

EXAMINER'S REPORT

by **Metodiy Ivanov Angelov, PhD, Associate Professor at Plovdiv University, "Paisii Hilendarski"**

on the materials submitted for participation in the competition
for the academic position of **Associate professor
in University of Plovdiv "Paisii Hilendarski", F**
in the higher education area of **2. Humanities,**
professional orientation **2.4. Religion and theology (Moral theology - religion and moral
education)**

The only candidate in the competition for associate professorship announced in Darzhaven vestnik, №: 39 of 02.05. 2023 and on the website of Plovdiv University "Paisiy Hilendarski ", for the needs of *Department of Theology to the Philosophical and Historical Faculty of Plovdiv University "Paisiy Hilendarski"* is **chief ssistant Ivelina Nikolova Nikolova, PhD on the Department of Theology at Plovdiv University.**

1. General presentation of the submitted materials

Subject of the procedure:

With order No. PD-21-1419 of 30.06.2023 of the Rector of Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski" (PU) I have been appointed as a member of the academic committee for the competition for the academic position of **associate professor in the Plovdiv University, "Paisii Hilendarski" in the higher education 2. Humanities** in professional orientation **2.4. Religion and theology** (academic subject *Moral theology - religion and moral education*), **announced for the needs of the Department of Theology at the Faculty of Philosophy and History.** With the decision of the academic committee at the first session of 17.07.2023 I have been appointed to prepare a examiner's report.

To participate in the announced competition, **the only candidate who submitted documents is chief assistant Ivelina Nikolova Nikolova, PhD, Plovdiv University.** The commission for admitting candidates to the competition, appointed with order of the Rector (RD-21-1332 of 21.06.2023), based on its meeting on 10.07.2023, comes out with an opinion that the documents presented by Nikolova meet of the requirements of Law for the Development of the Academic Staff, The Regulations shall govern the implementation of the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria Act (DASRBA) and Regulations for the Development of the Academic Staff of Plovdiv University and with a decision to admit the candidate to the competition procedure.

Documents for participation in the announced competition have been submitted by Ivelina Nikolova.

The hardcopy set of materials submitted by Ivelina Nikolova, PhD is in agreement with the Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski" Statutes for academic staff advancement and it comprises the following documents: 1. Application; 2. CV; 3. Diploma of Higher Education; 4. Certificate for the Educational and Scientific Degree of PhD; 5. List of research publications; 6. Copies of publications of scientific works; 7. List of citations; 8. Information about the fulfillment of minimum requirements; 9. Annotations of the materials in Bulgarian and a foreign language; 10. Self-assessment of contributions; 11. Declaration of originality and authenticity of the attached documents; 12. Certificate of work experience; 13. Reference for academic work; 14. Reference for the research work; 14.1. Official note from the Department for scientific research; 15. Documents relating to

artistic activity; 16. Certificate of compliance with the additional faculty requirements. From the presented materials for the scientific activity, it is clear that Ivelina Nikolova **fulfilled** the minimum national requirements with 695 points and the additional faculty requirements of the Faculty of Philosophy and History.

The candidate Ivelina Nikolova has submitted a total of 25 scientific works: 3 monographs, 2 extensive studies (with an impact factor) and 20 research articles, of which 9 are in scientific journals with an impact factor. Also presented are 22 volumes of educational literature on religion. The materials are presented in two categories - part of them are accepted for reviewing and another part as auxiliary evidence for the scientific and educational creativity of the candidate outside the category of the announced competition.

6 scientific works (1 monograph and 5 articles, of which 3 in journals with an impact factor), which are outside the dissertation are accepted for reviewing. In the final assessment, 9 study aids and methodical guides are also taken into account.

2. Short CV

Candidate Ivelina Nikolova was born in 1979. She received her secondary education "music teacher - instrumental profile" from music school "Filip Kutev" in Kotel in the period of 1999-2004. In 2004-2005 she studied theology at the Faculty of Theology at the Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", where she graduated from the Faculty of Arts "Bachelor" and the Faculty of Arts "Master", respectively. In 2007 she obtained the Master's degree in "Medieval Philosophy and Culture" at the Faculty of Philosophy of the same university. From 2006 to 2009, she was a full-time doctoral student at the Faculty of Theology of the university, where in 2010 she defended her doctorate.

Ivelina Nikolova's work experience is saturated with various pedagogical activities in different kindergartens and schools: from 2004 to 2011 she taught "Religion" in 74 central kindergartens "Magnolia", from 2010 to 2017 she taught "Religion" at civil contract in kindergartens and schools in Kyustendil. In the period from 2012 until now, she is a participant and coordinator of the "Religion" project for the development and publication of educational literature on religion for kindergartens and general education schools, which received the blessing of the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church for use.

