescoes were discovered, the earliest dating to the tenth century, the time of the later part of the First Bulgarian Empire.

\textsuperscript{15} R.F. Hoddinott, \textit{Bulgaria in Antiquity}, London: Ernest Benn Ltd, 1975, p.271. For an account on churches erected on this site together with a drawing illustrating the various phases in the evolution of the Church of St Sophia, vide ibid., pp. 269-277 and Figure 72 respectively.

\textsuperscript{16} The first church was destroyed by the Goths in the fourth century. A larger church was rebuilt on site but was subsequently destroyed in the mid fifth century by the Huns.

\textsuperscript{17} When it was converted into a mosque, all the medieval frescoes which adorned the church were destroyed.

\textsuperscript{18} The mosque was abandoned following the earthquakes of 1818 and 1858 which destroyed one of the minarets. Archaeological excavations commenced in 1911. The building was restored in the 1930s by a team led by Bogdan Filov and Alexander Rashenov, a professor of archaeology and an architect respectively. After the Second World War, the church was declared a national monument of culture. It was restored again in the 1980s.
The Sofia Synagogue is one of the two functioning synagogues in Bulgaria (Figures 6 and 7). It is very similar to the old Sephardic synagogue Leopoldstädt Tempel in Vienna. It was designed by the Austro-Hungarian architect Friedrich Grünanger, the architect of the Sofia Seminary of St John of Rila. The synagogue was constructed in the first decade of the twentieth century at the site where the older synagogue, commissioned by the Ashkenazi Jews during the Ottoman Empire was located. It is the third largest in Europe after the synagogues in Budapest and Amsterdam and the largest in southeast Europe.

The architectural style is Byzantine-Moorish Revival, with influences of the architecture associated with the Vienna Secession. Influences of Venetian architecture are evident in the main elevation. The entire synagogue covers an area of 659 square meters. The dome is octagonal in shape and the height of the building is 31 metres. It can accommodate 1,300 worshippers. The synagogue was inaugurated on 9 September 1909. Tsar Ferdinand I of Bulgaria, an orthodox Christian, was present for the official opening.

The Banya Bashi Mosque is one of the oldest mosques in Europe (Figures 8 and 9). Its name ‘Banya Bashi’, meaning ‘several baths’, is associated with the thermal baths for which the area is renowned. The Tsentralnata Banya, the central baths, are located in the vicinity. The Banya Bashi Mosque was erected in the later part of the sixteenth century during the reign of Mehmet Pasha, the period when works were undertaken on St Sophia Church to convert it into a mosque, over natural thermal spas. The Banya Bashi Mosque was designed by the Ottoman architect Mimar Sinan, the architect of the Selim II Mosque in Edirne, Turkey. The mosque is erected in large honey-coloured dimension stone with alternating courses of terracotta bricks. It has a finely decorated, 15 metre central dome and a red coloured minaret, a landmark in the neighbourhood.

19. The prime movers propelling the construction of the present synagogue were Chief Rabbi Marcus Ehrenpreis and local leaders Ezra Tadjer and Avram Davidzon Levy. The initial planning for the synagogue was undertaken in 1903 and actual construction commenced on the 13 November 1905.

20. The interior is richly decorated in Carrara marble and Venetian multicoloured mosaics and decorative woodcarving. The main element of the richly decorated interior is the chandelier, weighing nearly two tons, which is the largest in Bulgaria.

21. The first thermal baths were erected in classical antiquity by the Romans although the present baths date to pre First World War.
Figure 6: The Sofia Synagogue (postcard, circa 1934)

Figure 7: The Sofia Synagogue at present
Figure 8: The Banya Bashi Mosque at the beginning of the twentieth century

Figure 9: The Banya Bashi Mosque at present
The Banya Bashi Mosque is the only mosque which currently renders religious service to the Muslim community of Sofia. It forms part of the legacy of nearly half a millennium of continuous occupation of Bulgarian territory by the Ottomans. Since its opening, it functioned as a mosque except for the decades of communist rule when it was closed for worship and allowed to fall into disuse.

The co-existence of these three centres of worship of the three monotheistic faiths associated with Europe, is unique in the history of contemporary national cities. This uniqueness is not attributed to the physical proximity of these three sites but its harmonious co-existence and tolerance over turmoil of rough political circumstances prior to the foundation of the town as the national capital. These buildings represent not just the cultural but mainly the spiritual values of the Bulgarian Nation, values which ran, and still run at a meta level to the ideological beliefs of the governing elite over time. These values form the intrinsic character of the spirit of Sofia. Applying Hegel’s and Heidegger’s philosophical notions, contemporary Sofia is the result of the phenomena of the city through Zeitgeist; it is the spirit of place through the spirit of time. It truly fits the motto of the city, ‘It grows, but does not age’; a laconic statement on the spirit of the capital of the Bulgarian Nation.

