

REVIEW

by **prof. ScD Vera Boneva** – University of Library Studies and Information Technologies

on the occasion of the

dissertation on the topic “The Arian Disputes during the Reign of the Emperor Constantius II (historical-dogmatic research)”, written

by **Nina Koleva**, presented as defense and obtaining the scientific degree of „Doctor“ in the professional field 2.4. Religion and theology; supervisor **prof. Dr. Alexander Omarchevsky**

Information about the candidate and the procedure

Nina Koleva obtained bachelor's and master's degrees in Theology at the Faculty of Theology of the Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski during the period 2006-2012. From 2019 to 2023, she was a doctoral student at General History of the Church at the Faculty of Theology. From the submitted documentation it appears that she completed his individual plan on time and successfully wrote his dissertation work under the supervision of prof. Dr Alexander Omarcevski. The candidate has a high linguistic culture and professional experience in pilgrimage tourism. She is fluent in Turkish, Russian, Italian, English, and Greek languages at a very good and excellent level. This gives her a good basis for productive research work.

The text was presented in the Department of Historical Theology and is aimed for defense in a scientific jury. Three articles published in scientific proceedings are also presented to the scientific jury. After due verification, a protocol was created for the absence of plagiarism and other copyright delicts. The protocol is signed by the scientific supervisor. The information included in

the documents provided to me gives me a reason to assume that all legal requirements for finalizing the procedure have been met.

As a member of the scientific jury, I received all the necessary documents regarding the dissertation and the education of the doctoral student. I have also been provided with the abstract, which shows the main contributions of the scientific research. I declare that I have no common publications or other forms of common professional activity with the candidate, which would be a prerequisite for a conflict of interest.

General data for the dissertation

The text of the dissertation is 197 pages long. The following main parts are distinguished: list of abbreviations, preface, introduction, three chapters, conclusion, bibliography. The bibliography contains 179 titles in Bulgarian, Russian, English, French, Italian, Portuguese and Turkish from source texts, scientific interpretive literature, studies in periodicals and internet publications. The bibliography is well laid out, although not fully formatted according to the current ISO 690:2021 standard.

The sources of the dissertation are sufficiently representative. The interpretive texts cover the main thematic fields of the study. They are new and varied enough, although the list could be more comprehensive – mainly on the issues related to Arianism and the figure of St. Athanasius the Confessor.

The structure of the main narrative is convincing and balanced. Political and ecclesiastical historical events are presented in parallel, which corresponds to the spirit and content of the era in question. Major church and state leaders are well described and highlighted with their specific actions and ideas. Chroniclers are also present, albeit in the background, but with the important information they have recorded for generations.

The topic and objectives of the work are formulated in a motivated way. The methodology is described briefly but clearly. The scientific methods inherent in two academic fields – history and theology – have been rightly chosen and combined. Scientific studies and articles used in the dissertation are carefully described in the introduction. The part with the historiographical descriptions is slightly repetitive with the bibliography, but this does not interfere with the overall impression of a well-done scientific work. The hypothesis of the key role of the transformation of Christianity in the 4th century for the formation of medieval European civilization is a stable basis of scientific research.

The three chapters of the work are separated logically on a chronological basis. The Arian dispute is examined as a theological case study in the second chapter, and as an object of state policy in the third chapter. The bright personalities of two emperors – Constantine I and Constantius II, as well as two theologians – presbyter Arius and Saint Athanasius of Alexandria, are skillfully highlighted.

The abstract describes the main content of the dissertation correctly. The presentation of the three chapters of the study in it should be more detailed. The main part of the Abstract is not the summaries of the dissertation, but full-text excerpts from the introductory and concluding parts, which is not a good practice.

Analysis of the main text

The first chapter of the dissertation is an introduction to the main topic. It traces the transition from principate to dominate, which took place in the Roman Empire at the end of the 3rd and at the beginning of the 4th century AD. The transformation of the empire into a despotic and centralized administrative and military system is described correctly and in a little more detail than necessary in this case. The development of Christianity in the state framework created by Emperor Diocletian is outlined competently and precisely. The motives and

results of the persecutions against the Christians carried out by the emperor Galerius are convincingly shown.

With quotations from authoritative theologians and sociologists, the mythology created in the governing circles of the mentioned period that Christians were responsible for the decline of the Empire is debunked. The specific circumstances surrounding the issuance of the Serdician Edict of Emperor Galerius of the year 311 are explained in a subjective context. However, the meaning of the edict is well characterized.

The remarkable figure of Emperor Constantine the Great is characterized both in political and ecclesiastical-historical terms. State transformations of the empire at the beginning of his reign are correctly resented, as well as the choice of Byzantium (Constantinople) as the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire. The different hypotheses about the adoption of Christianity by the emperor are analyzed in the meaning field of his personal profile and in the logic of his administrative actions.

The rise to power of Constantius II and his brothers Constantine II and Constant is correctly traced, and the circumstances surrounding the division of the Roman Empire into three parts are well described. Without possessing the charisma and scope of his remarkable father, Constantius II (337-361) played a significant role – both politically and ecclesiastical-historically. The author justifiably pleads that the establishment of Christianity was one of the reasons for the partial stabilization of society in the Eastern Roman Empire under Constantius II.

In the second chapter, an analysis of Arianism as a Christian doctrine is made. The development of the phenomenon is traced chronologically in the context of the idea that that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, who was begotten by God the Father with the difference that the Son of God did not always exist but

was begotten/made before time by God the Father. Therefore, Jesus was not coeternal with God the Father.

