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**THE IDEAS OF SEEKING AND STRUGGLING AGAINST
GOD IN THE WORLDVIEW OF NIKOLAI RAINOV
(1889 – 1954)**

ABSTRACT

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Introduction

Reflecting on the life of a particular artist is a serious responsibility, as there is a risk of subjectivity and misrepresentation of the events in their life. Subjectivity is also possible when evaluating creativity, which is understandable, as creativity stems from both thought and emotion—where its vitality, dynamism, and beauty are to be found.

This dissertation focuses on the life and work of a prominent Bulgarian artist and intellectual, Nikolai Rainov. The responsibility is even greater because Rainov is an extraordinary and multifaceted figure—creatively vibrant yet controversial—who was constantly searching and often challenged himself. While the task is difficult, it is also interesting and intellectually stimulating, as the study attempts to take a theological perspective on a life filled with creative dynamism, yet marked by contradictory ideas and concepts that stand in opposition to Christian doctrine.

General Characteristics of the Dissertation Research

I consider the topic of this dissertation to be important, as it addresses contemporary issues concerning the theological relationship between God and humanity, and the human journey toward God in general. In this context, the life and creative path of Nikolai Rainov are briefly examined. Additionally, the artist's worldview, his aspiration toward God, and his pursuit of truth are explored. The text highlights Rainov's struggle with the imperfections of the world, his personal intransigence, and how his gradual disillusionment leads him away from the path of God-revealed truth. I also offer some personal reflections on the spiritual struggles people face in their search for God, and raise a significant

question: what are the temptations that often divert us from the path to Him?

An analysis of an artist's personality is possible, though incomplete, if viewed solely through a theological lens—that is, from the perspective of Orthodox anthropological teachings and the meaning of life. Thus, this dissertation does not claim to be exhaustive or profound, but is a modest attempt to contribute to Bulgarian apologetic scholarship.

I would be pleased if this dissertation, even in part, contributes to a deeper understanding of the artist and the man, Nikolai Rainov. His appearance alone speaks volumes about his character: silent, serious, and somber, with the hollow cheeks of an ascetic and the intense eyes of a man wholly devoted to his work, almost to the point of fanaticism. He shunned worldly vanity, lived almost reclusively, often surrounded by cigarette smoke, his head bent over books or manuscripts. Indifferent to food, sharp in his interactions with colleagues, and reserved and strict in his demeanor toward his children, Rainov allowed only a few to earn his trust and become close friends.

Nikolai Rainov was undoubtedly an encyclopedic figure with wide-ranging interests and remarkable productivity. He distinguished himself as a prose writer, poet, artist, art historian, and theorist. He was also a well-known public lecturer, deeply interested in folklore and ethnography, and an expert in esoteric philosophy, religion, and mythology.

Relevance of the Research

Nikolai Rainov explores a significant aspect of public thought—the transformation of religious consciousness, which fluctuates between Christian roots, pagan superstitions and mythologies, on one hand, and the deepening processes of secularization, on the other. The Christianity

that Rainov describes, interprets in his own way, or criticizes, pertains only to its superficial layer, manifesting as a cultural image of society and shaped by various social tendencies.

Rainov's talent is undeniable, but no matter how great, creativity must stand the test of time. It is judged by the truth it conveys and the good it brings. The more an artistic work manifests the fullness of truth, the more significant it becomes, as truth is neither subject to time nor dependent on fleeting social moods. It is truth that elevates creativity beyond the bounds of time, granting it lasting value according to the good it embodies.

Nikolai Rainov can also be considered a philosopher, for anyone who seeks the truth is one. There is a philosophy of the world, and there is a philosophy of Jesus Christ. Rainov devoted his talents, energy, and time to the world, not to Christ. In other words, he pursued the path to the unknown God, rather than the difficult, unappealing, and narrow path of prayer, surrender to God, and laying down one's life for others—the path of love.

Rainov's life illustrates that the Church should not be judged by human imperfection, but by its divine holiness. It was precisely because of the world's imperfection that God the Word became incarnate and established His Church.

In the Church, each person is called to realize their uniqueness by fulfilling their human destiny and embracing themselves as created in the image of God. This is, of course, a complex process, during which various doubts about faith may arise. Christianity's greatest adversary, therefore, is not individual religions but anti-religion. Unbelief emerges from spiritual blindness and a lack of spiritual effort.

