

REVIEW

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On the dissertation

„THE IDEA OF REINCARNATION IN THE EASTERN RELIGIONS (THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS)”

for the award of the educational and scientific degree “PhD”

in the field of higher education 2. Humanities

professional field 2.4. Religion and theology

(History of Religions)

To Victoria Albert Traykova

The idea of reincarnation is one of the most enticing tricks of modern para-religious and sectarian teachings, which have found a fertile ground for development in a society, subject to secularization and globalization. This concept, typical of Eastern religions, easily finds its place in the understandings of modern man, regardless of whether one identifies himself as a non-religious or religious person. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon to „Christianize” this idea, to „reconcile” it with the understanding of the Christian faith, which is not only oxymoronic but also detrimental to the soul - we cannot believe in the Resurrection and the eternal life and in the reincarnation and achievement of the depersonalized state of nirvana at the same time. Under these circumstances, researches such as the present dissertation, focused on such important religious issues, is always relevant and always necessary, especially when they have a practical focus on the goals set, as is the case here.

Victoria Traykova’s dissertation covers 279 pages of text, structured in a title page, table of contents, preface, introduction, three main chapters, conclusion and bibliography.

In the preface (pp. 5-7) the candidate explains her motives for the choice of research topic with the need for theological students to get a clearer idea of what they encounter when

studying the history of religions and how great is the real danger of dealing with the terminology and practices of Eastern religions.

The introduction (pp. 8-25) briefly presents the current situation in Bulgarian society and the attitude towards the problem formulated in the preface. A general description of the dissertation is given. The relevance of the study is justified by five main reasons: the wasteful media presence, the ignorance of the foundations of the Christian faith, the catalyzer of the secularization and multiculturalism, the “modernity” of the Eastern terminology and its widespread use in everyday life, the obligation to educate children and students to avoid the trap of the Eastern spiritual concepts; and four arguments: the philosophical origin of the idea of reincarnation, the variable nature of its conception, its inconsistency with the ideas of God’s providence, and its dogmatic impossibility. The object and the subject of the research are clearly and precisely formulated - the object is the very idea of reincarnation, and the subject is the process of its origin and spread over the centuries. The aim and tasks of the research are formulated in accordance, as well as the methodology. The sources and the state of the research on the topic, on which the dissertation is based, are presented in detail in order to build and defend its thesis. The structure of the research is also briefly presented. The described main parameters of the research are presented clearly and consistently, thus creating a good preliminary idea of the purpose, nature and contribution potential of the dissertation. The author and her research supervisor Prof. Dr. Klara Toneva have selected a really topical research theme and have formulated aims and tasks, the solution of which will contribute not only scientifically but also in applied terms, putting the conversation about the influence of Eastern religions on the contemporary Bulgarian society in the foreground (p. 15), for which they deserve congratulations.

The first chapter (pp. 26-73) examines the historical path of the idea of reincarnation, clarifying the situation in India at that time, distinguished in three sections. The first one traces the creation of Indian civilization, the borrowing of the idea of reincarnation and its inclusion in the first Vedic texts. The second deepens the study of the idea of reincarnation in its natural historical course with the advent of Buddhism. The third extends the study to Tibet, China and Japan, and the three most popular Eastern religions, influenced by Buddhism and containing in some form the idea of reincarnation. The great advantages of the study in this chapter are the identification of the authors of the idea of reincarnation, the clear indication of its disordered and variable character over time, as well as the wonderful explanation of the “charm of Buddhism” with which it is especially widespread in modern society (pp. 72-73). A very good

decision of the author is to draw conclusions at the end of the chapter, which convey in a concise form the most important deductions of the study in this part (pp. 100-101).

The second chapter (pp. 74-101) contains the evidentiary and apologetic part of the study. Structured also in three sections, it deals with the incompatibility of the idea of reincarnation in the life of man after the Original sin and the death that came through it; with the unity of the human person as body and soul, facing a resurrection and eternal life, thanks to the life of Christ and His Resurrection, not a reincarnation; with the differences between nirvana in Eastern religions and life in the Kingdom of God and the Church. This part of the study clearly demonstrates the insolvency of the idea of reincarnation in terms of the teachings of the Church, draws attention to the ideas of reincarnation and immortality in Orphism, Socrates and Plato, carefully examines the view of the unity of human personality of the first Christian apologists - St. Irenaeus of Lyons, St. Justin the Philosopher, Origen, St. Gregory the Thaumaturgus, St. Methodius of Olympus, St. Cyprian of Carthage, St. Athanasius the Great, St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory the Theologian, St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. John Chrysostom, St. Ephraim the Syrian, St. Cyril of Jerusalem, Blessed Jerome, Blessed Augustine, St. Maximus the Confessor, St. John of Damascus and St. Gregory Palamas. The emphasis here is on the person of the Lord Jesus Christ as the center of the Orthodox identity and on the incompatibility of resurrection and reincarnation, which contradicts the redemption. The study of the term nirvana from an etymological, philosophical and religious point of view made here is useful and interesting. At the end of the chapter there is again a place for the most important conclusions, formulated in five paragraphs (pp. 192-193).