The candidate's academic career began as a part-time assistant in Systematic Theology at the Theological Faculty of Sofia University. After participating in a competition in 2011, Ivelina Nikolova was appointed as an assistant at the Department of Theology at the Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski" and since 2013 she has been appointed to the position of assistant professor in Systematic (Moral Theology).

3. General assessment of the candidate's activities

3.1. Assessment of scientific activity of the candidate

Monograph

Ivelina Nikolova presents for review *a monographic work* with the title "Many Faces of Christian Hope". Even from the title the author's desire to escape from the stereotyped consideration of the problem and to analyze and present it in its depth and multi-layeredness is revealed. The scientific work has a volume of 486 pages with a complex structure consisting of a "Preface",

"Introduction" and main text in two parts, divided into chapters, separated into paragraphs and sub-points and finally ends with "References". The bibliography lists a total of 291 sources - 246 in Cyrillic and 45 in Latin.

The topic is originally formulated and scientifically fruitful, directing the reader's attention to the multi-layered, complex and diverse spiritual connections and manifestations of Christian hope in human life.

Regarding *the methodology*, in the introduction of her scientific work, Ivelina Nikolova emphasizes that she follows the ideological tradition of Bulgarian theological thought in scientific research in the area of the problematic of Christian hope. The author's aspiration is starting from this proven fruitful scientific basis, standing firmly on the ecclesiastical and biblical basis but enriching it with different approaches aimed at revealing new points of view to reach other unexplored layers of the complex structure of hope, from so that its multifaceted nature becomes apparent in the spiritual world of man. The author chooses an approach for the further development and upgrading of those rational ideas in Bulgarian and Orthodox moral theology that pave the way to a morally fruitful perspective. It uses a synthetic approach based on a well-defined and stable tradition coming from the famous Bulgarian theologians Gancho Pashov, Ivan Panchovski and Dimitar Kirov (p. 25), enriched with ideas and perspectives from applied interdisciplinary and interconfessional approaches. In this way the author integrates the achievements of the Bulgarian theological tradition with the wealth of Orthodox theology and the exchange of ideas from the field of humanitarian knowledge, presenting us with ideas from other Christian denominations, without, however, mechanically and uncritically borrowing them. From the point of view of this research perspective, I believe that Nikolova is headed in the right direction and this methodological base will give her the opportunity, on the one hand to further *develop and build on* what has been achieved so far as a tradition and on the other hand, to reveal new research horizons of this a key Christian virtue. Such an approach would protect her scientific creativity from being closed and encapsulated only within the framework of the achievements of Bulgarian theologians, repeating and commenting on their ideas, but would contribute to the discovery of new spiritual connections and psychological manifestations of hope in the life of Christian spirituality and in a more a general plan, significant for Orthodoxy in general, and it would not be an exaggeration to generalize for Christian theology as well.

The theme of the multifaceted nature of hope in Nikolova's work unfolds in a double context: on the one part- the development of the concepts of hope in Hellenic philosophy and the formation of the theological-ethical teaching on Christian hope is traced historically, in parallel with the identification of the meaning nests in it, and on the other part – its problematization in relation to trends in contemporary Orthodox theology, while not forgetting the humanitarian aspects of hope (pp. 27-28). It is extremely important to specify that the theme of hope in the monographic work will be considered as a value in the context of moral universalism (pp. 430-431).

In the first two chapters of the first part of her monographic work, using interdisciplinary and interconfessional approaches, Nikolova outlines the parameters of the lines of thought in the discussions on the topic of hope as revealed to us in the scholarly literature from the fields of philosophy (pp. 33-52) and Christian theology (pp. 57-236). With a concise and clear style, the author marks the main alternative theses and their arguments, which have conceptual significance and serve as ideological benchmarks in the history of the movement of human thought forward in this ancient and at the same time eternally relevant universal human problem, exciting humanity throughout the

different eras of its development. This angle of revealing the ideational landscape of hope is the conceptual background on which her scientific researches are further developed and on which the contributions of the monographic work to reveal the multifacetedness of hope stand out.

In the second part of the monograph, in the first chapter, Nikolova's reflections are focused on the biblical grounds for hope and its interaction with such moral and psychological categories from the Old Testament as justice, suffering, despair (pp. 238-297). In the same chapter, the dimensions and spiritual perspectives of the New Testament hope are revealed, and its characteristic features are clearly outlined (pp. 298-349). This virtue is thoroughly analyzed in the theology of Paul the Apostle, the various aspects of her spiritual manifestations and interactions being brought out and presented. The second chapter of this part focuses on the detailed and multi-layered analysis of Christian hope in the system of moral theology of the famous theologian Ivan Panchovski (pp. 350-397).