Contradiction in the life and work of an intellectual is often a brief stage in the process of understanding one's own spiritual nature. At the

root of extreme intellectualism lies human pride—the illusion that one can attain the highest knowledge independently. It was this extreme intellectualism that led Nikolai Rainov to Freemasonry, Dunovism, and Eastern religious teachings. The delusion he embraced affected both his personal life and his work.

When talents are not nurtured, they gradually fade from the human heart and are ultimately lost. While it is true that Rainov sought the truth, he never fully reached it because he turned away from Jesus Christ. Although he was devout in his early years, he lost the purity of his faith during adolescence. Despite receiving a high-quality education at the Sofia Theological Seminary, he became more interested in philosophy and literature at the expense of theological study. Instead of deepening his faith, the young seminarian chose not to continue his theological education.

His life changes—he turns away from Jesus Christ, and his heart becomes consumed by a futile search for truth. Futile because he embarks on this journey along the path of pseudo-spirituality. This, it seems, is where the tragedy of Nikolai Rainov's life lies. He swings between philosophy and theosophy, from Bogomilism to Freemasonry, driven by intellectual pride and dazzled by the allure of intellectualism. At times, he is a Theosophist, at others a follower of Dunov, and later a Freemason. He even joined the Bulgarian Communist Party, repudiating his former beliefs and even mocking Jesus Christ and rejecting the teachings of the Church.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, it would be incorrect to judge Nikolai Rainov's personality categorically and unequivocally. He cannot be described as an atheist, for his spiritual wandering proves that, despite his struggles against God, he never ceases to seek the Creator and thirst for Him, like a deer thirsts for streams of water.

Object, Subject and the Working Hypothesis of the Research

The *object* of the study is the worldview of Nikolai Rainov.

The *subject* of the study focuses on the aspects of his worldview, as reflected in his works, that engage with the Orthodox understanding of Jesus Christ and His Church.

The *research hypothesis* is as follows: the search for the true religion is fruitless if one chooses a path that diverges from the Way, the Truth, and the Life revealed through the person of the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. John 14:6).

God is not revealed through knowledge alone; rather, God is revealed through love, as all knowledge of God is a gracious gift and insight that one receives in response to faith and love. In this context, intellectualism represents a lower level of understanding, as it is confined to human thought and consciousness. Higher knowledge and understanding are found in the mystical experience of mental prayer, which is attained through Divine Revelation. The foundation of such a spiritual quest is love, trust, and confidence in God. Unfortunately, the life of Nikolai Rainov exemplifies how one can succumb to the influence of controversial teachings and stray from the Orthodox faith.

Research Status

The first theological commentary on Nikolai Rainov was made by Professor Ivan Snegarov, who published a short article titled *Nov opit za razrushenie na Hristovoto ychenie* [A New Attempt to Destroy the Doctrine of Christ] in the Church Bulletin in 1919. The author draws a parallel between Lucian of Samosata, Celsus, David Strauss, Ernest Renan, and the emergence of a new blasphemer of Christ —Nikolai Rainov—and his

novel *Mezhdu pustinyata i zhivota* [Between the Desert and Life]. Ivan Snegarov defines Rainov as the Bulgarian enemy of the God-man and accuses him of attempting to undermine the faith of many, not through scientific arguments, but by mocking the One who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

In 1919, Academician Protopresbyter Stefan Tsankov included Nikolai Rainov among the theosophists writers in his study през 1939 г. академик протопр. Стефан Цанков в своето изследване *Balgarskata Pravoslavna tsarkva ot osvobozhdenieto do nastoyashte vreme* [The Bulgarian Orthodox Church from its Liberation to the Present Time].

That same years, critical articles by professor of Moral Theology Gancho Pashev, were published in the Church Bulletin in response to the refusal to celebrate the 25th anniversary of Rainov's writing activity. Interesting insights regarding the failed jubilee are found in P. Tikhlov's monograph *Nikolay Rainov Zhivot, tvorchestvo, anekdoti* [Nikolai Rainov: Life, Work, Anecdotes] as well as in Stefan Mokrev's article *Zabraneniyat yubiley na N. Rainov* [Spomeni i dokumenti] [The Forbidden Jubilee of N. Rainov: Memories and Documents].

