

## REVIEW

for the dissertation of Victoria Albert Traykova entitled:

***“The Idea of Reincarnation in Eastern Religions (Theological Analysis)”***

For the granting of the educational and scientific degree “Doctor” in the professional field 2.4. Religion and Theology scientific specialization *History of Religions*

Presented by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Dimo Krastev Penkov, member of the scientific jury, appointed by order of the Rector of Sofia University SU “St. Kliment Ohridski” № RD 38 – 212/ 03.05.2022.

The procedure of the current defense has been initiated by the proposal of the Faculty Council of the Faculty of Theology (record № 9 of 28.04.2022) by the order of the Rector of the Sofia University SU “St. Kliment Ohridski” № RD 38 – 212/ 03.05.2022. At its first session, the scientific jury confirmed that the announced procedure was organized in compliance with all legal requirements and regulations. Following the discussion, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Dimo Penkov has been appointed as Chairman. The scientific jury unanimously appointed Prof. Dr. Rostislava Georgieva Todorova-Encheva (Shumen University) and Assoc. Prof. Dr. Dimo Penkov (SU) as reviewers, and the remaining members – Assoc. Prof. Dr. Kostadin Kirilov Nushev (SU), Assoc. Prof. Dr. Father Teodor Bozhidarov Stoychev (Shumen University) and Assoc. Stoyan Iliev Chilikov (Plovdiv University) to express their opinions. The deadline for the submission of the reviews and opinions was set at 15.06.2022, while the date for the open session of the scientific jury and public defense was set at 30.06.2022. All procedural deadlines were met.

### **Brief data on the applicant**

Victoria Albert Traykova was born on 01.07.1991. She received her higher theological education at the Theological Faculty of Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, where she graduated with a Bachelor’s Degree in 2015. During 2016 she obtained her Master’s Degree at the Master’s Specialization Program “Church and Media” in the same Faculty.

After passing successfully the competition for PhD candidate Victoria Traykova was enrolled in a full-time PhD program in “History of Religions” in the Department of “Historical and Systematic Theology” by order of the Rector № RD 20 – 1046/ from 05.07.2018. During the three-year period of her PhD studies, she fulfilled earnestly all her obligations as a PhD student and has been dismissed with the right to defend according to the decision of the Faculty Council of the Faculty of Theology (record № 11 from 24.06.2022) and the subsequent Order of the Rector № RD 20 – 1227 from 28.06.2021.

### **Relevance of the study**

The doctoral dissertation presented for review by Victoria Traykova, a full-time PhD student, is characterized by interesting insights related to the idea of reincarnation in Eastern religious teachings and the challenges that this idea poses to the Orthodox Christian. The doctoral student directs her focus towards a very relevant and controversial issue that is still exciting for our society today. This is evidenced by the fact that major bookstores and libraries maintain special stands and sections of literature promoting the idea of the reincarnation. It is a timely study and really to the point. It is fair to say that Bulgarian theological scholarship is lacking in studies that summarize the Eastern doctrine of reincarnation. The disturbing trend outlined by Academician Vladeta Jerotić years ago and based on statistical data revealing that more than 30% of the European population believes in reincarnation does not exclude the Bulgarian reality. Prof. Dr. Arch. E. Sapundzhiev has also pointed out the popularity of this idea among the Bulgarian society in the first half of the twentieth century in his “Short Handbook of Christian Apologetics” (1942, p. 71).

### **The Thematic Scope and Structuring of the main sections**

The submitted dissertation is 279 pages long. The dissertation thesis is developed according to a historical-religious perspective followed by a theological analysis. The plan and structure of the dissertation are subject to the author’s conceptual intention to explore in a comparative perspective, on the one hand the Eastern doctrines of reincarnation and on the other the Christian belief in resurrection, which is of fundamental importance to our Orthodox-Christian identity.

The preface (pp. 5-7) reveals the motives that led to the choice of the study topic and logically contains expressions of gratitude to colleagues from the Faculty of Theology, who supported the work of the PhD student. The introduction (pp. 8-25) comments on the relevance of the chosen topic, which is outlined in eight points. The main theological arguments that reveal the apparent inconsistency of the idea of reincarnation are presented through the prism of basic Christian truths and the dogmatic creeds of the Church. The object and subject of the study are formulated (pp. 14-15), as well as its aims and objectives (pp. 15-16). The methodology used is also specified (pp. 16-17). The introduction includes an extensive historiographical review of the more basic writings on the issues under consideration (pp. 17-21).

The first chapter (pp. 26-101), entitled “The Historical Path of the Idea of Reincarnation,” is a major religious-historical study of the genesis of the idea of reincarnation according to the religious notions of the East. The first part of this chapter presents in detail the history of Hinduism as the “ancestor” of this idea. It is important that the author pinpoints and clarifies the fact that the beliefs of the ancient Indians were not monotheistic but polytheistic. The most typical characteristic of this religious tradition is monism – the combining of multiple deities into a single impersonal principle, which is the basis of all that exists (see p. 32). Moreover, the most important and essential features of this ancient religion are presented – cosmology, mythology, philosophy, written monuments and cult. Here the Ph.D. student introduces us to the complex labyrinth and specificity of the religious life of the ancient Indians, their literary monuments, practices, prayers, etc. Following this more general introduction, the doctoral student narrows the scope of his research, stating that “the world was first introduced to the idea of reincarnation in the Upanishads” (p. 45). There, according to V. Traykova, the “cardinal doctrines of all Indian religious philosophy are unfolded – samsara (the unbroken chain of successive rebirths), karma (the predetermined relation between actions and the result of previous lives), and moksha (the highest religious goal, deliverance from suffering)” (p. 45). V. Traykova notes the fact in her analysis, that some of the views advocated in this corpus are of a philosophical-speculative nature rather than religious-mythological, which

provides her with the reason to assume that the idea of reincarnation is an artificial concept (see p. 51).

