

PEER REVIEW

by Prof. Dr. Sc. Maria Antonova Schnitter
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of a dissertation for the award of the scientific degree “Doctor of Sciences”

by: field of higher education 2. Humanities

professional field 2.4. *Religion and Theology*

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(acad. position., sc. degree, name, surname, surname - university or scientific organization)

Topic: THE FEAST "DORMITION OF THE THEOTOKOS" IN THE ORTHODOX LITURGICAL TRADITION (THEOLOGICAL CONTENT OF THE FEAST BASED ON THE HYMNOGRAPHIC AND HOMILETIC TEXTS OF THE CHURCH)

By Rector's order ПД 21-521/29.02.2024 I have been appointed a member of the scientific jury under the procedure described above. Within the term established by law, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Stoyan Chilikov presented the required set of documents, and at the first meeting of the scientific jury it was decided to prepare an opinion on the dissertation.

1. General presentation of the applicant and the procedure

I have known Protopriest Dr. Stoyan Chilikov for nearly two decades and over the years, I have witnessed and to some extent been complicit in his academic growth. His interest in his chosen dissertation topic dates back a long time and we can only be respectful of the patience and perseverance with which he has devoted years to the pursuit of this research. The result is, in a sense, his *opus magnum*, his life's work, and represents the extent of his conceptualization and mastery of the scientific problem.

2. Relevance of the topic

In theological studies it is difficult to speak of "relevance" - every topic is equally relevant from the perspective of eternity. Yet let me note that the scholarly text offered to our attention demonstrates a contemporary approach and is devoted to a topic that has not been studied in such breadth and completeness. Prompted by the youthful bewilderment of the young theology student

at the disconnect between authoritative "academic interpretation" and liturgical texts bearing ancient meanings and significances, this text engages us in an interesting tracing of the vicissitudes and stages of the Orthodox understanding of the Assumption of the Mother of God. It is a theme that is inevitably relevant to every Christian.

3. Knowledge of the problem

After devoting a significant part of his conscious life as a theologian and scholar to study, Dr. Chilikov undoubtedly knows the problem in depth. This is evidenced (albeit indirectly) by the volume and breadth of the literature cited: two Greek and one Slavonic manuscripts, with which we get the impression that he worked *de visu*, 130 sources (Greek and Slavonic) used in a variety of publications, as well as 171 titles of secondary literature in Cyrillic, Greek, and Latin, and ten electronic resources (most of them last reviewed in 2015-2016!). The sheer effort to encompass and make sense of all this vast and disparate information inevitably leads to entering into those fine details of the historical development of the subject under study that will ensure that reasoned and convincing conclusions are reached. Here I would venture to recommend that the "scholarly publications" cited be correctly dated in the bibliography - even when they are as popular as BHG, or AB, they have their bibliographical characteristics.

4. Research methodology

The chosen methodology is necessarily interdisciplinary. Alongside the in-depth analysis of the patristic and liturgical texts, there is a critical reading of the academic tradition and a search for one's own position on a number of controversial issues. I admire the audacity of the candidate to argue even with the most eminent scholars of previous generations (an inevitable characteristic of youth!), but I would still recommend him to express his disagreements in a more moderate tone. Although he has tried to soften his wording somewhat (following the recommendations made during the internal defense), I think the dissertation would only benefit from an even more balanced style of academic argument.

5. Characteristics and evaluation of the dissertation and contributions - presence / absence of plagiarism

The thesis submitted for defense consists of a preface, an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion and a bibliography, as well as two appendices.

The **Preface** introduces us to the background of the writing of the work and argues the author's commitment to the chosen topic. The introduction outlines the chosen research field, argues the chosen research methods and formulates the set aims and objectives. The thesis is formulated succinctly (p. 19) and focuses on the fact that in the liturgical sense of the feast of the Assumption, homiletical and hymnographic texts referring to the idea of "transubstantiation and even resurrection" are gradually added to the ancient rite (where the main theme is the Virgin's dormition/death). The main sources and historiography of the problem under study are traced, and the reading of the secondary literature is distinguished by its relevance, breadth and thorough criticality.

The **First chapter** of the dissertation traces the *history, structure and narratives of the Feast of the Assumption*. The important conclusion that veneration of the Mother of God "was not born in theological reflection" but derives "from the practice of liturgical worship" (p. 39) argues for a detailed historical overview. The theme of death as succession (rather than tragedy), marking the boundary between Old Testament and New Testament interpretations of this most important transition in the individual human trajectory, is examined from a strictly orthodox position. The historical-archaeological debate concerning the place of the "Mary's Sepulcher" could, in my view, be dealt with more briefly, and only insofar as it is relevant to the relevant local liturgical practices. The unequivocal assertion that "*it is in Gethsemane that the tomb of the holy Virgin is*" (p. 56) is not proven by any hitherto unknown facts, and should have been formulated less emphatically. Bringing in as evidence acanonical works (such as the Proto-Evangelium of James, etc.) broadens the view, but a detailed analysis of them is unnecessary insofar as these apocryphal texts have long been studied in detail in the world academic tradition.

I find convincing Fr. Chilikov's interpretation of the history of the establishment of the feast and its spread in the East and West of the Christian world. The structure of the feast and its dynamics is described by tracing the relevant liturgical readings. Here Dr. Chilikov turns to an analytical reading of the many and varied liturgical sources, and this makes the following sections of the dissertation truly contributory constructions of Orthodox liturgics. The sections dealing with the tradition of typikons and calendars are also interesting. These could be developed further in a study of their own. The apocryphal narratives of the feast are examined in their (natural) interrelation with the sacred tradition, and the chronological limit to the fifteenth century is convincingly argued. The inclusion of the original Slavonic texts contributes to densifying the

context and placing the literature of Slavia Orthodoxa within the wider picture of the medieval Christian world. It is not clear why Gregory Tsamblak's *Omilia on the Assumption* has not been analyzed - it is a vivid testimony to the level of Slavic theological thought in the early fifteenth century.

The **Second chapter** deals with the *Theotokology of the feast on the basis of its hymnography and the patristic words*. The very understanding of hymnography as a real vehicle and expresser of theological interpretation is unfortunately relatively rarely applied in our academic tradition-perhaps because of the discrepancy in the specific competencies of philologists-paleographers and theologians. I therefore believe that the combination of the two perspectives offered by this part of the dissertation is not only a practical but also an important methodological contribution. Although Byzantologists and paleoslavists have been talking about this for decades (see e.g. the important remark by Chr. Hannick (p. 115), there are still few researchers who apply such an approach consistently.

In this part of his work Fr. Chilikov delves into the texts of Slavonic manuscripts, which he uses mainly thanks to the collegial help of Slavists and Byzantinists (direct contact with the manuscripts is often problematic). The comparison of the Slavonic texts with their Greek originals does not lead to any clear conclusions about the absence or presence of transformations in interpretation arising in translation. If they are present, they should be mentioned and commented upon; if they are absent, why the need for such laborious reconciliation?

This is undoubtedly the most interesting part of the work, which traces the different aspects of the theotokology of the feast - the dogma of the Theotokos, the Assumption and the glorification of the Mother of God, the iconography of the feast. The relationship outlined between hymnographic texts and iconography is interesting and deserves further study. I would like to draw Fr. Chilikov's attention to the magnificent edition of *The Iconography of the Theotokos* (vol. 8 of the Athoniad series, S., 2022), as well as to the study on the subject included therein.

The **Third chapter** of the dissertation is devoted to the *liturgical sequences and feasts in connection with the Feast of the Assumption*. Here, the contemporary state of the feast and its individual preparatory stages are traced diachronically (the Ascension of Panagia, the Burial service of the Blessed Virgin Mary in its local and temporal variants, the Prayer Canon to the Blessed Virgin Mary with its variants related to the Marian Fast). The feasts associated with the Dormition of the Theotokos - Laying of the Garment of St. Mary in Vlaherna, Laying of Her Belt

of Honour in Chalcopectria are also examined. The feast of the Virgin Mary and its historical development is the subject of a separate analysis.

The Conclusion summarizes the conclusions drawn so far and focuses on the dynamics of the formation of the complex of dogmatic ideas and liturgical texts in the overall context of the feast over the centuries.

6. Evaluation of the publications and personal contribution of the dissertation

In the procedure for obtaining the degree of Doctor of Science, Fr. Stoyan Chilikov has submitted two studies and seven articles. The two studies and three of the articles have been published abroad (one twice, in Bulgarian and in Romanian). **All publications are original contributions of the dissertant. There is no evidence of plagiarism both in them and in the dissertation itself.**

It is noteworthy that all of the publications presented are dated up to 2018, i.e. a full 6 years before the launch of the current procedure, which is puzzling - despite the known vicissitudes through which the work had to pass.

I would accept a significant part of the 9 declared total "scientific contributions" as relevant, but it seems to me that they should have been formulated more concisely and correctly. As it stands, they often reproduce the conclusions drawn or even describe what the author of the paper has done, without being clear what his own 'contribution' consists of.

7. Summary of the dissertation

The summary of the dissertation meets the formal and substantive requirements and corresponds to the text of the dissertation. In addition, it has the qualities of an independent scientific text.

8. Recommendations for future use of dissertation contributions and results

Since the dissertation has already been published in a separate book, I would recommend continuing its wider scientific publication - mainly abroad, given its scientific contributions and the relevance of the issue.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I once again confirm my opinion that the dissertation submitted for the defense on the topic "*The feast "Dormition of the Theotokos" in the Orthodox liturgical tradition*"

(theological content of the feast based on the hymnographic and homiletic texts of the Church)" satisfies the legal requirements for obtaining the degree of Doctor of Sciences. It represents a comprehensive study of a serious theological problem and is evidence of the maturity and professional proficiency achieved.

I will vote positively for the award of the scientific degree "Doctor of Sciences" in the field of higher education 2. Humanities, Professional field 2.4. *Religion and Theology* to Protopriest Assoc. Prof. Dr. Stoyan Iliev Chilikov.

The opinion is prepared by:

Prof. Dr. Sc. Maria Schnitter

14.04.2024.