

REVIEW

of the works and assessment of the academic activities
of Assoc. Prof. Dr. **Klara Asenova Toneva**,
participant in a competition for the academic position "**Professor**"
in the scientific specialty *History of Religions*,
professional field **2.4. Religion and Theology**,
area of higher *education 2. Humanities*,
Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"
by Prof. DSc. Valentin Kanawrow

This review was prepared on the basis of documents submitted for participation in a competitive procedure for acquiring a professor's degree *in the* professional field 2.4. *Religion and Theology*, scientific specialty *History of Religions*, announced by Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" in SG, issue 1/2014 63 of 30 May 2021, in accordance with Order of the Rector of Sofia University No RD 38-450 of 17 September 2021 for the constitution of a scientific jury for the conduction of the competition. The submitted documents meet the requirements specified in the Act for the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, its Implementing Regulations, and the regulations of Sofia University. I am pleased to acknowledge the precise and clear ordering of the materials submitted for the competition. The procedure has been followed fully and accurately.

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Klara Toneva is the only **candidate in** the competition.

In support of her participation in the competition Assoc. Prof. Toneva has submitted a list of publications in Bulgarian and English **which contains 24** titles, including **2** printed monographs (2008, 2018), **4** studies, **16** articles and **2** textbooks. All titles are strictly compliant with the professional field of the competition and the two monographs are theoretical studies in the scientific specialty of the competition. The titles do not appear in the candidate's previously submitted list of publications for her habitation in 2012. She has duly submitted a full list of publications, which is considerably longer than the 24 titles quoted (including 74 publications, and, as a side remark only, I would like to point out that the candidate has 4 monographs).

Assoc. Prof. Toneva's academic resume includes: completed higher education with a Master of Theology degree at Sofia University (1996), postgraduate

qualification in English at the Department for Language Teaching and International Students - Sofia (1999), doctoral studies in the scientific specialty *History of Religions* at the Faculty of Theology at Sofia University - *The Situation of the Muslim Woman as a Contemporary Challenge to Islam* (2004), a full-time Assistant Professor position at the Faculty of Theology at Sofia University (2002-2003), a Chief Assistant Professor position at the Faculty of Theology at Sofia University (2004-2012), and, since 2012, a part-time lecturer position at the Military Academy "G. S. Rakovski" - Sofia and an Associate Professor position at the Department of Systematical Theology at the Faculty of Theology at Sofia University.

The academic experience of Assoc. Prof. Toneva, which is a worthy and sufficient basis for a successful professorship, can be divided into 5 sections: (1) personal theoretical contributions in the professional field *2.4. Religion and Theology*, scientific specialty *History of Religions*; (2) scientific achievements resulting from reflections on the dynamics of interconfessional discord and interconfessional dialogue; (3) an active theological position for the affirmation of Orthodox spirituality; (4) theological commitment to the place and role of women in religious contexts and church communities; (5) teaching work at higher education level. I will address individually each of these, which, in my opinion, constitute the general academic profile of Assoc. Prof. Toneva.

1) The main theoretical highlights in Assoc. Prof. Toneva's professorship candidacy, which add scientific value and indicate systematic research, are clearly visible in the two monographs submitted for the competition: *Secularised Religiosity*. 2018 Sofia: St. Kliment Ohridski University Press, and *The Church – a Community of Love*. 2008. Sofia: Pleiad Publishing House. Starting the analysis with the first, I would like to note its impressive and very skilfully worded subject, which opens up possibilities for multiple specific theoretical contributions that intersect with the Christian attitude and spirituality. This subject does not, as is the usual case, highlight the cultural, social and existential presence of the secular, nor the palpable secularism of the modern age, but the processes of religious decadence in relation to man's spiritual need for religion. The religious and the secular are opposing spiritual worlds

