

Response
to the show “Fatherland Front”
aired on March 27, 2010,
on Nova Televizia, Bulgarian National TV Network

By Dr. Viktor Kostov, Esq,
representing over 36 offended Christian
and evangelical churches and organizations

*(This is the text of the speech presented
on June 26, 2010
within the same program on NTV
as the first segment of the response.)*

Dear viewers,

In the following minutes we will present you with a point-of-view different from the one presented in the show "Fatherland Front" on the 27th of March this year, broadcast on NTV. According to the Law on Radio and Television, and on the basis of an agreement with the producers of the show, this is the right to response of over 36 Christian churches, denominations and organizations affected by the program in question.

We disagree with certain parts of that broadcast, as well as with the overall message of the production. The program in question presents Christian values, faith in God, the Evangelical Church, and the nature and practical dimensions of the fundamental human right of freedom of conscience and religion in an incorrect and misleading way.

Even if the story of the interviewed Snezhana Stoicheva contains some truth in itself, it cannot be the basis to argue before the million-viewer audience that pedophilia and Christianity go hand-in-hand, that the collecting of donations for the ministry of the church is a “shadowy evangelical economy,” and that the system of control of religious organizations is very liberal. These allegations are not simply outrageous and misleading. They are false. They instill in the audience and in society an incorrect idea about the essence of the Christian faith, church and ministry and the fundamental right to freedom of conscience and religion. Putting all believers and evangelical churches in this category, the authors did not reach the desired effects - to reveal corrupt individuals who abuse the trust of people in the name of religion. On the contrary, by accusing “all” the show in fact absolved the guilty, as far as there were any, in this case.

We remain convinced that Mr. Karbovski did not seek just that result. Overall, his journalistic work is directed towards revealing the truth about the state of Bulgarian society in its often grotesque inadequacies in regards to human lives and individuality. At the same time we cannot but note that the program we are protesting against fails to meet precisely this mission.

Here are the responses to some of the main theses of the program.

a. About Charity.

The show left the impression that Christian charity has only one sneaky goal -- to subversively win followers. This is unfair treatment, which, unfortunately we can only attribute to Mr. Karbovski. Christian charity is the heart of the gospel and the New Testament church. The idea to help the poor, foreigners, orphans, widows and other vulnerable groups in society has not been invented in the Department of Labor and Social Welfare. Charitable activity has been an intrinsic expression of faith in God since the beginning of Christianity and the church.

b. On the collection of funds for the activities of the church and accusations of a "shadowy evangelical economy."

Yet another myth planted during the anti-religious propaganda in communist times, is that the church must not collect donations. Mr. Karbovski in the show of March 27 crossed the boundary of good tone, calling charity and voluntary financial support for the churches "shadowy Evangelical Economics that nobody levies taxes on." Under current legal categories, the Church is practically a non-profit organization. Its business is to worship God, study God's word, preach the Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ, and do missionary and charity work. This work, naturally, should be financed. A Biblical and legal way of accomplishing this is to do it through voluntary donations by members and sympathizers of the churches and Christian organizations. Financing through donations is necessary because the church is not a government agency and should not be dependent on taxpayers. Moreover, the church is not a trading company to engage in trade, services and manufacturing. In terms of taxation it should be made clear that in developed and free societies charity, and especially private charities and religious activities, are exempted from tax burdens or have minor ones. Secondly, churches that are registered under the Religious Law keep records, which list their revenue and expenditures. Mr. Karbovski's math, stating who gave and gathered unaccountable millions by Christians, does not withstand a closer look at the numbers and that of reality.

c. On allegations of pedophilia and sexual immorality. To link Christianity and pedophilia is absurd and grotesque. Scandals in the Catholic Church as reported in the international media cannot be mechanically related to all churches and all believers. Each case must be examined individually, because the circumstances in each case are important. Only when the facts are fairly

examined and established can one draw conclusions and generalizations. Christ's teachings and belief defeated sin and perverseness - it is true, that many people who have engaged in an immoral and destructive way of life after their conversion to faith in Christ bear witness to a change in attitude and behavior. It is unacceptable to take the story of Mrs. Stoycheva and turn it into a platform for general statements that every pastor, every minister is actually a servant of sin and perversion. Unfortunately, such a conclusion can only be reached by Mr. Karbovski's interview with respondents, together with the captions that appeared onscreen during the interview.

d. On the sects and their secrecy.

As part of the show, while the depressing story of the alleged abuse of Ms. Stoycheva's trust goes on, we see the following words on the screen: "Snezhana in the secret world of sects." Firstly, the term "sect" is widely publicized in post-communist parlance since 1992. It denotes all "non-traditional for the country" beliefs and religious communities. The use of this term in the media over the past 20 years has always contained a negative connotation and accusation towards people belonging to "a sect." The term is often used to indicate the evangelical and Protestant believers and Christians and their churches. The ideological managing of people under communism did not allow any deviation from the thoughts, conscience and ideas imposed by the state. In fact, anti-sectarianism is anti-difference-of-thought. In Bulgarian culture, society remains burdened by state totalitarianism. Therefore, ideological, political and worldview differences amount to a threat to national security, the integrity of the nation or for the souls of youth. This heritage weighs on us, we see, even 20 years after the fall of the regime that allowed just one ideology. In pluralistic society which should be giving freedom to both the community and the individual, anti-sectarianism in the media serves to easily unify the mental and behavioral activity of people. It builds the sensational image of "the enemy among us." Actually, in the work of evangelical Christian churches there is nothing secretive, nothing threatening to the unity of the nation or the souls of young people. On the contrary. most evangelical communities have public Christian worship services, websites and other publications. If the media would seek feedback from people accused of "sectarian secrecy," they would see the true picture of Christian faith and evangelical churches.

e. On liberality of religious law in Bulgaria – and freedom of conscience and faith.