Sofia Heirloom Ring

Religious tolerance is ingrained in the Bulgarian Nation and its national capital is its symbol, it forms part of the spirit of Sofia. At the time of the First Bulgarian Empire, when Khan Krum conquered Sofia, at that time known as Sredets, the St Sophia Church was not turned into ruins although the conquerors were not

22. There are seventy mosques in Sofia but only the Banya Bashi Mosque is still serving its original purpose.
23. This motto was approved at the City Council at the turn of the twentieth century.
24. The five phases in the history of the monarchy of Bulgaria are: the time of Great Bulgaria (632-681 AD), the First Empire (681-1018 AD), the Second Empire (1186-1396 AD), the Principality (1878-1908 AD) and the Kingdom of Bulgaria (1908-1946 AD). The history of an autonomous Bulgarian state commenced with the peace treaty of 681 AD. The First Bulgarian Empire, often referred to as the Slavic Enlightenment, was characterized by significant cultural and artistic dynamism which kept flourishing during the Second Bulgarian Empire. The period between the First and Second Bulgarian Empire was politically turbulent. It was characterized by military attacks from the east and the northwest by the Turks and the Magyars respectively. The Second Empire came to an end with Ottoman occupation in 1396. From this period until the liberation of Bulgaria, that is under Ottoman rule, cultural and artistic life went through a
Christians. Christianity was again accepted in the First Bulgarian Empire during the reign of Khan Boris who converted to Christianity in 865AD. Jews had settled in the area since Roman antiquity but it was during the sixteenth century, during Ottoman occupation, that it became a Jewish centre.

Hospitality and protection of Christians and Jews were allowed by the Ottomans who were Muslims. Although most churches were converted into Mosques, the Muslim authorities allowed the restoration and building of churches towards the turn of the seventeenth century subject to strict regulations relating to the height and style of the buildings. These restrictions were introduced with respect to Christian churches and private residences. Due to the fact that the restrictions related only to the exterior of the buildings, the modest looking buildings surviving since then have lavishly decorated interiors with frescos and icons. The St Nedelya Church in Batak was erected under these regulations (Figure 10).

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One of the surviving cultural monuments of the Second Empire is the Boyan Church near Sofia with frescos dating to the later part of the thirteenth century.

25. Ibid., pp. 61-62.

26. According to oral tradition, the church was erected at the centre of the town of Batak in 1813 within 75 days, a fortnight less than the time granted by the Ottomans to erect it, during the Bulgarian Revival Period. The church is associated with the uprising of April 1876 and with the liberation of Bulgarian land from Ottoman domination. All the nearly 2,000 people, that is, a third of the population of the town, mainly women and children, who found refuge in the church where killed. Ekaterina Peychinova, the Director of the Museum of History in Batak, describes the fall of the church thus:

“For three days and three nights the people inside the church held together, and the shooting outside did not stop for a minute. The attackers threw beehives and set fire to straw, but the rebels would not give in. Then they began to suffocate and most of the people died of asphyxia. Thirst was the biggest problem for everyone, because there was no water near the church. The mothers used the oil from the icons to moisten the lips of their babies, and when there was no more oil, they used the blood of the dead. An elderly man said they should start digging the earth in search of underground water, but the spring of 1876 had turned a dry one and their attempts failed. At the end of the third day they caved in and opened the gates of the church. But then they had only two options: either become Muslims or die. Every single one of them chose death” (Bulgarian National Radio. Available at http://www.bnr.bg, accessed March 21, 2009).

