

OPINION
ON THE DISSERTATION OF YONKO BONOV
"CHRISTIAN FAITH AND VALUES IN CREATION BY YORDAN
YOVKOV AND ELIN PELIN"
FOR THE AWARD OF THE EDUCATIONAL AND SCIENTIFIC
DEGREE "DOCTOR" IN PROFESSIONAL FIELD 2.4. RELIGION
AND THEOLOGY (*Christian Apologetics*)
by Prof. Nina Dimitrova,
Institute of Philosophy and Sociology – BAS

Yonko Bonov is a full-time doctoral student in the Department of Systematic Theology at the Theological Faculty of the Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski". I have been appointed as a member of the scientific jury for the defense of his dissertation by Order of the Rector RD 38 – 625 of 5 November 2024.

The dissertation presented for discussion – "Christian faith and values in the work of Yordan Yovkov and Elin Pelin" has a total volume of 367 pages, divided respectively into a preface, an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion and a list of the literature used. The interdisciplinary nature of the research is announced in the preface, and the professional competences possessed by the author in the field of both literature and theology are an important prerequisite for the success of the undertaking.

In the introduction, the goals and tasks of the work, the methodological apparatus, the object and the subject of the study are specified.

In order to confirm the presence of Christian faith and values in the psyche of the characters of the two writers, the commentary literature on the subject dating from the period of socialism is rejected by the author as completely dominated by the ideological framework. However, let's not forget that different (than those in the present work) assessments of our two artists were also given during the interwar period, i.e. beyond this ideological dictate.

The doctoral student gives key importance to an article of Arch. Euthymius regarding the religiosity of Bulgarian writers, but the thesis expressed there is still not

consensual – for example, in "Church Gazette" from 1911. (no. 39) Stefan Tsankov, cited more than once in the dissertation, published an article in which he compared the religiosity of Russian and Bulgarian writers, between whom he found a contrast in this respect.

The first and second chapters of the present work are respectively dedicated to the works of Yovkov and Elin Pelin (from the purposes of the research), and the third chapter represents a comparative analysis.

Since the *opinion* format does not allow a detailed presentation of the presentation (especially given the amount of work), I will share some impressions of what was written.

Thus, the first chapter – "Yordan Yovkov: Man is Sinful, Blessed by God for Repentance", emphasizes first on the military prose of the writer, then makes a comprehensive, accompanied by many extensive quotations, analysis of his entire prose, categorically affirming the presence of Christian values in the soul of the characters described by him. For example, about one of them, Yonko Bonov says: "Yovkov's artistic image of Seraphim is unique in our new literature as a projection of the Son of Man who descended to earth" (p. 80). The biblical messages in the images created by Yovkov were traced, his religious humanism was established.

The story "The Reaper" occupies a special place in this part of the dissertation, insofar as it is in relation to it that Yovkov is defined as a religious writer. I would also like to see here a comment on the review by the theologian Gancho Pashev on the occasion of the second edition of the story (in the magazine "Spiritual Culture", issue 44 of 1930).

The theological and at the same time literary analysis of Yovkov's work is reasoned and competently conducted. I would also suggest an important addition, although the work is too large without it, but in my opinion, a theological-anthropological analysis of the figure of the *holy fool* – precisely as a religious figure – would be completely relevant and necessary to complement the chosen topic here. As far as I know, the author of a similar study in our humanities is Milena Kirova ("The Holy Idiot: a Typological Analogy in Yovkov's Work", 2006).

The second chapter – "Elin Pelin: The Fallen Man – A Manifestation of Bulgarian Modernity" continues the research started with the work of Yovkov's friend/opponent.

In the presentation of the ideological and socio-political context of Elin Pelin's work, emphasis is placed on the ideas of Russian populism, which, according to the author, had a significant impact on Pelin's worldview. The possibility that the writer was influenced by Renan seems unlikely to me.

In at least two places in the dissertation, Yonko Bonov also talks about the influence of rationalism ("a powerful wave of rationalism that has already flooded Europe") on the Bulgarian writer. I don't know what kind of rationalism it is; in the interwar period, the *philosophy of life*, which is not rationalism in the least, penetrated and became established in our country. The explanation of Elin Pelin's attitude towards the clergy should be sought not in populism or rationalism, but in the then state of this clergy (as it was later done (p. 132)).

The reanimated interest in Bogomilism and its artistic embodiment in Tsvetan Minkov, Kiril Hristov, Ivan Grozev, Nikolay Rainov is also explained in the third chapter with the impact of rationalism – but they are not rationalists at all, especially the last two, who are unanimously considered mystics.

Returning to the collection "Under the Monastery Vine", I will note that the author defines it as "a unique and unique phenomenon in our new literature" and ascertains its overall Christian spirit.

The doctoral student devotes a lot of space in his work to commenting on the critical evaluations of the collection both by later literary scholarship and by contemporaries. However, I am puzzled by the *deviation* dedicated to Nikolay Rainov – who he is and what he wrote is explained at length, so that the value of Elin Pelin as an artist and defender of the Christian faith and values among Bulgarians stands out precisely against his background. But a comparison between two such different types of artists is unproductive, and also creates the feeling of an edifying tone.

I am also puzzled by the commentary on the story "Prophet", in which the hero's encounter with Christ is assessed as "an indisputably original decision" (p. 211) – there are many such decisions in world literature.

The further analysis dwells in detail on other famous works of Elin Pelin (including novels for children), presenting them from the chosen perspective of research.

The third chapter is devoted to the similarities and differences regarding the Christian concepts of the two authors. The proposed criterion is their relation to the main provisions in the already mentioned article of Arch. Euthymius. The analysis is detailed and comprehensive, highlighting the specific artistic solutions in the field of the chosen topic.

A small note – I do not agree that Elin Pelin fits into the philosophical-literary current of existentialism – such a statement would be exaggerated.

The abstract presents the dissertation synthetically. The author has divided his scientific contributions into 7 points, which is unnecessary fragmentation. A polemical approach to atheistic criticism cannot be formulated as a contribution. The fourth contribution formulated can be combined with the second and a more appropriate definition is proposed. The fifth is untenable in my opinion.

The PhD student has three publications on the topic of the dissertation, as well as various participations in scientific forums and in research projects.

In conclusion: the presented study of a theological-literary character has fulfilled its set goals, providing sufficient argumentation in support of the statements made. Therefore, as a member of the jury for the defense of this work, I will vote "yes" to its author Yonko Danov Bonov to be awarded the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in Professional direction 2.4. Religion and Theology, specialty *Christian Apologetics*.

16. 01. 2025

Signature: