

## OPINION

regarding a competition for the academic post of associate professor by specialty: 2. Humanities; professional direction 2.4. Religion and Theology (Moral Theology – Religion and Moral Education), with a single candidate:

Dr. IVELINA NIKOLOVA NIKOLOVA,  
Ch. assistant professor in the Department - Theology, Faculty - Faculty of Philosophy and History, "Paisiy Hilendarski" University of Plovdiv, announced in the State Gazette, No. 39/05/2/2023

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To participate in the current competition, the only candidate, chap. Associate Professor Ivelina Nikolova Nikolova, Ph.D., has presented one monograph, nine study aids and methodical guides on religion, three articles in publications with an impact factor, two articles in publications without an impact factor. These works have so far not participated in competitions for the career growth of Ivelina Nikolova, incl. in the competition and for chief assistant. Apart from the works presented for the competition for docent, the candidate has an impressive bibliography - two more monographs, two studies and six articles in publications with an impact factor, nine articles in publications without an impact factor, and another 13 textbooks and methodical guides for studying religion.

From the reference given by the Faculty of Philosophy and History of the PU, it is clear that the candidate leads seven courses of lectures and four courses of exercises, with a total load of 495 hours, which is well above the norm of the University of Plovdiv (360 hours), which shows that the docent's course is provided with a sufficient number of hours.

I will not dwell on the educational-administrative activity of the candidate (called scientific-research for who knows why, but actually refers to participation in state exams, accreditations, curriculum development), where she was also extremely active, as far as this activity is concomitant for all teachers (regardless of their desire) and eats up a large part of their time and effort. It must be noted, however, her artistic and creative activity related to

prepress preparation, graphic design and layout of various scientific and popular science publications, something that I myself have witnessed on several occasions.

The data presented by her for scientific and teaching activities satisfy the minimum national requirements for appearing in the competition for associate professor (695 points in total). The monograph that the candidate presents for the competition is entitled "Many Faces of Christian Hope", Plovdiv University Publishing House, Plovdiv 2015. The study is presented as the second part of an aretological trilogy dedicated to the three Christian virtues - faith, hope and love. In fact, this is the first part of the trilogy, as it came out back in 2015, and the study of love is the second part, because it was published in the current year 2023, as far as I could manage with the documents presented.

In the introduction, the candidate examines some methodological issues. Without going into detail, I would like to say that she is completely right about the problems that theological science has, which is already developing in our country mainly in secular academic institutions.

This is a real problem, especially in Bulgaria, where until recently under the conditions of an atheistic regime, theological education was separated from secular academic higher schools. In fact, this problem accompanied the development of Christian theology throughout its history, even in the conditions of late antique and medieval societies that were religious. And then there were "inner" and "outer" philosophies, and often they didn't get along. Dr. Nikolova successfully coped with this challenge, although in some places the collision of the two types of thinking - religious and secular - is evident.

This is a solid study, although the author herself has defined it as "...an extensive introduction to the structural and content axes of the subject, revealing the many-faceted manifestations of Christian hope in the context of Christian aretology and systematics." In other words, the author takes her work, as it is fashionable to say now, as an approach to the subject. However, it has not only made an introduction, but has largely developed it.

The structure does indeed correspond to what it has stated as its intention – the first part of the work is an overview of the development of the idea of hope in the history of

European thought (including the Near Eastern tradition, based on Hellenistic culture).

In the very review of the sources and literature, Dr. Nikolova has largely managed to deal with the substance of this issue. Therefore, there is no strict distinction between the two parts of the monograph, although the second part is dedicated to the essential examination of the main problem. In the first part, many of the questions that are sought to be answered in the second are posed.

This second part focuses on some very important issues. First of all, it examines the Old Testament attitude to hope, while the first part begins with the ancient Hellenic concepts on this matter. Another approach could be applied, purely chronological, and the Hellenic philosophers could be considered in some sequence with the Old Testament ones, but the way the text is structured better highlights the two currents that lie at the basis of Christian concepts.

In the same way, there is the question of the second chapter of the second part, where the Bulgarian tradition is examined, in the person of Prof. Ivan Pančovski. This chapter could also be included in the first part, where the contributions of Prof. Ivan Pančovski would be placed in the context of the development of the study of the problem. Placed in the second part, however, the work of the main Bulgarian author on the subject stands out better. It is imperative to pay attention to perhaps the most important task that the author sets herself in this second part, namely the attempt at an eschatological interpretation of the topic. This issue is touched upon elsewhere in the monograph, and in the first part, when the views of some of the main Christian authors on the matter are considered, but quite rightly Dr. Nikolova has given special attention once again to this problem, which clearly lies in the foundation of Christian views on hope!