that counteract but also overlap with each other. The battle for the world's being-in-the-world (in Heidegger's terms) takes place along the entire religious-secular spectrum: from a complete denial of the gravity of secular elements, which shifts into religious fundamentalism, to a complete obliteration of religiosity, which leads to idolatry due to the irresistible transcendental phenomenology of the religious (as qualified in my critical metaphysical conceptuality). Assoc. Prof. Toneva's analytical and synthetic approach throughout this section reveals both the extreme existential ills of its extremes and the disastrous amalgam of secularised religiosity, which lays claim to both balancing intermediation and denial of extremes, but is all the same a "Sickness unto Death" (as referred to in Kierkegaard's discourse, or rather his existentialism). Today's acclaimed return to the religious should not be unconditionally understood in the context of man's natural leanings to religion. Kant already showed that man's leanings are not a stable and reliable basis for moral behaviour. On the contrary, fetishism and alienation can be overcome not through the chaos of what exists or the multicultural entanglements of what is happening (monocultures exist only in agriculture, while even Friday is a multicultural entity), but through the metaphysical being of Jesus Christ, manifested in His miracles, but also in the providence of salvation that testifies to true freedom. This overcoming is accomplished through religion, which facilitates the spiritual ennoblement of man's natural faith leading to salvation. The latter, however, was conceived by grace. It is precisely grace that is the source of the eternal return (in Nietzschean discourse) of the religious. In this sense, Assoc. Prof. Toneva unravels secularised religiosity along the transcendental path from the supernatural to the world, which is the only way to lay bare the claims of the symptoms and epidemic explosion of secularised religiosity to cultural flexibility and elegance, and more specifically its nihilism. The latter is the extreme manifestation of religious decadence, in which the transcendental essence of religion is buried in the confusion and tumult of the existing or in "its" natural laws (which are not ontic, but *ontological*), instead of being metaphysically conceptualised in the supernatural divine nature of Jesus Christ.

The thematisation of secularised religiosity brings to light numerous questions – both of epochal, historical, and civilizational nature, and of the transcendental specificity of religion and the ecumenical essence of the Church. Assoc. Prof. Toneva's proposed answers to those are clear and specific, without sparing difficult decisions and exposing the Church's frequently unstable position in the modern and especially the postmodern age. Modernism is clear and categorical, rational and critical, sharp and monistic, while postmodernism is slippery and faceless, as well as nameless, and has the clear goal of deconstructing all things lasting and stable, traditional and sacred, monistic and categorical. Secularised religion has various manifestations in modern and postmodern times, being their product. The merit of the monograph is that from the disciplinary perspective of the history of religions, these manifestations are clearly defined and explored, including the tendency for the growing blurring of secular religiosity and its increasingly persistent penetration into today's worldviews. Assoc. Prof. Toneva, however, offers alternatives. In the first place, this is the Christocentric principle and the response of the Church, namely ministry and education. The solution is existentially deployed in the field of Christian identity and along the path to bliss: labour, peace, truth, beauty, a pure heart, clear conscience, love, a striving for perfection, consolation in faith, and a Christian family (151 ff.)

If *Secularised Religiosity* is a markedly polemical work, the second submitted monograph, *The Church – a Community of Love*, I consider to be a specific apologetic and dogmatic work based on the history of Christianity. The preparation of such scientific work includes two aspects – content and methodology. Starting with the second, I would like to point out the fundamentality of the statement of the foundation of God's grace, upon which, as Assoc. Prof. Toneva argues, man's faith grows. Following from this, the first chapter is devoted to the invisible nature of the Church and God's thought-out home-building and salvation plan. Community and communion are, according to the author, the main pillars of the Church, shaping God's people in Christ. Assoc. Prof. Toneva makes an in-depth analysis of the understanding of the Church as Body of Christ, respectively as a "living organism of