In the third chapter of the second part, entitled "Modes of Hope" (pp. 398-471), Nikolova connects the study of hope with the practical spiritual life of man and with the ecclesiastical ideological context, which translates the usefulness of the conclusions in an interdisciplinary plan and towards the humanities and social sciences. While the rich philosophical training and theological erudition of Ivelina Nikolova is more visible in the previous chapters, in this part of the monograph her skills for in-depth logical analysis of spiritual cause-and-effect relationships, spiritual reflection and the possibilities of penetrating into the subtle manifestations of Christian hope.

Arguing against relativist and subjectivist views in axiology, despite the fact that the experience of hope is subjective, the author categorically defines it as a universal spiritual value, the study of which cannot be effective outside the paradigm of moral objectivism and universalism (pp. 430-431). She raises the question of the omission so far in Christian theology of a thorough study of the axiological aspect of hope as an absolute and universal value, gradually lost from the life of modern man (pp. 429-430). Of important social and practical importance is the examination in this chapter, on the one hand, of its beneficial influence on personality development, and on the other hand, of the negative spiritual states, primarily related to hopelessness and selfishness, found in the materialistically oriented person, which do not allow the manifestation of hope and ultimately lead to despair and thoughts of suicide. This part of the monographic work represents a real ideological and conceptual richness in revealing the many faces of Christian hope, because Nikolova goes beyond the framework of traditional Christian reflections on the topic, but also starts in the direction of their application in a universal all-human perspective. It is successful and with wide heuristic possibilities to differentiate hope, on the one hand, as a "*subjective experience*" and on the other, as "*asummarized expression of the entire Christian teaching, which includes the teaching of immortality, resurrection, and eternal life*" (page 406).

The paradox of hope as a special spiritual state is the subject of the author's reflections and the main core of her original conclusions, argued by proving the absurdity in the experienced state of hope, arising from the powerlessness of man and related to the disintegration of his "inner world" . The paradox is manifested in the process of that personal transformation, in which a palette of feelings and states define a person: from the lack of hope and complete collapse to the emergence of hope from the source of his inner Christian values and faith. In this sense, man "*experiences hope primarily as paradoxical, as absurd*" (p. 407). In these lines, the inspiration and insight of the researcher is also felt, which at times sounds with apologetic force and argumentation, paraphrasing the original thought of the ancient Christian thinker: "*then the thought of Tertullian*" *credo quid absurdum*" (*I believe*

because it is absurd) also means "I hope because it is absurd". Absurdity arises from faith because it cannot be explained by secularist arguments and in this sense appears paradoxical and impossible. Hope is seen as a soul transaction related to human being, while its roots are metaphysical and universal. Impasse is seen as a source of hope (*absurd Christian hope*, p. 407) only and only if unconditional faith in God is embodied in man's understandings and experiences. These conditions make sense of the hopelessness and suffering in human existence, namely through the strengthening of faith in God, which will appear as a ray of salvation when a person's soul is immersed in inner sorrow. Therefore, hope is the mystical realization of human faith, strengthening the relationship between God and man, manifesting itself as a mystery and often "*misunderstood in its depth*" (p. 406). Man's powerlessness can be seen as a source of hope when it is fertilized by faith in God and has grown into inner strength. The mystical connection between hopelessness that leads to despair and hope can only be experienced through faith in God, while optimism can be a manifestation of a person's inner philosophy or qualities. Thus hope is derived from faith in God. When one *cannot be master of the moment—both the present and the future—he unwittingly gives that opportunity to "God"* (p. 399). Ivelina Nikolova insightfully reveals that this logical absurdity is due, on the one hand, to the believer's realization of his powerlessness in the face of circumstances, and on the other hand, he fully accepts the help of the elusive action of God's gracious energy, which supports him spiritually and believes in the main pillars of Christian teaching - about the immortality of man, about eternal life, about redemption and salvation and others, which he experiences as truths. In the monograph, hope is defined as *a paradoxical space in which God's grace manifests itself and which we cannot explain rationally*" (p. 400), because "*hope provides us with a special experience of knowing God, without our specifically wanting it or without even to come into personal contact with God*" (p. 401). God-knowing experience and the manifestation of hope cannot be achieved through the will of man, no matter how strong his desire, but is only stimulated by his inner awareness and openness to experiencing mystical states. In this sense, hope, apart from being a paradox, can also be seen as a reward for the believer as a result of his devotion to God. Hope can be seen as a gift from "communicating" with God, because it is a source of strength necessary both for overcoming difficulties and for inner improvement. Inner strength is expressed in the constant manifestation of hope, which gives meaning to faith in God and to the mystical "communication" between God and man. In this sense, the person enters into an intuitive "*personal contact*" with God, which is sought after and conscious and is the fruit of mystical experiences and striving for spiritual improvement. The awareness of man's relationship with God and faith in spiritual postulates give the believer unshakable confidence in the success and the happy end of human life regardless of the state of sensory visibility. This produces peace in the believer in the face of life's challenges and even in the face of death. Nikolova points out, however, that in order for this to happen, an inner spiritual transformation is necessary, and repentance is one of the conditions through which perfection and knowledge of God is reached, and hope is the tool for salvation, perfection and knowledge of God (p. 400 and p. 401). Clarifying in this way the specifics of Christian hope, the author clearly distinguishes it from optimism, which he considers as a positive attitude towards the good and the positive in life.