The third chapter (pp. 194-248) focuses on pointing out some contemporary misunderstandings in the perception of both Christianity and Buddhism. The three sections here are devoted to various examples of implementing the idea of reincarnation in everyday life - through multiculturalism and the power of social networks and media; through the modern religious sects and especially through the transcendental meditation; through the most commonly used Eastern concepts of karma, meditation and yoga. This part of the study is very interesting with the explanation of the characteristics of modernity, with the description of the power of media to form reality, with the mixing of the idea of progress and the pursuit of a clean and healthy life with the occult, sectarian and para-religious. The idea of reincarnation is clearly, analytically and intelligibly presented as it is exploited by various sects, with special emphasis on the transcendental meditation and the modern widespread use of seemingly innocuous Eastern religious concepts that replace Christian truths and practices and, ultimately,

distance man from God. At the end of the chapter there is also a place for the most important conclusions, formulated in three paragraphs (pp. 246-248).

The conclusion (pp. 249-255) sets out the arguments in opposition to the idea of reincarnation and makes several suggestions to address the problem, one of which is to educate the journalists in Christianity and other religions in order to achieve greater adequacy and truthfulness of the news on religious issues. The conclusions made after the historical review and the theological analysis are clear and accurate, and allow the formulation of four main arguments that refute the validity of the idea of reincarnation.

After the conclusion, the used extensive bibliography is presented (pp. 256-279), consisting of 13 sources, 243 titles in Bulgarian, 42 titles in English and Russian, as well as 13 Internet resources. A declaration of originality of the scientific work is presented separately. The reference to the contributions of the dissertation is attached to the abstract, together with a list of the author's scientific publications.

The dissertation's abstract (28 pp.) is concise and clear in structure and presentation and gives a very good idea of the content and achievements of the study. This is an important fact that I would like to note explicitly, because recently there has often been seen an underestimation of the importance of the abstract as a specific scientific genre or an inability to deal with it.

The contributions of the dissertation, formulated by Victoria Traykova, are three: the study is an attempt in Bulgarian Orthodox theology for a thorough study of the idea of reincarnation in Eastern religions and the attitude of the Orthodox Christianity on this issue; the study would be useful for teaching theology students; it is also an attempt to bring the subject of the reincarnation from a Christian point of view to a wider audience. I agree with the wording of the scientific contributions and appreciate their scientific and applied value.

Each study has its strengths as well as its weaknesses. Especially when it comes to a doctoral dissertation, making certain remarks to the author is a norm that aims not to discredit the dissertation, but to support it and to smooth out some minor or major imperfections in order of a successful future publication, for example. The study in question makes a pleasant impression that there are no major imperfections and the remarks that can be made are of a formal nature. In the introduction of the dissertation, in section 1.1 Relevance of the research (pp. 12-14), five reasons are given, which "unite the opinion on the relevance of the topic" and four arguments, which are marked only with the phrase "The main arguments are:" (p. 13). There is no transition between reasons and arguments and it is not clear what the arguments are for. Their content identifies them as counter-arguments against the idea of reincarnation. For

sure this ambiguity was obtained mechanically when the author conveyed in a concise form the arguments set out in full in the conclusion of the dissertation (pp. 249-255). There the author wrote: “The dissertation research passed into two main stages in theoretical terms - the first one was a historical review and the second one was a theological analysis. From the first stage of the study – the historical, the following conclusions stand out, and with them - the first arguments against the idea of reincarnation:” (pp. 249-250). The same thing is observed in the dissertation’s abstract (pp. 6-8) and (pp. 20-27). Also, the first chapter of the study weighs on the historical overview of the situation in ancient India, as well as a thorough follow-up of all the details of the life of the Buddha. However, I do not deny that, for a wider audience, these details would probably be useful. In conclusion, I would like to ask Victoria Traykova the question she has certainly considered many times and probably has some particular ideas in this regard: how could the much-needed religious literacy of journalists and the subsequent enlightenment of the media be realized?

I would like to congratulate the author for her literate, clear and concise writing style, for her obvious personal interest in the subject, for her theological knowledge and for the apologetic talent she demonstrates. Victoria Traikova also has the necessary number of scientific publications for defense, which proves her research competence.

In conclusion, I would like to state that I consider the presented dissertation to be very relevant. I appreciate its scientific contributions and I vote positively with “yes” for the award of the educational and scientific degree “PhD” to the candidate Victoria Albert Traykova. Also, I would like to suggest the other members of the esteemed jury also vote in the affirmative.

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