Mr. Karbovski also commented on the fact that it was very easy to register a church, since one needs only four members. I will mention that this situation is the result of the tireless work of human rights activists and organizations who oppose the trends toward limiting religious freedom. Just in the last three years there were at least five or six attempts for legislative revision of the religious law in the direction of limiting the possibilities for registration of religious communities. Moreover, the very existence of a special legal regime for religions and their registration has already established the desire of the authorities to limit believers and keep them under their watchful eye. For comparison, if you want to register a non-profit for the propaganda

of militant atheism, the registration follows the general procedure in the courts. No need to follow any particular “law for atheistic organizations.” If you are Christian or another religious organization, the regime of the right to association becomes more complicated. In this context, Mr. Karbovski’s exclamation: "Enough of such religious freedom!" we could take as an appeal to restrict the rights of religious association. And it is already sufficiently limited, in our view.

f. **Ultimately, the fundamental flaw** in the approach to the preparation of the program is as follows: based on the story of an apparently frustrated and disappointed woman, without the presentation of other viewpoints, the anchor draws conclusions that are too general and are misleading statements about the Christian faith, the Evangelical and other churches, and the spiritual significance of the nature of God.

A few words are needed regarding **the balance between freedom of speech and freedom of religion**. We respect freedom of speech, for a number of reasons:

i. Firstly, **New Testament Christianity is the basis of freedom of conscience and expression**.

The Apostles in the early church taught respect for authority and to all other individuals and groups in society. But when the authorities try to place restrictions on faith and preaching in the name of Jesus Christ, who is Messiah and Savior, then obedience is due to God, not the interim earthly rulers. The apostles refused to submit to religious and community leaders, when they ordered them not to preach Jesus Christ as the risen savior of humanity and of the individual person. To this testifies the New Testament, in the Acts of the Apostles, Ch. 4 and 5.

ii. Second, we believe **that respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms** is in agreement with the **Christian view** that man, despite his sin and need for reconciliation with God, is born in God's image and therefore entitled to be treated with dignity regardless of social, racial and cultural differences.

iii. Finally, **freedom of speech and free journalism is a guarantor** against the imposition of a tyrannical government or the imposition of a totalitarian ideology or religion on the whole society, through manipulation, propaganda and state coercion.

At the same time, it should be noted that freedom of speech is not limitless. Public speaking and writing is a great responsibility. It cannot serve for defamation and inciting hatred towards a group of people only because of their different religious beliefs. This is not to say that we are against the freedom to criticize the beliefs of others. On the contrary, religious debate and persuasion of people with other beliefs to change them is an integral part of freedom of conscience and religion. In finding this balance, how to convince the opponent that our viewpoint is correct, and not humiliate the dignity of the individual in this exchange, is the great secret of free societies, and the success of true New Testament Christianity. In ensuring this

important balance between freedom of speech and freedom of conscience, truth is an essential part. Unfortunately, we believe that the show “Fatherland Front” of March 27 failed in this regard.

Mr. Karbovski is among the most watched and popular journalists in the country. We respect his work and the fact that it offers viewpoints and reflections, which oppose the indolent thinking of mass culture and the reckless approach to human relations. At the same time, we cannot but take note of the extraordinary blunder which Mr. Karbovski, following his journalistic passion, made in the show of March 27.

In contrast to the summaries of Mr. Karbovski, we should summarize:

- i. Faith is not something trivial, on the contrary, the relationship to God is the most important choice in life;
- ii. God is real and one can fellowship with Him, though, indeed, not on the cell phone;
- iii. Christians are not pedophiles and sexually immoral, but rather adhere to high moral standards in every sphere of life, and moral purity and abstinence are the result of the reality of the forgiveness of sins, among serious followers of the Bible;
- iv. Charity and giving financial donations to the activities of the churches is not a shadowy economy, but true generosity and an expression of support for a noble cause; and
- v. freedom of religion and conscience is not excessive, but still misunderstood and an under-respected category in Bulgarian society.

In conclusion we will say this: Media influence on today’s conditions gives significant power. Therefore, if this power is exercised with careful regard for the facts and the truth, it will not serve sensation, scandal and commercialism but truth and goodness. We hope that Mr. Karbovski, and the media, in general, will live up to this responsibility when exploring the issues of faith, church and evangelical Christianity.

*All rights reserved © 2010 Freedom for All – an online magazine
for the freedoms of religion, conscience and speech for the Bulgarian context.*

E-mail: editor@center-religiousfreedom.com

www.Center-ReligiousFreedom.com