

OPINION

by **Assoc. Prof. Dr. Svetoslav Svetosarov Rybolov**,

Department of Systematic Theology, Faculty of Theology at
"St. Kliment Ohridski" University of Sofia, according to a competition for the
selection of an associate professor in professional direction 2.4. *Religion and
theology*, announced in SG No. 100 of 16.12.2022, with a single participant

Ch. Assist. Dr. Ventzislav Georgiev Karavalchev

1. Information about the contest

The *opinion* is part of the procedure announced in the State Gazette, no. 100/16.12.2022 competition for "associate professor" in professional direction 2.4. *Religion and Theology* at the Department of Church History at the Theological Faculty of "St. Kliment Ohridski" University of Sofia. The presentation is in accordance with the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff, the Regulations for its Application and the normative requirements of the University of Sofia for the acquisition of academic positions. I have not registered any irregularities in the procedure.

2. Information about the candidate in the competition

The educational and teaching activities of ch. assistant professor Dr. Ventzislav G. Karavalchev meets the requirements for teaching experience and academic workload at Sofia University. In 2017, he was competitively elected as a full-time senior assistant in the Department of Historical and Systematic Theology, and in 2016, he defended his doctoral dissertation in Church History at the same faculty. During the years of his teaching experience, he delivered courses in the form of seminars and lectures on Church Archaeology, as well as seminars and lectures on a number of other church-historical disciplines in bachelor's and master's degrees of the Faculty of Theology and Faculty of History at the University of Sofia. Dr. Karavalchev has extensive teaching experience in Ukraine and Georgia as a minister of the largest missionary organization of the state church of the Kingdom of Great Britain. He is well known for his professional collaboration with the St. George Zographos. His scientific and popular publications in the field of ecclesiastical archaeology are popular reading in the Bulgarian public sphere. He has done several specializations abroad - Rome, Athens, Birmingham and Geneva¹.

¹There are some minor inaccuracies in the candidate's CV. For example, membership of organisations should be clarified chronologically, as an organization such as BOYA is long defunct, and the Volos Academy for Theological Studies does not currently grant membership to researchers who are not engaged with it as researchers in its projects. Also, I recommend that the candidate reassess his/her self-assessment of language skills, indicated in terms of proficiency at the level of philological education, and such is not indicated in the CV.

3. Research and evaluation evaluation of scientific results and contributions

The candidate's research activity is more than sufficient for the specific recommended requirements for the academic position of Associate Professor. A 'List of publications submitted for the competition' is attached, comprising 19 (articles, a habilitation monograph and a defended dissertation). Of course, the PhD thesis is peer-reviewed, so it is not subject to peer review.

Articles: "St. Apostle Andrew the First-Called and his mission in the lands of Bulgaria". *Christianity and Culture* 4 (2017), pp. 101 - 110; "The Holy Martyrs Ina, Pina and Rima – the Scythian disciples of the Apostle Andrew and enlighteners of our lands". *Christianity and Culture*, 9 (2017), pp. 66 - 73; "St. Demetrius of Thessalonica or the Wonderworker of Sirmium (Srem) and his servant St. Lupus of Nove (Svishtov)", *Christianity and Culture*, 5 (2016), pp. 62 - 71; "St. Barbara of Iliopolska - on the traces of a Tradition". *Christianity and Culture*, 4 (2012), pp. 87-98; "The Stara Zagora (Veria) martyrs for Christ: the 40 virgins, Deacon Amon and Kelsina". *Christianity and Culture*, 7 (2017), pp. 88-96; "The Monastery of the Bulgarians on the Island of Oxia". *Christianity and Culture*, 4 (2016), pp. 35 - 42, represent serious and original scholarship on various issues of Christian antiquity that show the candidate to be a thorough scholar of the subject matter. The article devoted to a church-historical topic of the 20th century - "Metropolitan Boris of Nevrokopion - the Shepherd and the Confessor", *Christianity and Culture*, 8 (2016), pp. 16-28, being a well-constructed study based on sources, nevertheless suffers from a serious flaw in a certain aspect. Namely, the author has not indicated well-known facts concerning the period of the Second World War, in which Metropolitan Boris of Nevrokopion occupied, to say the least, controversial positions. Silencing the truth in science is not a good practice, so it becomes an ideology.

