

REVIEW

of the dissertation *The Doctrinal Conflict between Christianity and Islam*
(according to St. John Damascene's Heresy 101)

submitted by

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in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the scientific degree of **Doctor of Science**

Professional field **2.4. Religion and Theology,**

Scientific specialty **Theology (Systematic Theology – History of Religion)**

by Prof. Valentin Kanawrow, DSc

The dissertation contains 453 pages, and includes a bibliography, a list of abbreviations, and 397 pages of plain text. The impressive bibliography, which is divided into: (1) sources; (2) studies; and (3) anthologies, historiographies, encyclopaedias and dictionaries, consists of 778 entries in Bulgarian, Russian and English. It is relevant to the content of the dissertation and sufficient in terms of sources, information material, hermeneutic value and productivity. The dissertation is submitted together with an abstract and accompanying documents. The 33-page abstract demonstrates compliance with the specifics of the dissertation genre, i.e. a theoretical study formulating, structuring, justifying and methodically presenting an innovative doctoral thesis, the systematic development of which leads to positive scientific achievement) by succinctly reproducing its content, outlining its scientific contributions, and listing the candidate's publications on the topic of the dissertation. The accompanying documents meet the legal and other requirements for the defence procedure.

Klara Toneva graduated in 1996 with a master's degree in Theology from Sofia University, and obtained a post-graduate qualification in English from the Institute for Foreign Students in Sofia in 1999. In 2004, she defended a doctorate on *The Position of the Muslim Woman as a Contemporary Challenge to Islam* in the scientific specialty History of Religion at the Faculty of Theology, Sofia University. In 2002, she became a part-time assistant professor, and, subsequently, a senior assistant professor at the Faculty of Theology, Sofia University. In 2012, she was appointed associate professor at the Department of Systematic Theology, Faculty of Theology, Sofia University, and, in the same year, she became lecturing as a part-time lecturer at Georgi Rakovski Military Academy of Sofia. Since 2022, after successfully completing an

academic award procedure, she has held the title of professor in the scientific specialty History of Religion, professional field 2.4. Religion and Theology at the Faculty of Theology, Sofia University.

Before proceeding with the proper analytical part of the review, I wish to specifically mention Klara Toneva's professional ethics, commitment and consistency. She has chosen a path of professional development that goes beyond the professorship, and, within less than a year of obtaining that academic position, she has already presented her higher doctorate to the attention of the university and specialised theological community. This fact alone is worthy of academic respect, considering the existential, scientific, administrative and financial neglect of the higher doctorate in recent years in Bulgaria, which categorically devalues the successful theoretical achievements and equates the intellectual life of the scientist with the vanity and office-seeking aspirations of politicians, administrators, clerks, and the like.

As a specific preliminary aspect to the actual theoretical corpus of the text, I like to point out the choice of approach to the problematic. It outlines the problematic field of the dissertation, which, rather than being objectively determined, is in fact objectively structured precisely by means of this approach, itself transformed into a theoretical instrument in the systematic development of the concept. Considered on merit, this is a definitive methodological contribution of the dissertation, perfectly aligned with the goal of the higher doctorate. The explication of the underlying intent is not objectively but strictly conceptually structured, and the model interpretation is built together with the application of the method, rather than as a result of analysing pre-defined chunks of an already identified hypothetical unit.

In this connection and as a second preliminary aspect, I like to stress the architectonisation of the theoretical problematic, which is structured not only in historic-religious, historic-doctrinal, canonical-foundational, canonical-interpretative, theological-debative and apologetic and Christ-loving terms, but also as a single hermeneutic interpretative knot of those six fundamental research projections. The fine balance of their thematising and entwinement is a major achievement of the candidate, lending a certain level of depth and detail, but also vitality and energy to the text. On p. 29, Prof. Toneva notes: "Even though, as a piece of theological-systematic research, this dissertation falls into the scientific and methodological domain of history of religion, is also borrows from other contemporary approaches of comparative theology and comparative religious studies."

As much as these two preliminary aspects enable a well thought-out and methodologically clear theoretical presentation, they also add hermeneutical value, which can be seen from the saturation of the theoretical content and the identification of innovative focal points, which are appropriately integrated into the conclusions at the end of each chapter.

The textual part of the dissertation is structured into a preface, an introduction, seven chapters, a conclusion, a list of abbreviations, and a bibliography. The chapters are well balanced, which is proof of fruitful reflection on the topic and its structural theorising. The introduction contains an accurate overview of the distinctive elements of the dissertation. The methodology is precisely explained, and special emphasis is placed on “the combination of the historical-critical and the theological-systematic methods” (p. 12), as well as, and most understandably so, on comparative analysis. The parameters of the doctoral conflict, the understanding of heresy, and the difference between debate, discussion and dialogue are clearly spelled out; a working hypothesis is proposed; and the supporting arguments and fundamental precepts in the seven chapters are briefly described.