The dogmatic controversies related to Arianism and the sacrament of the Holy Trinity are traced chronologically – before, during and after the key Council of Nicaea. The place of St. Athanasius of Alexandria in refuting the dogmas of Arianism is outlined with the necessary precision. The dissertation has a separate paragraph on the Council of Nicaea of 325, held for the purpose of drawing up a confession expressing the faith of the Church. As is known, at this council Arianism was declared a heresy, and the presbyter Arius and his disciples were sent into exile in Illyricum.

The leading figure in the fight against Arianism, Saint Athanasius the Great, has been characterized on the basis of a variety of sources. Both classical and modern authors are cited. The main works of St. Athanasius the Great are also mentioned. One of the strengths of the dissertation is the fourth paragraph of the second chapter, where the development of Arianism in the period 325-361 is shown. The points of divergence between Arianism and the dogma of the Holy Trinity are well structured. In the mentioned part of the narrative, the thesis is convincingly developed that Saint Athanasius and the Holy Cappadocian Fathers affirm the belief in the consubstantial Trinity not as an abstract truth, but as the main motive of human hope for salvation.

Not only with theoretical arguments, but also with church-historical facts, the author proves that the dogmas and works of St. Athanasius the Great and the Holy Cappadocian Fathers have a decisive role in the confirmation of the church's doctrine of the Holy Trinity. Another positive element of the dissertation is the good description of the deeds and works of the two Cappadocian fathers - Saint Gregory the Theologian and Saint Basil the Great. Theirs is the contribution not only to the confirmation of the dogma of the Holy Trinity, but also to the

realization of a delicate but strong epistemological connection between the achievements of Ancient philosophy and the High Theology of the beginning Middle Ages.

The title of the third chapter is formulated as follows: „Emperor Constantius II as Ruler“. It does not fully correspond to the content, which is largely devoted to the religious policy of the emperor. Moreover, that is precisely the topic of the dissertation. In this part, which is central to the study, the main academic contributions are also made. In general, the biography, policies and wars of the ruler are successfully described. His personality traits are highlighted in comparison to his famous father. Hostility to paganism and toleration of Arianism are outlined as the main features of Constantius II's religious policy.

The pro-Arian policy of Constantius II reached persecutions and sentences against the orthodox party – the patriarchs Paul of Constantinople and Athanasius of Alexandria were exiled already at the beginning of his reign. The author sought the reasons for this policy in the influence of the court bishops on the emperor. This thesis contains only part of the historical truth. The wider context of the problem should be considered against the background of the increasingly prominent differences between the Eastern and Western Roman Empires.

The role of the Council of Serdica of 343 in uniting the Church around the Nicene Creed and condemning Arianism as heresy is competently and thoroughly revealed. However, the circumstances that led to the continuing split between East and West after the Council of Serdica are also indicated. The general picture of the internal imperial upheavals, and especially the civil war of 350-353, is sketched sparingly, but clearly enough to understand the complex situation in the forming Byzantine Empire in the middle of the 4th century AD.

The historical legacy of Constantius II has been defined as important for the transformation of the post-Roman world – both politically and ecclesiastically.

Most of the assessments and summaries in the Conclusion are well worded and adequate to the topic. For me personally, however, some of the qualifications are too extreme – for example, the emperor is called „brilliant“ and his capital „beautiful“. These adjectives do not sit well in an academic text, even more so in relation to a ruler who fought bloody wars and whose capital was just beginning to develop as the urban center of Byzantium.

Assessment of contributions and critical notes

The self-reference of contributions is not voluminous and pretentious. Most of the formulated contributions are factual, which is important in historiographical terms. However, this is problematic in the logic of the scientific field of Theology, in which the dissertation was developed. The claim that the dissertation is the first research in Bulgarian about the church policy of Constantius II is also problematic, since in 2001 Stanislava Stoycheva defended a dissertation on the following topic „The Christian Church in the Diocese of Dacia during the reign of Constantine I, Constans and Constantius II“ (764 p.) (Faculty of History of Sofia University). Nevertheless, I accept as a contribution the author's overview of the religious policy of Constantius II, developed in the third chapter of the dissertation. Some of the analyzes of the religious disputes surrounding Arianism can also be assessed as original.

My critical remarks relate mostly to the author's penchant for lengthy narration of known historical and religious circumstances and personalities. There are individual repetitions in the text, as well as some typographical errors that need to be corrected. Primary sources should be cited from the most authoritative and established sources in Theology. Citing a published primary source in a secondary interpretive work is not acceptable. Especially since in this case we are dealing with recognizable originals that are available for use – including on the Internet. Final assessments of individual emperors, which are rather popular but

not academic, should be avoided. The asserting Caesaropapist model of Byzantium, precisely during the studied period, is only marked, and it is key to the course and outcome of most ecclesiastical-historic events and trends, which are the subject of the dissertation. The main asymmetry of the work is between the dominant ecclesiastical-historical narrative on a topic that is formulated as the theological-analytical „The Arian Controversies in the Reign of Emperor Constantius II“. In many places, the narrative not supported with references to the sources used, which is unacceptable for a Humanities dissertation.

Despite the highlighted weaknesses and inaccuracies, I accept that the text meets the basic criteria of the genre and covers the key requirements for a PhD dissertation. These features are partially compensated by the skillful construction of the historical narratives, as well as by the author's excellent terminology.

Conclusion

The work presented by Nina Koleva covers all the basic requirements for a dissertation in the professional field „Religion and Theology“. The text is carefully and competently written. The scientific apparatus is arranged according to the rules. The main thesis is proved in a motivated and convincing way. The author demonstrates intellectual courage to explore a difficult topic with a global context.

In view of the above, I vote in the affirmative for awarding the educational and scientific degree Doctor in the professional field Religion and Theology of Nina Koleva.

Sofia
March 8th, 2024

Prof. ScD Vera Boneva