Despite the efforts of the Ottomans to remove evidence of the atrocities, the church could not burn down as it was of masonry construction. Since then the church was no longer used for
The notion of religious tolerance and fraternity is so powerfully ingrained and forms such an integral part of the national identity that, in defiance to the orders of one of the most notorious regimes in world history, the Christians took a stand to protect the Jews from extermination. Although an ally of Nazi Germany and enacting the 1940 anti-Semitic Law for the Protection of the Nation - which act was officially promulgated in early 1941 - Bulgaria refused to extradite Jews to concentration camps. Such extradiction was heavily opposed by the Orthodox Church and by an action group, inspired by both humanitarian and political concerns, led by the vice president of the Bulgarian Parliament. King Boris was

[27] There are two epitaphs and a commemorative slab in the grounds of St Sophia Church, written in Jewish, English and Bulgarian languages. They all testify to the stand of the Bulgarian Nation against the Nazi regime. The first epitaph reads “In Memory of Boris III, King of Bulgaria 1894-1943 and in Honor of Queen Giovanna – A tribute to their contribution to the rescue of Bulgarian Jews during the dark days of the holocaust”. The second epitaph reads “In Memory of Nobel Bulgarians: Ekzarkh – Metropolitan Stefan, Metropolitan Kyril, Metropolitan Neofit, Metropolitan Sofroni and other dignitaries of the Church; of Dimitar Peshev, the Deputy Speaker of Parliament, and other brave men and women, who successfully struggled for the rescue of Bulgaria’s Jews during World War Two”.

Figure 10: The St Nedelya Church in Batak
also appalled by the deportations. Adolf Beckerle, the German Minister in Sofia, in a correspondence to his superiors in Berlin dated 7 June 1943, attributed the failure of the deportation of the Jews from Bulgarian territory to “the mentality of the Bulgarian people, who lack the ideological enlightenment that we have .... A Bulgarian, having grown up together with Armenians, Greeks, Gypsies, does not find any fault with a Jew which could justify any special measures against”.28

All these three faiths, in whose name genocides took place whether at the time of the crusades or Nazi Germany, have the same roots and promote values which underlie their respective theology. In this context, the latter part of the play Nathan the Wise is significantly applicable to illustrate this point. The narrative is so powerful in its underlying moral that, over a century and a half after its publication, the Nazi regime banned this publication.29

The Ecumenical City

St Sophia Church is a living legacy of the spirit of the city, a city of significant cultural and administrative importance and a trading centre of the Balkans dating back to the Thracian period. Indeed, it has also been a centre of Christian spirituality since the time of Ancient Rome. The first church on site, the highest point in the city,

The commemorative slab sums up the collective stand of the Bulgarian Nation against the German oppressive government:

“In the year 1943, while the Holocaust of Europe’s Jews was reaching its peak, a unique phenomenon occurred in Bulgaria. Eminent leaders of the Bulgarian people, the Heads of the Church, enlightened public figures, writers, doctors, lawyers, workers, ordinary citizens and the Royal Family
They all stood together and succeeded to rescue all of the Bulgaria’s 49,000 Jews from deportation to the death camps
The great majority of Bulgaria’s Jews immigrated to Israel in the years 1948-1950 and took an active part in the rebirth of the Jewish State.”

29. Following a meeting with Adolf Hitler, the content of which is still unknown, King Boris returned to Sofia on 15th August 1943. The King passed away on 29th August 1943, a mystery unsolved to-date. Crampton observes that a day before his death, “a perceptive senior official in the German ministry in Sofia had noted: ‘In the eyes of the Bulgarian people the king is less a monarch than a leader. He is a symbol of national unity and his disappearance could ... lead both to an internal crisis and to external realignments’ (ibid., p.177).
was erected soon after the Edict of Milan issued in AD 313 which granted religious tolerance in the entire Roman Empire. The edict was signed by Constantine the Great, who once declared that “Serdica is my Rome”, and by Licinius; the former was the Emperor of the western part whilst the latter was the Emperor of the eastern part of the Roman Empire respectively. An earlier edict granting religious tolerance was issued by Emperor Galerius from Serdica in AD 311, but confiscated property was not restored to its Christian owners until the signing of the Edict of Milan.

The Church of St Sophia is not just a historical and cultural monument of the city of Sofia but is in effect its godparent, lending its name to the city and thus bestowing the protection of its patron saint as guardian of the city of Sofia itself; hence, the motto is well fitting.

Throughout the Byzantine Empire a number of basilicas were dedicated to Hagia Sophia, from the Greek Αγία Σοφία meaning Holy Wisdom. Unlike in other churches, the patron saint is not a historical figure but a symbol of Divine Wisdom. The only church which lent its name to a city is the one in Sofia. Other principal churches dedicated to St Sophia include the one in Istanbul and Kiev. St Sophia church is symbiotically linked with the history of the Bulgarian Capital.