In her reflections in this chapter, as well as in the previous ones, Ivelina Nikolova *achieves the goal of her research* and reveals the multifacetedness of Christian hope, in which its aspects are logically outlined: axiological and personal character, universal and universal value, as well as its theocentric, Christological, messianic, aretological, soteriological, eschatological, personal and at the same time "conciliar" character in the context of Christian teachings. At the same time, the author

reveals to us hope as dynamic - it moves the believer forward towards spiritual transformation and knowledge of God. In her monographic work with a clear, concise and comprehensible statement, Nikolova confidently and inspiredly leads us along the reflective paths of thought to a deep and expansive understanding of Christian hope, revealing penetratingly the hidden aspects of hope, "shrouded in mystery due to its paradoxical *nature* " (p. 406). Through his monographic work, the author manages both to confirm what has been achieved on the topic of Christian hope in the tradition of Orthodox theology, and to expand and upgrade it with new aspects and revelations.

Scientific articles proposed for review

Of the 5 articles proposed for participation in the competition, 3 are in journals with an impact factor. The first of them: *An innovative educational model for training in Religion, developed on the territory of Kyustendil municipality - "Path to goodness" for our "Little Sunflowers"* presents the organizational and conceptual parameters of the project "Religion - Kyustendil", the innovative model for training in "Religion", as well as research on the results of the implementation of the project over the years, which began in 2010 and continues to this day. In addition to didactic and methodical provision, Nikolova is also involved in large-scale organizational activities, covering about 60 groups with children from kindergarten and about 40 more groups in schools. In the words of Ivelina Nikolova, "The number of children studying the subject "Religion" approximately for each year is about 1200." It is clear that such activity leads not only to the successful realization of the educational project, but also to its deployment as an apostolic activity. The other article, *Key Competencies – the Key to New Reform for a Truly New Religion Program*, presents Nikolova's keen awareness of current trends in education and her drive to implement them in Religion studies. The third article presented, *Moral problems in the recent history of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church*, presents in English some moral problems from the recent past that the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC) and its leadership faced - it is indicated as a manifestation of Christian humanism, the struggle and the role of BOC for the rescue of Bulgarian Jews during the Second World War; the conditions and limitations in which the Church existed during the atheistic totalitarian regime in Bulgaria are explained, the strategy it adopted and the consequences of such political and social isolation today. The church schism after 1992, its causes and its overcoming are explained. Current challenges facing the Church are also indicated. Nikolova's scientific research reveals the author's good knowledge of the modern history of the Church and the current trends of development in it. The theoretical pedagogical training of Ivelina Nikolova and her understanding of the role of interactive religious education are evident from the fourth article submitted for review, *Interaction in Religious Education*. The other article proposed for review points to an interesting study for us Bulgarians - *About the place of the Bulgarian folk song with Orthodox-religious content: the experience of the municipality of Kyustendil*. In terms of content, the interdisciplinary study reveals the intertwining of the ideas of Christianity in folklore and outlines the interrelationships between memory, traditions, life and heritage - an effective approach in religious education presented on the territory of Kyustendil municipality.

In summary, the developments of Ivelina Nikolova reveal her broad and diverse scientific interests as a person and a researcher, aimed at analyzing the activity of the Church, at theoretical and practical pedagogical issues, the relationship of religion with folklore, ethnology and local lore, which are scientific topics equally close to it and allow the use of a successfully presented interdisciplinary approach in moral theology.