Prof. Toneva axiomatises religious difference, and not the religious in general and/or the typicality of the religious phenomenon. In this way, she gracefully omits the seemingly coincident but in fact sparsely abstract characteristics of the religious phenomenon, which are neither constitutive of a concrete ecclesiastical communion, nor are they transformable into concrete canonical foundations. In the strict Orthodox sense, she reiterates that the Church is both the body of Christ and the fullness of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:23), i.e. the Church is a Christologically, triadologically, pneumatologically and eschatologically determined and righteous catholic community. Seen from a different angle, an extreme focus on religious unity does not go beyond a utopian claim, which can never be a legitimate ontological theme. Prof. Toneva skilfully avoids this pitfall, choosing to fundamentalise religious difference instead. This might look like a spiritual and cultural flaw, an example of political incorrectness or a way to stay current, but in fact “debate is not just part of the discussion of differences, it is a way of truthful theological dialogue, which is all the same open to answers” (p. 30).

From this starting position and in suchlike manner, on rigorously doctrinal grounds, constituted by St. John Damascene’s Heresy 101, and with a Christ-like pathos, Prof. Toneva considers the theological dialogue between Christianity and Islam against the background of their shared Old Testament origins. The latter aspect is significant, insofar as it represents the

common and yet interpretatively porous principles of the dogmatically and canonically distinct foundations of the two religions. The dissertation argues that the Qur'anic rendition of the Old Testament narratives "is inconsistent and lacking in detail and historical dating" (p. 108). An important ideological consideration is that it frames the subject of the doctrinal conflict, first of all, chronologically, i.e. beginning with the establishment of Islam as a monotheistic religion in the middle of the 7th century through to the middle of the 9th century, and, second, through the prism of St. John Damascene's Heresy 101. Arab by origin but born into a Christian family, living in the mixed Islamic and Christian religious climate of Damascus and Palestine (in the words of Protopresbyter John Meyendorff "in his mind and heart [he was] living in Byzantium (p. 103)), but also one of the Fathers of the Church, St. John Damascene was not only a witness to those turbulent religious times, but also a discerning author of systematic and polemical works seeking to propose an exact exposition of the Orthodox faith: "the truth, adorned and woven as if with goldwork embroidery" (p. 99). Needless to say, from the perspective of time and specifically aiming for precise theorising of the subject, Prof. Toneva considers other important periods in the history of the relationship between the two religions, and, above all, in the dynamics of their doctrinal conflict.

The first chapter traces the origins of Islam, its roots and pillars, and its establishment as a monotheistic religion. The analysis is concise and factual, focusing on the person of Muhammad, his religious, civil and political views, and the doctrinal formation of Islam. The second chapter examines the religious interaction between Christianity and Islam and details its spiritual and historical context, specifically focusing on the establishment of monotheism and the reasons why the Qur'an favours Christians over Jews, including as a result of "Muhammad's more benevolent attitude towards Christians compared to his attitude towards the three Jewish tribes in Mecca" (pp. 80, 75, 88). Certain shared characteristics between Islam and a number of Christian heresies and the beginning of the doctrinal polemic between Christianity and Islam are explored, including through a justification of the reasons and the way in which this polemic was led primarily by the Christians of the East, whereas for the Latinised West it did not surge until the 12th century. The writings of St. John Damascene appeared in this complex and not entirely unambiguous doctrinal context, marked by Byzantium's political weakening and territorial concessions. Taking all of these internal aspects and external circumstances into account, the dissertation proceeds with a proper analysis of Heresy 101, as well as some of St. John

Damascene's other theological writings, and rationalises why the Church Father views the Islamic religion a Christian heresy.

The next five chapters explore the doctrinal differences between Christianity and Islam arising from their dogmatic and canonical specificities. Below, I shall briefly dwell only on their theoretical contribution and omit their accompanying comprehensive contextual analyses, which alone I consider to be among the main theoretical merits of the dissertation. To trace them would mean to engage in a lengthy hermeneutical discussion, which, even if worth the interpretative delight, would still require much detailed elaboration.

The dissertation is primarily concerned with confronting the Qur'anic postulate of the oneness of God (the Tawhid) with the Christian triadology on the basis of the differences in the interpretations of the act of the revelation, the role of the prophets and the prophecies, the significance of providence, omens and different apologetics. An interesting aspect of the analysis is the problem of the inlibration of Divine Logos, including with respect to the meanings of the words "Scripture" and "Qur'an" (meaning "reading"; pp. 118 ff.) The candidate justifies the firm claim that Islam is not a divinely revealed religion and Muhammad is not a prophet within the meaning of the Old and the New Testaments (pp. 124 ff.) In short, the problems stem from the Qur'anic misunderstanding of the infinite nature of the epiphany, the miracles, and the triune God, manifested in the co-equality and the co-existence of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity.