In 1979, in connection with the 100th anniversary of Nikolai Rainov, Velika Andreycheva published a monograph titled *Kniga za Nikolay Rainov* [A Book about Nikolai Rainov]. This work includes previously unexplored materials from his life and creative path, but it does not address the issues central to this dissertation.

A key work relevant to the topic at hand is Edvin Sugarev's monograph *Nikolay Rainov – bogotarsachat bogoborets* [Nikolai Rainov: God-seeker and Theomachist]. In this study, the author reconciles the dual aspects of Rainov's personality as both a God-seeker and a theomachist. In the introductory article to Rainov's works, E. Sugarev expresses the opinion that the image of Jesus Christ in the novel *Between*

the Desert and Life serves as a nucleus that intergrates the Nietzschean assertion that God is dead, the Buddhist claim that anyone can become a Buddha, and the Christian conviction that God is love (1 John 4:8).

In the book *Ezoterizmat kato religiozna disfunktsia* [Esotericism as Religious Dysfunction], authr D. Rusev examines the initial forms of esoteric teachings in Bulgaria following liberation from Ottoman rule, dedicating significant attention to the work of Nikolai Rainov, which he analyzes from a theological perspective, revealing Rainov's esoteric and occult inclinations.

Overall, this dissertation aims to engage with the diverse range of research opinions related to the work of Nikolai Rainov, specifically through the lens of Christian apologetics.

Aim, Objectives, Methodology, Structure, and Presentation of the Dissertation Research

Research Methodology of the study: Given the specificity of the scientific speciality in which this topic is developed, a comparative-analytical approach is employed, combined with both inductive and deductive methods.

The *aims* are to unravel the mystification surround the personality of Nikolai Rainov.

The *objectives* focus on the forms of God-seeking and theomachy in Rainov's worldview and works, analyzed through the prism of Christian apologetics.

Structure of the Dissertation: The dissertation is organized into a preface, introduction, three chapters (each followed by conclusions), a final conclusion, references and appendices.

Presentation:

The first chapter is dedicated to the life and work of Nikolai Rainov. His life and work are intertwined, with his creative legacy reflecting the main challenges he faced throughout his life. A significant stage in his life was his time at the Sofia Theological Seminary, which would profoundly influence him by setting the course from God-seeking to a struggle against God. Nikolai Rainov's excellence as an artist is evident not only in his writing but also in the fine arts. His works in this field present new aesthetic, stylistic, and thematic possibilities. Additionally, the first chapter of the dissertation outlines the central theme in Rainov's work: the path of salvation.

Chapter two focuses on the worldview positions and the shift from theism to theosophy and occultism. Three factors influenced the formation of Nikolai Rainov's religious-philosophical worldview: the family environment in which he grew up, the education he received, and the social influences on his personality. The attitude towards Christianity in Nikolai Rainov's family was not so much a consequence of theological inquiry and reasoning as it was a product of his patriarchal upbringing. The religious aspects of young Nikolai Rainov's worldview gradually transformed into philosophical ones, with the doctrinal truths of Orthodoxy being replaced by notions of occultism. In general, Nikolai Rainov does not fit neatly into any particular religious-philosophical system. In this second chapter, I argue that it is difficult to categorize him according to the characteristics of any specific form. This aspect of his personality is both an obstacle to knowing God, while serves as a basis for struggling against Him

The third chapter attempts to analyze the occult-theosophical views of Nikolai Rainov through the prism of Orthodox theology and experience. It becomes evident that Rainov is critical not of Orthodoxy as a whole, but rather of specific representatives within it. I will argue that, while Nikolai

Rainov has God in his heart, he lacks respect for the Church and the clergy. He rejects Church, yet his intelligence and high level of erudition fuel his thirst for new knowledge about other religions and various occult practices..

Conclusion

Nikolai Rainov's life and work are closely intertwined. As for the question of what main life challenges the artist faced, we find the answers within his work.

An important stage of his life was his studies at the Sofia Theological Seminary. His time there marked, on the one hand, a shift from seeking God to waging war against God, and on the other hand, it significantly influenced his work. Compelled by his desire to be a leader and his drive for self-expression, Nikolai Rainov found it challenging to engage with theological disciplines that were dogmatic and not open to arbitrary or free human wisdom. The methodological approach and educational framework proved unacceptable to the young Nikolai Rainov.