Here I would like to draw attention to several other publications such as. "The path of a sacrificial ministry from Silistra to Kiev". *Christianity and Culture*, 9 (2012), pp. 50-59; "The Island Monastery of St. John the Forerunner - an unread page of our church history". *Christianity and Culture*, 3 (2014), pp. 93 - 103; "St. Nikita of Remessiana and the evangelization of the Bessi". *Christianity and Culture*, 7 (2013), pp. 80 - 89; "St. Barbara of Heliopolis - on the traces of a tradition". *Christianity and Culture*, 4 (2012), pp. 87-98, which show the author as boldly reaching into new and unexplored areas of scholarship. However, these are essays written before the defense of the candidate's doctoral dissertation and therefore I will not dwell on them.

For the contributions of the articles, I will summarize that most are presented in a form I accept, but still the hypotheses about the episcopacy of St. Clement of Rome in Serdica and the activities of St. Apostle Andrew in the northern Black Sea region are not presented with sufficiently convincing historical arguments. In fact, the effort to look for a direct apostolic origin in some cathedrals, such as that of Odessus (Varna), has no historical evidence, and is not supported by the subsequent practice over the centuries of this cathedral drawing its authority from that of Constantinople. Here the author is stating what he wishes to be true rather than the other way around. Particularly, on the subject of the relics found in the ruins of the monastery of Ss. John Prodrome" in Sozopolis on the Black Sea, I cannot completely agree with the candidate, as his arguments are not convincing enough, and even after his publication in the scholarship the discussion on authenticity continued and today few dare to challenge the authenticity of the relics found during the excavations on the island.

I will focus on Dr. Karavalchev's **habilitation thesis** in more detail, as it has the most serious contribution among his works and is a work that should undoubtedly be positively evaluated. I have no doubt that the work has been written for a long time, since the study of the Black Sea region has been taboo in Bulgarian science for the last century. The few studies have often spoken in vague terms about the Christian and ethnic history of the region, due to the specificity of the post-Ottoman history of the area and the complex ethnic and religious balances in eastern Bulgaria and more specifically on the Black Sea coast, including Anchialos. Today, however, Bulgaria is an integral part of NATO and the EU, the territorial disputes in the Balkans are far in the past, and this provides an incredible opportunity to objectively study the history and archaeology of Anchialos as an ancient ecclesiastical center of particular importance.

Of course, its ecclesiastical history is closely linked to the Greek community and today, thank God, this does not raise any ripples, on the contrary, a work like that of Dr. Karavalchev is a highly objective study of Christian antiquity, medieval importance and the presence of Anchialos in the ecclesiastical history of the Ottoman era - an attempt at scholarship that betrays courage and daring on the part of the author. The author has focused his contributions mainly on the early period of the history of Christianity in Anchialos, but I actually see a contribution, at least in Bulgarian scholarship, especially in the study concerning the Ottoman era, since interesting processes unfolded here then, which led to the strengthening of the city's influence. Moreover, the documents that are available today on this era (mostly in Greek) allow an objective tracing of the processes and the establishment of the historical truth concerning a number of important events in the history of the region.

The structure of the monography is correct and suggests an objective approach to the object of study.

I also have some remarks to this essay. Throughout the book, most of the words and expressions in Greek are spelled with the wrong superscripts - accents and inflections, and the Greek spelling is not followed. There are a number of factual errors, and the argumentation often presents what is desired as scientific fact without supporting it with correct reference to sound scientific arguments. There is a persistent anachronism in the use of important toponyms, which also introduces confusion into the reader.

Also, I think the conclusion is not well constructed and does not really highlight the results achieved in the study. Also, there are certain weaknesses in the style and language of the paper that could easily be addressed with one revision.

The articles and the monograph, with which Assist. Prof. Dr. Ventzislav Karavalchev participated in the competition for *associate professor* show his consistent scientific interest in church archaeology and history. This consistency in scholarly pursuits is a prerequisite for a truly thorough knowledge of the subject matter and the development of research skills. Summing up, I dare to assert that Dr. Karavalchev is an established scientist over the years, but at the same time he is a researcher with technical and methodological gaps in his scientific developments. This objection of mine is conceptual, and I hope that in the future Dr. Karavalchev will not allow such moments in his research developments. The conclusions I have drawn so far, despite my critical remarks, give me grounds to confidently urge the esteemed scientific jury to award to Assist. Prof. Dr. Ventzislav Karavalchev the academic position of **Associate Professor**, and I myself will vote for this without hesitation.

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Svetoslav Ribolov

Sofia, April 2nd, 2023 r.

St. Maria of Egypt