The next substantial part of Chapter One is devoted to the development of the idea of reincarnation in Buddhism, Taoism and Dzogchen, the Tibetan doctrine of the cessation of reincarnation. In this chapter, the doctoral student is entirely within the specifics and methodology of the discipline of History of Religions.

Chapter two, entitled “A Christian View of the Idea of Reincarnation” (pp. 102-193), represents a comparative analysis between Eastern concepts and Christian doctrine. In this part of her theological study V. Traykova undertakes the difficult and ambitious objective of tracing and analyzing the historical underpinnings of the doctrine of reincarnation in Orphism and Plato’s philosophy, as well as revealing its diametric incompatibility with the orthodox worldview and experience presented in the writings of the ancient Church apologists. In the course of the analysis it becomes clear that according to Buddhism the human soul does not exist as a unique substance, while according to Christianity the human soul is more precious than the riches of the whole world (cf. Mt 16:26). Furthermore, the ideal of Christianity is eternal life for the human being, whereas that of Buddhism is the cessation of all life. Apart from that, what is pointed out is the fundamental difference between the rebirth of life, which takes place in the Church and reincarnation, which is nothing else than “the complete annihilation of the personality” (p. 193). The belief that the human body is only a “shell” devalues human life along with all its historical manifestations. The value of the human psychosomatic personality, personal relationships and relations is undermined by the ideal of “reincarnation” or “metempsychosis”. In addition to this, the unique meaning and dignity of human being, along with the material world, time and history are disdained. The tragedy of human death as destruction of personal human psychosomatic identity is also ignored in an inhuman way. Thus the human being is transformed to an “impersonal idea”, an impersonal ghost, a chimera, while personal existence sinks into meaninglessness and the impersonality of all-pervading nothingness.

The third and final chapter of the dissertation is devoted to the various manifestations of this doctrine in our time (pp. 194-248). Here are examined various

processes, such as secularization and globalization that influence contemporary religious life and contribute to the spread of this doctrine, which is contrary to the Orthodox worldview and experience. The activities of guruist sects and various practices, such as transcendental meditation and yoga, which alienate the human being from God are also analyzed. Adequate remedies are sought to counter this pernicious and pessimistic teaching. In this part of her dissertation V. Traykova very skillfully presents the manipulative practices of religiosity as used by religious sects, as well as the serious danger lurking for those who practice yoga, transcendental meditation, etc., of being initiated in the worship of pagan deities.

The conclusion (pp. 249-255) presents in synthesized form the main results of the study. The dissertation has the necessary textual-critical apparatus and includes 670 footnotes. The bibliography is also rich and includes more than 300 titles in Bulgarian, Russian and English.

#### **The formation of the Dissertation Abstract.**

The dissertation abstract (31 pages) strictly follows the structure of the thesis and reflects its content correctly. The fact that the whole conclusion of the main text is included in the abstract does not leave a good impression (see Dissertation Abstract, pp. 23-29 and Dissertation, pp. 249-255). This calls into question the ability of the doctoral student to present the main results of her research in a synthesized form. However, the scientific contributions mentioned by the doctoral candidate reflect the undoubted merits of the dissertation.

Reasonably expected, some criticisms can be made of the dissertation text. As such, a small number of typographical errors can be pointed out, such as on p. 7, 12, 80, 133, 144, 175, 178, etc., of the main text, use of incorrect articles of the word “Messiah” (p. 179). Not so good impression is also made by the wrong use of the verb “support” on pp. 18, and I must underline, that a study does not support itself but is based on other studies. In relation to the established theological terminology, I recommend to V. Traykova to avoid words like “broken” in relation to human nature, and stick to the use of the commonly accepted word “corrupted”. Besides that, the use of the adjective

“shattered” for the human nature is also inaccurate (p. 158). The chronology of p. 111 must be consistent with the established chronology when referring to the order of occurrence in time before the Birth of Christ. On p. 139 the name of St. Gregory the Great is pointed among the notable Western apologists of 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> centuries, however there is no any mention of him, which begs the question why he is included at all. I cannot fail to point out the double factual error in the conclusion, where the PhD student links Aristotle with the “sense of one Demiurge” and the “immortal soul” (see p. 251).

All the above omissions, inaccuracies and errors can be easily corrected and do not in interfere with the reading of the text. Four publications directly related to the topic of the dissertation thesis are also present, one of which is in print. The other three have been published in prestigious scientific journals and volumes reflecting the doctoral student’s enduring interest in the topic under consideration.

### **Final assessment**

Overall, the dissertation reflects the enduring scientific interest and research effort of the doctoral student Victoria Albert Traykova, who has dedicated a lot of energy and effort in its development. This thesis has its scientific merits and therefore is fully aligned to the scientific criteria and standards of an independent and complete research.

The dissertation contains the legally required declaration of originality and authenticity of the text. For my part, I declare that I have no common publications with the PhD student and I do not fall under any situation of “conflict of interest”. The supporting documentation is complete, as required by law and other regulatory documents regulating the procedure of this defense.

Taking into account the scientific contributions of the dissertation and the importance of the considered issues, I strongly suggest to the esteemed members of the scientific jury to bestow the educational and scientific degree “DOCTOR” to Victoria Albert Traykova. For the current procedure I declare that I will vote “YES”.

13.06.2022 г.

Sofia

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(Assoc. Prof. D. Penkov)