

REVIEW
FOR THE DISSERTATION OF VASIL VASILEV
"GOD-SEEKING AND GOD-FIGHTING IDEAS IN THE
WORLDVIEW OF NIKOLAY RAINOV"
FOR THE AWARD OF THE EDUCATIONAL AND SCIENTIFIC
DEGREE "DOCTOR" IN PROFESSIONAL FIELD 2.4. RELIGION AND
THEOLOGY (*Christian apologetics*)
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Vasil Vasilev is a doctoral student of independent training in *Christian apologetics* at the Department of "Systematic Theology" in the Faculty of Theology of the Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski". The presented dissertation work is dedicated to the religious-philosophical ideas building the worldview of the writer, thinker, artist, critic Nikolay Rainov, undoubtedly one of the most significant personalities in the spiritual life of Bulgaria from the first half of the twentieth century. The research has a total volume of 212 pages, it is structured in a preface, an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, a list of the literature used, covering 241 titles, and several appendices placed at the end.

I am enrolled as a member of the current jury for the defense of the dissertation work by Order of the Rector of the Sofia University RD 38 – 626 dated 05.11.2024.

The chosen topic of the dissertation work is a test both due to the fact that Nikolay Rainov is a phenomenon in modern Bulgarian culture (whose erudition, in the words of the famous Polish researcher Grazyna Schwat-Galabova, "covers not only knowledge from the field of art history, ancient philosophy, ancient mythology, but also from the field of esoteric sciences, Christian and Jewish mysticism, Renaissance hermeticism, alchemy, finally – of Gnosticism in its various varieties" ("*Heresis Bulgarica* in the Bulgarian cultural consciousness of the XIX and XX centuries 2010")), and due to the abundance of expert studies, criticisms, comments, reviews, etc., with which the work had to deal, to single out its own position on the relationship between God-fighting and God-seeking in the writer.

The preface and introduction are made according to standard requirements.

In the introduction, I was struck by a statement that equates Vazov and Rainov in their capacity as commentators of a popular Christianity – something that I find difficult to agree with. After which it is said that Nikolay Rainov gave his gifts and efforts to the world and not to God – a statement immediately followed by another, in which it is said that the writer went on the path of the unknown God (pp. 8-9). The text should be cleared of such ambiguities and contradictions, emphasize the argumentation in favor of one or another statement. From page 12, for example, we understand that philosophy and literature are almost certainly the reason that Nikolay Rainov "turned his back" on Jesus Christ?

More important titles should be added to the research literature on the subject.

The first chapter – "Life and activities of Nikolay Rainov" begins with "brief biographical information" about him, actually quite comprehensive (including the years in the "new socialist reality"). There is a paragraph specially dedicated to the creative path of the writer. The main steps in this path are traced in detail, with the doctoral student attempting to build a complete portrait of Nikolay Rainov, presenting and commenting on the various aspects of his activity, placed in the context of Bulgarian modernism. In addition to these efforts for comprehensiveness, contemporaries' memories of Rainov's extraordinary personality also find a place.

In this part of the dissertation, the issue of the occult orientation of Nikolay Rainov is discussed. Pages 55–57 are an initial outline of his creative evolution, which the research is requested to expand and deepen. An important place in the analysis of the life path of the writer is occupied by his relations with Petar Danov as relations between two authors with an esoteric attitude. To the extent that it is rightfully given an important explanatory meaning, this point is also present in other places in the dissertation.

The public calvary to which the writer was subjected on the occasion of his anniversary is accurately and faithfully recreated.

The second chapter is called "The worldview of Nikolay Rainov", and the third – "An attempt at theological evaluation and analysis of the worldview positions of Nikolay Rainov" – I note this because it comes out as if the worldview is presented

first, and in the next chapter it is evaluated from a theological point of view. In fact, evaluation constantly accompanies the exposition presenting the views of the writer – these are not two separate processes. So consideration should be given to changing the title of at least the second chapter, which deals with the formation of the writer's views, the context in which this occurs, etc.

"Hereditary religiosity" (religiosity is not inherited) doesn't sound good to me – it is clear that Vasil Vasilev had in mind the influence of the family environment, which led to the much-discussed seminary education. In addition to the family environment, the doctoral student also presents the ideological climate of the era, the fashionable literary currents to which Nikolay Rainov was also involved, especially symbolism. No less important is the presence of occultism in Rainov's early work, which is discussed from this point of view in the dissertation. It is claimed that the writer's interest in the occult was motivated by the desire to change reality, and the revolutionary worldview (probably referring to the spread of Marxist ideas in our country at the time) was rejected by him. Probably because the Gnostic ideas, to which Nikolay Rainov's worldview can ultimately be reduced, due to their negation of *this world*, contain a radical revolutionary core.

In this part of the dissertation study, the religious beliefs of Nikolay Rainov are summarized as mysticism. As Rainov himself says, if religion is the path along which the human soul seeks God, mysticism is the direct but steeper path along which He is found: a mystic is "one who is guided in his activity by the desire to manifest the spiritual beginning in man – God, to make that man live with the consciousness that eternity is his lot" ("Mysticism and Unbelief" (1925)).

The following is a detailed description of the writer's connections with Theosophy, accompanied by an attempt to reveal the presence of it in his artistic works. Knowing them well makes an excellent impression. The pages dedicated to the so characteristic and recognizable fairy tales of Nikolay Rainov are very well written – fairy tales for which the question of how suitable they are for children is rightly raised, and not because they are scary (those of the Brothers Grimm are also scary).