Nikolai Rainov's work is characterized by a notable quality: temporal immobility. It is as if the past, present, and future coexist in a shared dimension. Raynov was the first writer to introduce ornamental prose into Bulgarian literature, and his academic studies on style—primarily focusing on the aesthetic approaches of decorativeness and syntheticism—played a significant role in the development of modernism in Bulgaria.

A key motif in Raynov's work is the path of salvation: the journey from darkness to light, from the unreal to the real, and from death to immortality. The four prerequisites for successfully traversing this path are: distinguishing the true from the untrue, rejecting the transient and the illusory, practicing right conduct, and expressing love.

Three factors had an undeniable impact on the formation of Nikolai Rainov's religious-philosophical worldview: the family he grew up in, the education he received, and the social influences on his personality. From his grandfather and father, Nikolai Rainov inherited character traits, while his mother and grandmother introduced him to faith. Overall, the attitude

toward Christianity in his family stemmed more from the patriarchal upbringing he received than from any theological pursuits or arguments.

In his philosophical reflections, Nikolai Rainov articulates the credo of the secularized post-liberation intelligentsia: believing but not religious. Gradually, the religious aspects of the young Nikolai Rainov's worldview transformed into philosophical ones, and the doctrinal truths of Orthodoxy were supplanted by notions of occultism.

However, it cannot be said that Nikolai Rainov adheres to any particular religious-philosophical system; notably, he does not create one himself. As an artist, it is difficult to categorize him according to the characteristics of any specific form. This aspect of Nikolai Rainov's personality poses an obstacle to the knowledge of God and, furthermore, becomes a valid ground for theomachy.

Nikolai Rainov envisions the ideal of a just social order in the future, which requires a spiritual elevation and an inner spiritual evolution experienced by each individual. For him, there is no boundary between history and mythology; mythology is the center, the "heart" of history—the core that contains and transmits its messages. That is why the writer does not merely explore, retell, or interpret history as an author; instead, he treats it as one would handle ore, smelting it to extract metal, from which he begins to sculpt modern versions of ancient myths or compose entirely new ones.

Nikolai Rainov interprets medieval texts by overlaying them with traditional historical prose. The magical character of these tales is designed to captivate the reader's imagination and foster a broader perspective. Although he engages with biblical themes, Nikolai Rainov's creative quest is primarily narrative rather than spiritual. This is why he approaches theosophy, occultism, and religion more as an artist than as a believer.

Raynov depicts the divinity of the overman not as a state of achieved perfection, but as an embodiment of the knowledge possessed by the overman. Therefore, divinity is also understood as the complete development of a fully realized human being. In this way, Nietzsche's concept of the *Übermensch* (overman) is somewhat popularized in Nikolai Rainov's work; his theosophical model describes a new race of humans defined by the characteristics of the overman.

Nikolai Rainov asserts that he possesses mystical knowledge that transcends the traditional interpretation of Holy Scripture. This conviction has likely accompanied him in writing the novel *Between the Desert and Life*, which relativizes Christian values by instilling doubt in the reader through a postmodern perspective on the Church's social role and mission.

Although he claims to possess mystical knowledge, Nikolai Rainov does not define himself as a spiritual leader or theologian. Furthermore, he cannot be described as a religious artist, as the majority of his work does not express religious seeking.

In general, Nikolai Rainov is critical, but not of the Christian faith as a whole; rather, he critiques specific representatives of it who engage in morally unacceptable transgressions. He maintains an objective stance towards various representatives of spiritual communities and expresses no preference for any particular religious doctrine.

The attitude of the Church and the religious community is entirely predictable: it is critical, unequivocal, and harsh towards some of Nikolai Rainov's works. Those works that provoke censure are defined by Rainov himself as works of art rather than as sacred in nature.

The writer has a distinct affinity for the national. As a Gnostic, he expresses an interest in the Bulgarian version of this perception of the world through Bogomilism; however, the cosmopolitan nature of

theosophy prevents the balance from being disturbed by a predominance of Bulgarian influence.

