

OPINION

By prof. Nina Dimitrova, DSc

ABOUT THE DISSERTATION OF CLARA TONEVA

**"THE DOCTRINAL CONFLICT BETWEEN CHRISTIANITY
AND ISLAM (ACCORDING TO HERESY 101 OF ST. JOHN OF DAMASCUS)"**

FOR THE AWARD OF THE SCIENTIFIC DEGREE

"DOCTOR OF SCIENCE" in professional

direction 2.4. RELIGION AND THEOLOGY

The dissertation offered for discussion is an impressive and comprehensive study (453 pages) in the field of the complex relationship between the two world religions. Written not with academic ambitions in mind – Professor Toneva is an established scientist with a solid career, and as the culmination of many years of scientific research in this thematic field, the dissertation impresses with the exceptional scrupulousness of the research conducted – the explanatory footnotes (including additional scientific information) are over a thousand, and the cited sources in the bibliography are 778 – in Bulgarian, Serbian, Russian, German and English.

Intended to outline the doctrinal differences along the border between Christianity and Islam through the work of St. John Damascene, the work is broken down in detail – the structure includes 7 chapters. After a fascinatingly written Preface, there follows a very extensive Introduction, containing all the components required for this part of the dissertation research. The reader is introduced to the problematics of the relationship between Christianity and Islam, and the possible approaches to them are proposed – debate and/or dialogue. The work is billed as polemical and critical in addressing the more important differences between Christianity and Islam.

The thesis of the dissertation (p. 11) states that, in its formation and development, Islamic theoretical theology was stimulated and nourished by its polemics with Christianity. The methodological toolkit, with the help of which to carry out the planned research, is also presented; the available literature is also described in detail, and the fact that it is listed separately for each of the seven chapters makes a very good impression.

Also an undoubted plus of the study are the summaries at the end of each of these chapters. In general, the introduction is completed according to the regulatory requirements and, in my opinion, is flawless, so I was surprised when I saw Prof. Toneva's self-assessment at the end – that the dissertation itself was not *flawless*. (But the contrary statement would not be possible as uttered by any author of a dissertation). From the clarification that follows, it is clear that the following criticisms can be leveled at the dissertation: that the debate with Islam (an approach highlighting the differences) is preferred over the dialogue with it (an approach mitigating the differences); that a bias in position has been shown; that problems secondary to the purpose of the research did not receive sufficient development, etc. However, the dissertation research is not a compendium to be required to meet these requirements; on the contrary, it is an author's work with an emphasized own position – such as the proposed work of Prof. Toneva.

The scope of the opinion does not suggest that I follow the exposition step by step, which begins with an analytical presentation of the doctrinal characteristics of Islam. What I can do in this case with such an extensive text is to highlight those moments in it that made a special impression on me. In a comparative study, a good knowledge of the compared objects, a thorough understanding of the essential differences between them is a prerequisite. Prof. Toneva is undoubtedly an excellent connoisseur of Islam, as well as, in her capacity as an Orthodox theologian, of Christianity. This fact gives the reader reason to trust her conclusions, but before that let me point out more specific contributing points in the thesis. Thus, Islam – expectedly, given the expertise of Prof. Toneva – is described in depth in various aspects – as history, as a general worldview position, as a doctrine, as emblematic figures, as central concepts, etc. The analysis of the spiritual-historical context of the interaction between Christianity and Islam and the discussion of the internal kinship of the latter with Christian heresies is also performed at a high professional level.

The selected author's approach separately presents key positions in both religions and directly compares them, which contributes to the persuasiveness of the conclusion about their doctrinal incompatibility, respectively about the impossibility of compromises in this regard. And specifically – the Christian triadology is contrasted against the Islamic "association"; the Christian fellowship in love versus the Islamic

ideal of communal solidarity (ie the Church versus the Ummah), etc., drawing on and using the ideas of St. John of Damascus from his polemical – Islam-related – text.

In my opinion, the difference between Christianity and Islam in the matter of the relationship between God and man is particularly highlighted in the analysis of the Islamic resistance to the idea of an *inhuman* God; resistance, as a result of which "the immanent heat is hardly felt in Islam, on the contrary – it brings a chill; the sense is of an all-powerful being who possesses a will, a ruler who is untouched by human pain and who has removed himself from man and his life's cross" (p. 171). These emotionally charged lines are eloquent enough about the contrast between the two religions on this all-important point.

The last two chapters are too close to me personally in thematic sense – in both the presentation is anthropologically oriented. Many issues are discussed, the clarification of which separately for the two religions again reveals the deep differences between them – it is about the understandings of sin, freedom, fate/predestination, and also about the controversy between icon worship and iconoclasm. The grounds for speaking of Islam as a public religion rather than as a personal faith are presented.

The notions of the afterlife shaped by the two religions are also singled out as one of the important criteria for distinguishing and opposing them – while the Christian Kingdom of God is thought of as a spiritual state, the Islamic paradise is filled with bodily pleasures.

After the careful juxtaposition of the various worldview contrasts, in the conclusion of the dissertation, the prospects for the Christian-Islamic relationship are discussed. Prof. Toneva's comprehensive comparative analysis confirms the meaningfulness of her conclusion: "Participate in interreligious dialogue, but hold firmly to the foundations of personal faith" (p. 380).

My impression of Clara Toneva's dissertation on the doctrinal confrontation between Christianity and Islam is that it is a competent, thorough and valuable study, the timeliness of which is beyond doubt.

The abstract is prepared in the same careful manner and adequately reflects the content of the dissertation. It also includes the author's reference to the contributions of her work – well-formulated and well-founded.

Prof. Toneva has also presented the following publications on the topic of the dissertation – 5 studies and 9 articles (from the period 2004 – 2022), testifying to her long-standing interest in this thematic field. Due to the limited volume of the present opinion, I will only note that the author's attention to the native theological heritage deserves respect.

I have no publications in common with Klara Toneva.

Conclusion: Based on everything that has been said so far, as a member of the scientific jury for the defense of Clara Asenova Toneva's dissertation, I will categorically vote "yes" to award her the requested scientific degree "Doctor of Sciences" in professional direction 2.4. Religion and theology.

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