One of the mandatory moments in the explanation of Nikolay Rainov's worldview is the discussion of his attitude towards Nietzsche – this was done by Vasil

Vassilev in a separate paragraph. In the doctor's interpretation, Nietzsche's *Übermensch* in Rainov's work is an analogue of Dostoevsky's *man-god*. Let's also keep in mind that one of the specific Bulgarian readings of Nietzsche is the identification of Zarathustra with Christ (as Kamelia Zhabilova points out in "Nietzsche. Topos of the Spirit") – especially important in the interpretation of the novel about Christ.

Another smaller part of the second chapter deals with the influence of Freemasonry on the formation of the worldview of the writer, offering a brief history of this world phenomenon and clarifying the attitude of the Church towards it. The doctoral student explains Nikolay Rainov's relationship with Freemasonry as a "legitimate consequence of the ongoing secularization". However, this explanation does not explain anything – we must give up extremely general explanations; here the attractive features of Freemasonry for a person with Rainov's attitude should be highlighted.

At the end of the chapter (as well as the other two) there are summaries of the previous presentation. In one of them, it is claimed that Nikolay Rainov is not part of a certain religious-philosophical system (that is, that he "slips away" from the formatting of his concepts), which was an obstacle to knowing God and at the same time a reason for fighting God. Both parts of the statement are debatable; an argument for this is needed and none is presented.

We come to the most important chapter, in which attention is focused on the famous novel "Between the Desert and Life" – "the first attempt at a literary interpretation of the Gospel account of the life of Jesus Christ in Bulgarian fiction", according to the author. I will immediately note that I fully agree with the recommendation of Prof. Ribolov (from the preliminary discussion of the dissertation) that this novel should have been placed by the doctoral student in its necessary context of similar artistic attempts to recreate the image of Christ – Kazantzakis is the first name that comes to mind given the general Balkan context.

There are many supranational attempts in this regard, but it would be good to present the relevant national context as well – in 1927 in magazine "Bulgarian Thought" Georgi Konstantinov published two large texts dedicated to the image of

Christ in Bulgarian literature; Tsvetana Georgieva is the author of a monograph on the gospel in the literature of Bulgarian modernism (2005), etc., there is no point in listing. But the comparison between the various attempts to recreate the image of Christ in fiction would significantly enrich the current interpretation of the novel under discussion.

In the first subparagraph of the third chapter, it is said that "in the works of E. Renan and Nikolay Rainov, we are faced with a deliberate, sought-after desacralization of the image of Jesus Christ" (p. 132). Indeed, Renan aside, why are we confident of this? The writer left no record of his *intentions*, and, as we know, intentions and results are different things. Rainov is the author of an *artistic experiment*, and his novel should be evaluated precisely as such, and not as a religious teaching. It is a *literary* fact, and in the 20th century literature has already given up its didactic attitudes, abandoning realism as well.

There are various images of Christ in world literature, including those wrapped in revolutionary romance, as in Blok's poem "The Twelve". Significantly different versions of the image are also possible in the same author, for example in Dostoevsky ("Idiot" and "Poem about the Grand Inquisitor"). Against this background, the novel "Between the Desert and Life" is one of the next attempts in the discussed relationship. The novel, as is known, received polar assessments, with its critics proceeding far not only from the scandal with the image of Christ, but precisely from the criteria for evaluating the *artistic* qualities of the work.

Nikolay Rainov was aware of the fundamental impossibility of an artistic embodiment of the image of Christ (and he has already left written evidence of this). It is due to the unconvincingness of world examples in this regard – including the one with Dostoevsky's Prince Christ.

Most important in the third part is the attempt to evaluate the philosophical-religious views of the writer based on his 1919 novel – the author is called upon to answer the question "is Nikolay Rainov bound to a specific religious-philosophical system?". Vasil Vasilev gives a negative answer, considering that the only thing that remains constant in these views is mysticism. I am of the opinion that the answer is another – both the denial of the Old Testament and – especially! – the metaphysics of

Light expressed in the first part of the novel (Light and Its fall into the flesh of *this world*) refer directly to easily recognizable fundamentals of Gnosticism as a whole (regardless of its many variants). It is not by chance that today's researchers evaluate the novel as a modern apocrypha.

The thesis conclusion is detailed and well done. And in the end, it refutes the excessive categoricalness regarding "whether his work is an attempt to desacralize the image of God in man, or the opposite – it is an attempt to challenge everything in man and the world that moves away from the truth, which is hypocritical and deceitful?" (p. 170).

Bearing in mind the great challenge of the chosen topic, I believe that Vasil Vassilev has presented a successful development of it from the standpoint of theology. The author has satisfactorily demonstrated his scientific competence, and the efforts made to search for different documentation have enriched the exposition as a result. A good knowledge of Nikolay Rainov's work is also a merit of the work.

In the abstract, well conveying the content of the dissertation work, the contributing points are formulated and realistically presented.

Three publications on the topic of the dissertation research are presented.

In conclusion: as a member of the scientific jury, I will vote "yes" to Vasil Boyanov Vassilev to be awarded the requested educational and scientific degree "doctor" in professional direction 2.4 Religion and theology, specialty Christian apologetics.

16. 01. 2025

Signature