The novel *Between the Desert and Life* is the first attempt in Bulgarian fiction to recreate the Gospel account of the life of Lord Jesus Christ. What is striking about this work is the deliberate desacralization of the image of the God-man; moreover, the resurrection of Christ is nowhere mentioned as the center of Christian faith. While E. Renan, for example, views the symbolic language of Christian faith as a distortion of Christ's message, Nikolai Rainov situates the image within a far more complex palette of relationships. In addition, he does not present himself as a biographer-narrator or as a "new evangelist." *Between the Desert and Life*, which is not an evangelical novel, stands in categorical opposition to the evangelical narrative. It offers a different interpretation of the sacred image that is both unacceptable and fundamentally alien to the hagiographic tradition. The novel makes seemingly minor (at first glance) and seemingly private (in relation to the overall narrative) changes in the narrative layers that, however, indicate a distortion of the Christian gospel.

"With the truth for the truth" is the motto of the novel, and its author's message is that it is necessary to reform human life in order to reach a common symbol. In this context, a new level of symbolization is introduced through the creation of an impressive image of a new and great hero of humanity.

Nikolai Rainov carries God in his heart but does not respect the Church or the clergy. He rejects the Church; however, the writer's intelligence and erudition sustain his insatiable thirst for new knowledge—about other religions and various occult practices. He studies these subjects, reflects on them at length, and presents them to his readers, all without considering divine revelation and at the expense of church canons.

However, creative peculiarities in the realm of religion bear rotten fruit; misrepresentation of religious truths occurs, leading some people to accept these misrepresentations as a non-canonical version of the Holy Scriptures. According to Nikolai Rainov, what is specifically Bulgarian is the heretical alteration and conceptualization of the Christian myth, which is influenced by the unique cultural and historical situation. Thus, influenced by Eastern mysticism, Gnostic teachings, Russian occult literature, and ancient Himalayan adepts, Nikolai Rainov dared to write a novel about the life of Lord Jesus Christ, in which he denied both His immaculate conception and His divine-human nature.

Although the novel has been described as one of his most significant works, in eschatological terms, it likely represents the most serious personal challenge for the seeker Nikolai Rainov. His spiritual path is an unending journey in search of truth and spirituality, during which he ultimately discovers that he has drifted away from it.

He died neither fully understood nor fully acknowledged. In fact, Nikolai Rainov passed from the earthly realm without having truly understood the Lord Jesus Christ in his heart. While he did not create his own religious-philosophical doctrine or movement, his work contains intellectual codes that indicate a direction toward the esoteric development of Bulgarian religious thought since the early twentieth century, a trend that continues in various forms today.

Until his last breath, Nikolai Rainov remained both a God-seeker and engaged in a struggle against God.

Is the search of God a quest for something he has already found?

Is his struggle against God, in fact, a fight against what distorts the image of God in humanity?

Is his work an attempt to desacralize the image of God in human being, or is it the opposite —an effort to challenge everything in humanity and the world that is untrue, hypocritical, and deceptive?

We leave the answers to Nikolai Rainov himself: "...I studied philosophy and ended up in decorative and graphic art. I decided to become a monk and then go married. I loved people, and they hated me...I owe my greatest gratitude to the seminary, where I was taught to think, to be silent, to revere, to contemplate, and to seek something great than the human being..."¹.

¹ *Almanac Zhatva [Harvest]*, 1922.

Scientific Contributions

1. For the first time in Bulgarian theology, an attempt is being made to conduct a comprehensive study of the theological ideas in the worldview and work of Nikolai Rainov.
2. Identification and analyse of the preconditions and reasons that led to a change in Nikolai Rainov's religious views and his adoption of occult-magical notions.
3. A theological analysis of the main themes in the novel *Between the Desert and Life*.
4. Practical orientation: This dissertation serves as a starting point for further research and the preparation of a specialized course aimed at training students in theology.

Publications on the topic of the dissertation

1. “Vliyanie na okultizma i teosofiyata varhu mirogleda na prof. Nikolay Raynov (1889-1954)” [Influence of occultism and theosophy on the worldview of prof. Nikolai Raynov (1889-1954)] *Светодавец – списание за богословие, история и култура*, 11-12/2023, 44-58.
2. “Nikolay Raynov i Tsarkvata” [Nikolai Rainov and the Church], *Мисъл, слово, текст*, ПУ „Паисий Хилендарски“, т.13 (19), 2023, 117-126.
3. “Lichnostta na Iisus Hristos v magichno-okulnrite vyarvania na Nikolay Raynov” [Lichnostta na Iisus Hristos v magichno-okulnrite vyarvania na Nikolay Rai (1889-1954)], *Светодавец – списание за богословие, история и култура*, 7-8/2023, 34-42.