

OPINION
FOR THE DISSERTATION THESIS OF THEODOR AVRAMOV
"JAROSLAV PELIKAN AND THE ROAD OF THE HISTORIAN TO
THE CHURCH (through the Tradition to Orthodoxy)"
FOR THE AWARD OF THE EDUCATIONAL AND SCIENTIFIC DEGREE
"DOCTOR" IN PROFESSIONAL FIELD 2.4. RELIGION
AND THEOLOGY (History of Orthodox theology during the
twentieth century)

by Prof. Nina Dimitrova, DSc., Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

Theodor Avramov, master of theology from Sofia University (2018), in the period 2020-2023 is a full-time doctoral student at the Faculty of Theology, and from 2021 he is also an assistant at the Department of Historical Theology. The documents for the defense procedure of the proposed dissertation are complete. The articles deposited specifically on the topic of the dissertation research are published on the pages of "Theological Thought" and "Christianity and Culture". Theodor Avramov has completed specializations in Greece, France, Latvia, Switzerland.

I have been appointed as a member of the current jury in the procedure for the defense of Theodor Avramov's dissertation research by Rector's Order RD 38-350 dated 10.07.2023.

The proposed dissertation is from the field of the history of Orthodox theology in the twentieth century and is dedicated to the personality and work of one of the most authoritative church historians of the same century – Jaroslav Pelikan; a person who is undeservedly and inexplicably absent from the attention of Bulgarian theological thought. This finding, with which the study begins, immediately shows/proves its relevance – it is going to fill a void, to start many other studies on Pelikan – a request given by the author of the present dissertation. At the same time, the choice of topic fits into a growing tradition of fruitful synthesis between theology and history, and the work presented to our attention is a successful development in this direction. It also shows continuity with the work of the research supervisor, with his and the department's long-term activities on the translation and popularization of the works of Fr. George

Florovski, a key figure for the interpretation of the personality and of Jaroslav Pelikan. Theodor Avramov's dissertation study meets theology with history, and it itself represents such a synthesis, being both a careful search for an immense number of documents from the Princeton archive (the presentation of which is in many cases for the first time), and theoretical theology, interpreting Yaroslav Pelikan's path from theology to history and from there to the history of theology.

The scrupulous research effort made speaks to the list of diverse titles at the end, including sources, media publications, secondary literature in Cyrillic and Latin. It is imperative to note the valuable appendices at the end of the dissertation, which contain a complete bibliography of works by and about Yaroslav Pelikan.

I hope that the research will be published as a monograph to make it accessible to a wider audience. From reading the dissertation, I am convinced that the doctoral student aims not only to obtain the educational and scientific degree necessary for his academic growth; the intellectual and emotional engagement with the chosen topic and *subject of research* is evident, and his pursuits in this field are likely to continue. Such an impression is especially made by the introduction, containing the mandatory elements such as the justification and relevance of the research, an announcement of the goal and its achievement through the solution of 7 specific tasks (steps), a clear definition of the object and subject of the research, as well as the set of methods used, and also the discussion of the available commentary literature on Pelikan's work.

I find the proposed structure appropriate – the study presents both the entire life and academic path of Jaroslav Pelikan in the broad context of the 20th century, and – in parallel – his corresponding work for the individual periods of this path. Impressive is the detailed presentation of numerous interpersonal relationships, which is an important building block of the overall portrait of the distinguished theologian.

The study is too voluminous and without the appendices at the end, therefore, within the framework of this opinion, I will not retell what was done in the three chapters, each of which ends with a well-made summary. I will mark those moments that seem to me to be key in evaluating the work. Such is the emphasis on Pelikan's opinion regarding the authentic Christian view of history, resp. the presentation of history as a scene of a duel, as well as the highlighting of Pelikan's main methodological

principle regarding the relationship between tradition and the history of the Church (a principle embedded in his *opus magnum* and as a kind of research strategy): "Tradition is the general history of the Church, but the Church is never a simple arithmetic sum of the perfectly unique individuals who build it" (the quote from Pelikan is on p. 56 of the dissertation).

The presentation of the important interpersonal relationships (exhibited by Matthew Spinka, Wilhelm Pauk and especially Adolf Harnack and George Florovsky influences) is exemplary – carefully documented, with attention to every single fact. It enriches the knowledge not only about Jaroslav Pelikan, but also about the important personalities of his intellectual environment. In relation to the problem of Christian Hellenism (discussed extensively in the dissertation), I would like to ask Theodor Avramov about a possible reaction from Jaroslav Pelikan to Harnack's work on Marcion. In this connection, I think that the only lightly touched on question (in a footnote) about the concepts of "de-Judaization" and "Hellenization" – as meaning two interpretations of the same phenomenon, could have received a more significant presentation.

And, of course, in view of Florovsky's influence, I appreciate the emphasis on Pelikan's understandings of *history* and *development*, specifically the development, change of doctrine, as appropriate. Quoting Pelikan that "there can be growth but not change," the PhD student offers the following interpretation: "Even assuming some form of development, the immutability of truth must be congruent, and through this thread the question of development must be answered" (p. 83). However, the situation remains incompletely clarified, which Avramov also notes: "There is a problem in Pelikan's very project of tracing the development of the Church's teaching, especially when it comes to Orthodox theology, which he also emphasizes" (p. 100). But even when patristic theology is seen "not as a series of exceptional innovators, but as a thread of tradition", the fixed problem – belonging to the "difficulties of the Christian historian" – is, in my view, still present.

Since I am convinced that the text should also be published as a book, a stylistic revision is necessary.

The merits of the work are many – competence, professional erudition, exceptional informativeness, depth of analysis and, as a result – an excellent

presentation of the whole being of Jaroslav Pelikan, i.e. the purpose of the dissertation research has been met. The abstract is also prepared in accordance with the regulatory requirements and adequately presents the dissertation. I fully agree with the claim of the five contributing moments formulated in it.

In view of everything that has been said so far, I will confidently vote for Teodor Assenov Avramov to be awarded the scientific and educational degree "doctor" in Professional direction 2.4. Religion and theology, specialty *Orthodox theology in the twentieth century*.

31. 08. 2023

Signature:

