

STATEMENT

By Prof. Dr. Rostislava Georgieva Todorova-Encheva
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On the dissertation

“THE DOCTRINAL CONFLICT BETWEEN CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM (According to St. John Damascene’s Heresy 101)”

for the award of the educational and scientific degree “D.Sc.”
in the professional field 2.4. Religion and theology
(Theology – Systematic Theology (History of Religions))

To Prof. Dr. Klara Asenova Toneva

The present dissertation operates in the vast field of the centuries-old relationship between Christianity and Islam. It raises again the questions about the reconciliation of religious and cultural identity, about the rigidity of the boundaries between religious beliefs and value systems, about the compatibility of empathy and coexistence with the preservation of the purity of faith, presenting them through the prism of the works of one of the pillars of faith - St. John Damascene. Prof. Toneva concentrates her attention on the 101st chapter of Damascene’s “On the Heresies”, justifying her choice of starting position with the primacy of this polemical text and with the certainty of its authorship. The motives for writing this dissertation lie in the extensive presence of Islam and the challenges caused by its coexistence with Christianity in the current social situation (pp. 10-11), as well as in the personal research interest of the author, so well presented in the preface (pp. 4-6).

The object and subject of the dissertation are clearly stated, a specific working hypothesis with three main sections is presented, the methodology and the chronological framework are correctly selected (pp. 11-12). The author's principal aim, to explore the doctrinal conflict between Islam and Christianity according to the 101st Heresy of St. John Damascene, is accomplished through a profound analysis of selected sources that highlights the differences between the two religions, traces the nature of the theological discussion on the topic, and gives the perspective of Orthodox thought on Islam. The four tasks that the author sets to achieve in the study derive from this (pp. 13-14). The exceptionally thorough bibliographic survey presented in detail for each chapter is impressive.

The dissertation covers 453 pages of text, structured in a classic way for scientific research, and consists of seven main chapters and the necessary attributes for them. The emergence and doctrinal formation of Islam are examined in sequence (Chapter I), along with the relationship and controversy between the Judeo-Christian tradition and Islam, together with the views of St. John Damascene on Islam (Chapter II), the differences between Islam and Christianity in the understanding of revelation (Chapter III), the significance of the Cross of Christ and the problem with the Sacrifice of the Cross for Islam (Chapter IV), the Christian and Islamic understanding of community and solidarity (Chapter V), the differences between Christian and Islamic anthropology, together with notions of the meaning of life and the problem of image (Chapter VI), and the understanding of love and eschatology (Chapter VII).

The conclusion of the dissertation summarizes the results of the research and clearly brings out in a concise form the main doctrinal differences between Christianity and Islam, starting with the nature of the content of the Qur'an, passing through the Islamic doctrinal ideas and the arguments with which the kalam asserts and defends them, together with the distorted use of biblical texts to arrive at the exposition of St. John Damascene's firm and reasoned opinion that Islam is not a divinely revealed religion and Muhammad is not a prophet (pp. 384-397).

Within the scope of a brief opinion on the merits of the dissertation under consideration, the present writer's opinion cannot be widely deployed. And since in this case there are no occasions for making serious remarks, I will limit myself to presenting the most important aspects of my positive opinion of Prof. Toneva's work. Many things in this study leave a pleasant impression on the reader (I am convinced that this will also happen to readers who are outside the strictly scientific community), and first of all I will place the author's skillful polemical style.

Already in the introduction, Prof. Toneva defines her work as polemical, with a pronounced critical-analytical character (p. 30), but not every polemic is successful, even when it defends the right cause. In her research, the author demonstrates her ability to polemicize successfully, without falling into the two extremes - of the indifferent presentation of facts and summarizing “for” and “against” or of the emotional thundering of the enemy, which clouds reason and turns into propaganda. In today’s conditions of militant liberalism and propagandistic relativism, this is particularly important. Moderately, but clearly and quite firmly, Prof. Toneva defends the truth of the Orthodox faith and critically refutes the doctrinal positions of Islam.

A wonderful impression is made not only by the erudition, research and theological skills of the author, but also by her literate and correct speech, her ability to handle the word, arguing, refuting, but without causing the differences to become rifts (p. 397). According to Prof. Toneva, this dissertation thesis is not flawless, and I can see why she points out some of the possible criticisms of the study (p. 30). I agree that the dissertation is not flawless, in the sense that there is no such thing as a truly flawless dissertation. Scientific works, even those on which the author works for decades, are never completely finished and completely flawless, they are only a step forward, a contribution to the general flow of human knowledge, on which the next researcher will step to contribute and build on. I believe that Prof. Toneva managed to do exactly that - to present her knowledge as an experienced scientist and with her long-term work to contribute to the development of theological science, for which I congratulate her. I am sure that her dissertation will be useful to her intended audience as well as to a wider readership.

The dissertation’s abstract is structured in a volume of 33 pages and presents the content, main points and contribution nature of the research clearly enough. I consider the formulated six contributions (p. 31) to be truly significant and I emphasize as particularly valuable the theological argumentation of the debate as a means of dialogue and the practical focus of the research, i.e., its scientific and applied character. In the abstract, the author’s publications on the topic of the dissertation are indicated - five studies and nine papers (pp. 32-33), which demonstrate the scale and depth of her scientific activity, and the reference to the found citations unequivocally shows the impact and importance of her research.

In conclusion, I would like to state that I highly appreciate the fundamental and scientifically applied contribution of the presented dissertation and I vote with a confident “yes”

for the awarding of the scientific degree “Doctor of Sciences” to the candidate Prof. Dr. Klara Asenova Toneva. I suggest that the other members of the esteemed jury also vote in the affirmative.

January 4, 2023

Prof. Dr. Rostislava Georgieva Todorova-Encheva