man and God" (p. 26). Adhering strictly to the chosen methodological path, she turns to the analysis of the visible Church, first of all thematising the descent of the Holy Ghost on earth, which, in a dialectical manner, is associated with the ascension of Christ. This dialectic exteriorises the visible Church as an image of the invisible and, accordingly, as the omnipresence of the Son and the Holy Ghost, not only in an inseparable unity and wholeness with the Father, but also in a spiritual sense here on earth. Revealing the dynamic of the relationship between the Church and the world is the next logical step in the methodological aspect. The focus here is the clarification of the unity of the heavenly and earthly Church. From this position the author explores the sacraments of the holiness of the Church in the characteristic reversibility of the sanctity of the call and the sanctity of the answer (p. 115 ff.), but also as a gift of grace - baptism, anointing, Eucharist, repentance, priesthood, marriage, and consecration. The final, fifth chapter of the monograph, which finalises the methodological procedure and content analysis, is devoted to the sanctity of the Church's response. In the horizon of holiness, as grace that was bestowed to the visible Church, but, at the same time, as grace that is immanent to the Church (as Body of Christ), the love of the mother of God, the righteous struggle of saints, the innerness of monasticism, and the virtuous nature of the parish are considered. As an original epilogue, the monograph expounds on the holiness of the Church, understood as "the bride of the Heavenly Bridegroom and temple of the Holy Ghost" (p. 185). The important conceptual point here is the doctrinal and apologetic affirmation of the reality of the Church as an antechamber to the kingdom of God, notwithstanding all of its failures arising from its earthly presence.

In addition to the mentioned contributions in the two monographs, I must also note Assoc. Prof. Toneva's many theoretical contributions in her studies and articles. Here, I would like to draw attention to the studies and articles *History of Religions – a Metronome of the Heretofore and the Hereafter; Pitfalls of Tolerance; Prof. Ivan Panchovski's Approach to the History of Religions; Orthodox Theology and the Modern World. Sixth Congress of The Orthodox Theological Schools of Higher*

Education (5-10 October 2004) and *Religious Extremism: Problem and Symptom*, which are fully compliant with the scientific specialty of the competition.

(2) In the sector "Scientific achievements resulting from reflections on the dynamics of interconfessional discord and interconfessional dialogue" I would like to point out the multiple publications of the candidate, her multiple participations in scientific and church forums, as well as her practical work. Without specifically focusing on these achievements - their relevance is very clear – I admire Assoc. Prof. Toneva's consistently Orthodox but at the same time scientifically sound position in the episodes of interconfessional dialogue.

(3) In the sector "Active theological position for the affirmation of Orthodox spirituality" I can refer to all the publications of the candidate, her participation in scientific forums, her teaching work and her public appearances. They testify to an active and zealous spiritual and academic personality.

(4) I would specifically like to highlight Assoc. Prof. Toneva's theological commitment to the place and role of women in the context of religion and in church communities. Her diligence and her achievements in this field are impressive - starting with her doctoral dissertation, through multiple academic activities, including numerous publications, to dozens of media appearances. All of them are worthy attestation that Klara Toneva deserves to be the first woman in Bulgaria to be awarded the academic position of "Professor of Theology". Her focus on the place and role of women in the context of religions and in church communities is even more significant against the background of today's spread of pernicious gender concepts and practices, including at school, university and nationwide. It is high time everyone understood that gender ideologies are detrimental to women.

I must add that sectors (2), (3) and (4) are not predominantly practical. On the contrary, in each of them the candidature is legitimised in a markedly scientific way through serious publications, including monographs. For example, in sector (2) in addition to the article *Religious Extremism: Problem and Symptom*, I would like to mention the article *An Orthodox Position on the Treatment of non-Christian Religions*, which lists the reasons for the difficult interreligious dialogue (rigid