The mediaeval church of St Sophia, the Church of Holy Wisdom, in Sofia is founded on a historical site dating to the first millennium BC, a site which, since then, has been at the cross-roads of Europe. To-date, these cross-roads have always been attributed to the geophysical and geohistorical location of the city. No references are made to its position with respect to the spiritual heritage of Europe. Indeed, in 343-344 AD, the church of St Sophia hosted scholars at the Ecumenical Council of Serdica, a continuation of the First Ecumenical council convoked in Nicea in 325, with the agenda to merge the then existing Christian rites. Although

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30. The site was outside the walls of the city and close to the amphitheatre. Part of this amphitheatre is presently incorporated in the lower ground floor of Arena di Serdica Hotel. Thus, the first church was likely erected as a basilica sepulcralis, a burial church for the city acropolis.
31. ‘Sophia’ is the transliteration in the Latin alphabet of the Greek word for ‘wisdom’.
32. Mention of the name ‘Sophia’ first appeared in the Vitosh Charter of Bulgarian Tsar Ivan Shishman and/or in a Ragusan merchant’s notes, both dating to the fourteenth century. During the Medieval period the settlement was known as ‘Sredets’. This name was used until the late eighteenth century when the term ‘Sophia’ came more in use. During the Ottoman occupation, the town was known by the Turkish population as ‘Sofya’.
occupied by the Byzantine Empire till the ninth century, no reference is made to Serdica in the semi-official lists drawn by Epiphanius, Basil, de Boor and Leo the Wise in the seventh, early ninth, ninth and early tenth century respectively. Furthermore, the lists of the bishops present at Councils do not make any reference to Serdica.34 Steven Runciman scantily attributes this to limited religious life in the city: “probably [Serdica] was merely a garrison city without much religious life”.35 In the Middle Ages the town gained significant importance, with the church of St Sofia becoming a centre where scholars assembled. Under the Ottomans, the intelligentsia were compelled to flee but, as highlighted above, Christians and Jews were allowed by the Muslim authorities to have places of worship, under strict aesthetic restrictions. In this sense, the three monotheistic religions, all derived from a common tradition, co-existed within a single geophysical space, the common denominator. Following the process of nation formation post Ottoman Liberation, the issue of socio-cultural integration was reinforced. The ethic criterion was set aside in the establishment of the Bulgarian Nation.

One may sum up the theme of this paper by making reference to Vasil Levski, one of the leading national heroes of the Liberation and formerly an Orthodox monk.36 He called for a Bulgarian republic based on ethnic and religious equality: “The rule of Turkish masters shall be replaced by concord, fraternity and complete equality of all nationalities. Bulgarians, Turks, Jews and others shall be equal in faith, nationality, civil status and every other respect, all being ruled by the same law to be approved by the majority vote of all nationalities”.37 He stressed that neither were the Bulgarian revolutionaries against the Turks nor was their religion but against the Ottoman government which had been ruling Bulgarian nationals, including the Turks, in a barbaric manner.38 Despite the Ottoman oppression, different ethnic groups and religions developed a modus vivendi. This legacy of ethnic diversity and religious tolerance forms part of the unique heritage of

35. Ibid., p.282.
36. Levski, meaning lion-like, was his nickname. His real name was Vasil Ivanov Kunchev.
38. The liberal ideas of Levski, hailed as the ‘Apostle of Freedom’, were modelled on the French Revolution. On February 19, 1873, at the age of 35 he was executed by the Ottoman authorities by hanging (M. MacDermott, The Apostle of Freedom: A portrait of Vasil Levski against a background of nineteenth-century Bulgaria, Allen and Unwin, 1967).
Sofia. This heritage should be preserved and provide a role model to the complex political realities present nowadays in the Balkan Peninsula. Not even the most notorious political regime managed to destroy the rapport between different ethnic representatives. It was dangerous to shelter Jews but a collective decision was taken that, despite the fact that Bulgaria was an ally of Germany, the country ran against Nazi orders to protect the Jews and none were deported.

Despite the political powers and the different attitudes towards ethnic groups, there was always a great deal of tolerance between them and this is a valuable trait and which should be conserved for the future and serve as a paradigm for the Balkan region. Multi-cultural and multi-religious coexistence and tolerance is a unique characteristic of Sofia. Throughout Bulgaria, the population is living in harmonious relation in regions and small towns. The majority of the Bulgarian population is tolerant and efforts should be invested to build further on what unites and not divide the Nation, a notion applicable equally to the whole geographical region. Reinforcing this notion is crucial for effective urban planning process which involves assigning zones and activities to fractions of its Capital.

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