3.2. Evaluation of educational and pedagogical activity and preparation of the candidate

Study activity with students

The report on the educational activity confirms that the annual workload of Nikolova covers the required minimum hours for lectures and for the annual norm of 360 hours. She holds courses in 7 disciplines (Moral Theology Part I and II, Christian Apologetics, Undergraduate Seminar, Religion and Moral Education, Interactive Methods in Teaching Religion and Applied Ethics) - all with 210 hours of lectures and with general horary, together with doubled lectures and exercises - 495 hours. Since her appointment as chief assistant until now, Ivelina Nikolova has had 2 certifications with positive grades. This fact, as well as her previous pedagogical experience in the educational system, are evidence of her high pedagogical qualities and methodical training.

Other learning activities

From the autobiography of Ivelina Nikolova, it can be seen that over the years she has gained *extensive practical experience* as a teacher of religion in the various grades of the general education school and in the kindergarten. For the current competition, the candidate also submits *an author's set of printed color teaching aids and methodical guides* for the teacher, intended for grades 1 to 4 in primary school level together with an interactive book on religion, published by the publishing house of PU "Paisiy Hilendarski". The educational materials are in accordance with the didactic and age requirements, they are *implemented* in practice and are used in the territory of the Kyustendil municipality with the approval of the Holy Synod of the BOC.

4. Evaluation of the candidate's personal contribution

The main contributions to Nikolova's scientific activity are most clearly outlined in her monographic work, as well as in the development of methodological and educational literature on religion. *Contributions to the monograph:* 1) Affirms the Bulgarian theological tradition; enriches, continues and builds conceptually the Bulgarian moral theology in this issue from the positions of moral universalism; 2) Develops a new problematic field and direction in the research of the topic, enriching it with the use of approaches expanding heuristic possibilities with new research perspectives; 3) In terms of structure and content, it examines the topic chronologically, which provides opportunities for greater completeness in clarifying the issue; 4) Reveals the paradoxical nature of Christian hope; 5) It highlights the manifestations of negative deviations from hope and their consequences. *Contributions in the methodical and educational literature:* 1) Construction of an educational system based on the Orthodox heritage, intended for children. The system uses interactive methods and is original in terms of methodology and content. Methodical guides for the teacher have been developed; 2) The educational system has been tested, implemented and fulfills a need of the general education school for such type of educational literature.

5 citations of Ivelina Nikolova's scientific works were found .

I believe that the materials proposed for review for the competition ***are the personal work of the Ch. Asst. Ivelina Nikolova, PhD and the contributions in them are her personal merit.***

5. Critical remarks and recommendations

The monograph "Love - the center of Christian aretology " and three of the articles indicated as scientific production outside the contest category are of scientific and practical interest and may also be submitted for participation in the contest .

6. Personal impressions

I have known Ch. Asst. Ivelina Nikolova, PhD since 2011 as a purposeful person, a thorough scholar and a Christian teacher who inspires children to the Orthodox faith. Her ability to work in a team and empathetically participate in various projects and university activities allows me to confidently express the opinion that Ivelina Nikolova responsibly and qualitatively fulfills her official tasks.

CONCLUSION

The documents and materials presented by Ch. Asst. Ivelina Nikolova Nikolova, PhD **meet all** the requirements of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, the Regulations for the Implementation of the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria Act (DASRBA) and the relevant Regulations of Plovdiv University "Paisiy Hilendarski".

The candidate in the competition **has** submitted **a sufficient** number of scientific works published after the materials used in the defense of the "PhD" and for the competition for the position of "Chief Assistant". The candidate's works contain original scientific contributions that have received recognition from the scientific community, some of which have been published in journals and scientific collections issued by international academic publishing houses. Her theoretical developments have practical applicability, and some of them are directly oriented to academic work. Ivelina Nikolova 's scientific and teaching qualifications **are unquestionable**.

The results achieved by Ch. Asst. Ivelina Nikolova, PhD in her academic and research activities **fully** correspond to the minimum national and additional requirements of the Faculty of Philosophy and History, adopted in connection with the Regulations of the University of Applied Sciences for the application of The Regulations shall govern the implementation of the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria Act (DASRBA).

After getting acquainted with the materials and scientific works presented in the competition, analyzing their significance and the scientific and scientific-applied contributions contained in them, I find it reasonable to give my **positive** assessment **and I recommend** to the Scientific Jury to prepare a report-proposal to the Faculty Council of the Faculty of Philosophy and History for the election of **Ivelina Nikolova Nikolova** to the academic position "**associate professor**" at Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski" in: field of higher education 2. *Humanities*, professional direction 2.4. *Religion and Theology (Moral Theology – religion and moral education)*.

09/08/2023

Reviewer:

(signature)

/associate professor Metodiy Angelov, PhD/