Finally, I would like to make some recommendations, although it is a published work that has had its literary life since 2015. From the point of view of a medievalist historian, I would like to see a stricter distinction between the texts studied as source and interpretive. It seems to me that in places, the exposition is quite extended with side questions of the main one, but somewhere the connection is lost. I can illustrate this finding with the exposition in the second chapter of the first part. There, when reviewing the idea of hope in modern theology, it is quite logically recommended that Christian theology return to the patristic tradition, where the question of hope was developed in the most detail, with a view to both the Old Testament idea and classical Greek philosophy. It is not necessary, however, to consider the views of the great fathers of the church in such detail and comprehensiveness, but only those of them which bear on the subject. Perhaps the author's teaching activity had an influence here, as the text presented in this way would be better perceived by a learning public.

Somewhere there are deviations from the main topic. I will give only one example here. What is the connection between e.g. the question of the symphony between the state and the church with the idea of Christian hope (pp. 87-88)?

The cited opinions of modern Russian theologians are not convincing, their studies have other goals, whether they talk about hope or not!

In this sense, the exposition could be tighter and more focused. Other minor notes may be made, such as the name of Jean Calvin called John (p. 226); in places the terms nation, tribe, people are mixed (eg on p. 224). On p. 298, several Orthodox encyclopedias are listed that talk about Christian hope. I would also add the latest, which is also the most complete - the Orthodox Encyclopedia, published by the Moscow Patriarchate, where there is a very nice article on this subject.

Despite the notes made, I repeat that this is a solid study, which, using the achievements of theological thought, and especially the Bulgarian one, which is in no way more backward than that in "near Orthodox countries". Regardless of the number of authors and publications on the issue. In this sense, this monograph takes the next step in the study of Christian hope. This book alone, and the author has one more, which was not submitted for the current competition (probably for reasons of a technical nature), would be quite sufficient for her to qualify as a docent.

However, Dr. Nikolova has also presented several scientific works on the problems of religious education for the competition. Three of them (in English) are in indexed editions. In them, the author shared her experience gained from several educational projects, at different levels, as well as from her practice as a religion teacher. In the remaining two articles, published in publications without an impact factor, already in Bulgarian, important issues of religious education are also discussed, among which I would like to draw attention to one issue that is touched upon by Dr. Nikolova and in her other research, namely the interactive teaching of religion.

All these purely scientific contributions do not remain only on the pages of academic publications. Dr. Nikolova has presented a whole series of textbooks and articles that have a scientific-applied character, insofar as they are devoted to issues related to the teaching of religion at various levels in our educational system. The presented set consists of nine textbooks and methodical aids - four textbooks from the first to the fourth grade, the accompanying four methodical guides and one interactive book for those trained in religion, again for this period of the children's education. They were written in connection with the new religious education curriculum adopted in 2018.

It is impressive that 16,000 units of these aids have been sold, which in itself is an indication of their quality and the public need for them.

Finally, I want to end with something that even novice theologians know. In the Christian tradition, especially at a wider societal level, the three Christian virtues of faith, hope and love are personified by the three innocent daughters of a martyr mother named Sophia. All

four are highly revered. As is well known, on a higher theological level, St. Sophia is Jesus Christ, he is Wisdom, he is the Word. He is, after all, to use the personification of the Roman martyr and her daughters, the father of hope, and hope itself! Something that is proven very well in the monograph presented for the current competition.

After getting acquainted with the materials and scientific works presented in the competition, analyzing their significance and the scientific, scientific-applied and applied contributions contained in them, I find it reasonable to give my positive assessment and confidently recommend to the Scientific Jury to prepare a reportproposal to The faculty council of the Faculty of Philosophy and History for the election of the head. Assistant Professor Ivelina Nikolova PhD in the academic position of "associate professor" at PU "Paisii Hilendarski" in the field of higher education 2. Humanities, professional direction 2.4 Religion and theology (Moral theology - religion and moral education).

Therefore, I call upon the honorable jury to award Ch. Assistant Professor Dr. Ivelina Nikolova Nikolova the academic title "docent", for which I will vote without hesitation.

Plovdiv, August 2, 2023

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