Kenosis, suffering, death on the cross, love and the victory of life over death are all matters of sharp doctrinal conflict. In the dissertation, these New Testament topoi are approached from the standpoints of dogmatics and apologetics, but they are also considered in discursive and evidential terms, and, above all, in relation to the Truth embodied in the Person of the God-Man. The problem stems from Muslims' historical acceptance of Jesus Christ, including as the Messiah, but their denial of His divinity and co-existence with God the Father, as opposed to Christians' intimate reception of Jesus Christ in the Holy Eucharist, considered a liturgical mystery of the Church. On this issue, Prof. Toneva once more refers to St. John Damascene, who expounds on the way in which the coming of the Holy Spirit, which is beyond man's abilities, language and thought, transforms the bread into the body of Christ and the wine into His blood. In Islam, on the contrary, Allah remains closed within his transcendent essence and does not descend into a (physically suffering) man, who, in his divine essence, can take the salvation of men upon himself.

Another breaking point in the dogmatic divide between Christianity and Islam is the presentation of the Holy Spirit: a distinct hypostasis with divine dignity or a spirit from Allah; a personal divine being or a quality and power of God. The dissertation considers the Old Testament understanding of the Holy Spirit, and elaborates on its conceptual distinction from that of the New Testament. The differences between the Church of Christ and the Islamic community (the ummah, but also the House of Islam) are clarified, stressing on the overlap between religious authority and secular power in Islam and the distinction between the City of God and the city of man, as well as the things that are God's and the things that are Caesar's in Christianity.

An important aspect of the doctrinal conflict between Christianity and Islam are their divergent anthropologies, which Prof. Toneva conceptualises as salvation and prosperity. Orthodox anthropology, she claims, is essentially Christological, but it also draws on the other dogmatic foundations of theology. The dissertation then proceeds to analyse the anthropological views of St. John Damascene on creation and redemption (pp. 264 ff.), specifically focusing on the Old Testament notion of the creation of man according to the image and the likeness of God, concluding that there are fundamental ontological and moral differences between the Christian and the Islamic anthropologies, which are most obvious in the Christian understanding of man as a partaker of the body of Christ as opposed to the Islamic view of man as a vicegerent of Allah on earth.

The doctrinal differences between Christianity and Islam are further manifested in their eschatologies. Whereas the Qur'an is primarily concerned with the terrors of hell and the carnal pleasures of paradise (p. 336), "for Christians, the kingdom of God is past, present and future: it is past, as it already dwells in those professing the faith in Jesus Christ and living according to His teaching; it is present in that the Church of Christ is its image, revelation and manifestation among the people; and it is future by virtue of its belonging to the future age" (pp. 382, 338 ff.) The final paragraph of the dissertation is concerned with the possibility of an interreligious dialogue between Christianity and Islam in the context of their doctrinal differences. Here, Prof. Toneva engages in a detailed analysis of the types of interreligious tolerance and draws attention to the hard-to-win but absolutely necessary way of interreligious dialogue, which, however, should be sought without compromising with the doctrine of faith. In this regard, it will also be necessary to consider the new religious, secular and anti-religious trends in the modern world.

The text closes with an elaborate conclusion, which accurately summarises the doctrinal conflict between the two religions. It concludes that these differences are insurmountable and justifies the need for dedicated efforts on both sides to prevent them from further growing into rifts.

Prof. Toneva summarises the contributions of her dissertation in six points. They are carefully and methodically formulated and sufficiently well and systematically justified in the text.

Prof. Toneva's candidacy meets the minimum national qualification requirements for scientific activity specified in the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria Act and its Implementing Regulations for the professional field 2.4. Religion and Theology, area of higher education 2. Humanities. This was established by the defence committee and entered into the minutes of its first meeting of 8 November 2022.

The candidate has submitted 14 publications (5 studies and 9 articles), which are fully compliant with the topic of the dissertation.

I have no major disagreements with the statements made in the dissertation and the attached publications.

In the Questions, Comments and Recommendations section, I would strongly recommend publishing the dissertation after the necessary editions have been made in accordance with the relevant genre requirements. It might also be worth considering an expansion of the final paragraph into a separate chapter. A broader socio-cultural, but also a specifically religious-doctrinal context will probably require much more of an effort on behalf of Prof. Toneva and the Faculty of Theology at Sofia University to ensure a more active and wider workshop-, project- and media-based debate on the problematic dynamic between Christianity and Islam.

I have not found any plagiarism in the dissertation and the accompanying publications.

I have not collaborated with Prof. Toneva on either scientific papers or research projects, but I most certainly hope to do so in the future.

Conclusion: Bearing in mind the highly topical and dynamic nature of the debate between Christianity and Islam, the plasticity of the consistent and systematic presentation of its subject matter in the dissertation, including on the basis and through the prism of a thorough analysis of St. John Damascene's Heresy 101, the theoretical contributions of the candidate regarding the doctrinal conflict between Christianity and Islam, their wide-ranging cultural, social and political

projections, including with regard to the intimate religious life of Christians and the mission of the Church, I would have no doubt in recommending that the members of the defence committee vote in favour of the successful defence of the dissertation of **Prof. Klara Asenova Toneva, PhD** on the subject *The Doctrinal Conflict between Christianity and Islam (according to St. John Damascene's Heresy 101)* by awarding her the scientific degree of **Doctor of Science** in the professional field **2.4. Religion and Theology** within the scientific specialty *Theology (Systematic Theology – History of Religion)*.

Sofia, November 25, 2022

St. Kliment Ohridski

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