dogmatic cores, secular breakthroughs in religiosity, syncretic inclinations, etc.), with a contribution to exploring possible positions on dialogue: exclusive, inclusive and religiously pluralistic. In sector (3) along with the monograph *The Church – a Community of Love* and the textbook *Introduction to Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, I want to draw attention to the article *Archpriest Alexander Men – the Difficult Path to Dialogue*, which defends the idea of the great Russian religious philosopher that the antechamber of interreligious dialogue is constituted by the moral views and actions that set the basis for achieving "the elusive harmony between devotion to faith in God and openness to the faith of the other, i.e. openness in devotion and devotion in openness". In sector (4) along with Assoc. Prof. Toneva's dozens of academic and media appearances, I would like to refer to the articles *Theological Reflections on Feminism*, *The Woman in the Three Abrahamic Religions – Man's Equal or "one step under"* and *Theological Reflections on Feminism* (all three articles are included in the full list of the candidate's publications, but because of their importance in relation to this essential aspect of the candidacy, I have included them in this review).

With regard to sector (5) "Teaching work at higher education level" I will briefly refer to Assoc. Prof. Toneva's successful university work as Assistant and Associate Professor at the Faculty of Theology at Sofia University and at the Military Academy "G. S. Rakovski" - Sofia, the compulsory and elective courses she teaches in bachelor's and master's degrees, graduates (14) and PhD students (including three successful defences) and her administrative duties. As university work includes not only teaching but also research and dissemination, we should also note the candidate's participation in numerous scientific projects, scientific forums and media events. Assoc. Prof. Toneva has presented her scientific contributions succinctly and synthetically in 7 points. The contributions are real and theoretically substantiated in the candidate's publications. Their formulation in the field of the spiritual mission of the university and the Church and in favour of the cultural growth of society is impressive. This should also be seen as a definitive contribution when considering her candidacy.

The report on the classroom engagement of Assoc. Prof. Toneva at the Faculty of Theology at Sofia University for the last two academic years quotes 509 hours of classroom employment in the 2019/2020 academic year and 490.8 hours of classroom employment in the 2020/2021 academic year.

The evidence regarding the implementation of the minimum national requirements specified in Art. 2b of the Act for the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria far exceeds the traditionally presented evidence in the professional field *2.4. Religion and Theology*: by group of indicators A she is awarded 50 points, by group of indicators C - 100 points, by group of indicators D - 395 points, by group of indicators E - 600 points, and by group of indicators F - 160 points.

Assoc. Prof. Toneva has submitted a reference sheet regarding the citation of her scientific works (excluding autocitations) - a total of 62 entries, which is truly impressive.

I have not found any plagiarism in the candidate's publications submitted for the competition.

I do not have any joint scientific papers nor participation in research projects with the candidate, but I hope to in the future.

In the mandatory section "Questions, notes, recommendations and wishes" for each review, I would like to note that the professorship procedure is not a time for scientific debates and conceptual interpretations as is the doctoral defence, but rather for a comprehensive assessment of an academic path presented on the basis of an analysis of the detailed structure of its specific segments. My overall assessment of the academic experience of Assoc. Prof. Toneva is definitely positive. In that regard, I declare that I have no fundamental disagreements with the candidate's theoretical views in the five sectors. I wish Klara Toneva good faith, persistence and academic achievements on the Christ-loving path. Still, she might want to attempt to rethink and rediscover the metaphysical nature of idealism (formal intellectualism), which necessarily philosophises transcendence and existentially calls for God.

Conclusion: having regard to the overall academic profile of **Assoc. Prof. Klara Asenova Toneva**, her concrete theoretical achievements in the professional field *2.4. Religion and Theology*, their importance in the theological paradigm, her successful teaching practice, as well as her various public activities in the name of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and for the benefit of theological culture and education, I strongly plead the esteemed members of the scientific jury to, without any hesitation, recommend her to the Faculty Council of the Faculty of Theology at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" as the selected candidate for the scientific specialty *History of Religions*, professional field *2.4. Religion and Theology*, area of higher education *2. Humanities*.

Sofia, 13 November 2021

St. John Chrysostom



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(Prof. DSc. Valentin Kanawrow)