

STATEMENT

by Prof. Dr. Daniela Lubenova Koleva, SU 'St. Kliment Ohridski'
Professional field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Studies
for participation in a competition for the academic position of associate professor in
professional field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Studies,
announced in the State Gazette no. 5/16.01.2024
with candidate Dr Teodora Ivancheva Karamelska

I. Assessment of the compliance with the minimum national requirements and the requirements of the New Bulgarian University

In her application for the competition for the academic position of associate professor in Professional Field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Studies, Dr. Teodora Karamelska has submitted her monograph *Believer, but not religious. Bulgarian Contexts of Holistic Spirituality*, NBU Publishing House (2023) and 22 articles and studies, most of which are in peer-reviewed journals and collections, and three are published in international editions in English and German. Four of the articles are co-authored with Galina Goncharova. All submitted publications are in the thematic area of the announced competition and are in accordance with the minimum national requirements and the additional requirements of the New Bulgarian University for habilitation; by some indicators they significantly exceed the latter.

II. Research activities and results

1. Evaluation of the monographic work, creative performances or other publications corresponding to a monographic work, including an evaluation of the scientific and applied contributions of the author.

The monograph *Believer, but not religious. Bulgarian Contexts of Holistic Spirituality*, presented as a habilitation thesis for the competition, is an original contribution to the sociology of religion – a research field that only in recent years has received due attention from researchers in the field of social sciences in Bulgaria. The monograph thematizes the new 're-enchantment' of the world in the conditions of late modernity, namely an accelerated pace of life, increased geographical and social mobility, fragmentation of publicity and radicalization of subjectivity. Arguing with the thesis of desecularization, the author seeks to understand the influence of all these transformations of religion as an institution and religiosity as a subjective experience. The relevance of this question is determined, on the one hand, by the ambivalent attempts to revitalize Orthodoxy as a traditional religion since the 1990s in Bulgaria and, on the other hand, by phenomena clearly visible in recent years in our country and not coincidentally diagnosed as 'spiritual revolution'.

Drawing on the legacies of Max Weber, Georg Simmel, and Ernst Troeltsch, and engaging in a productive dialogue with a number of contemporary authors, Karamelska elaborates on the distinction between religion and spirituality, which she uses as a theoretical framework for understanding the emergence and the manifestations of religious individualism. The delegitimization of the universalist claims of ecclesiastical Christianity, which began historically with Protestantism, has contributed to the de-ritualization and subjectivization of religious experience and, accordingly, to the transformation of religion from a complex of socially significant symbols and practices into ‘the religious as a spiritual form’ (p. 43), unrestricted by theological canons and privileging immediate life experience. This immediate relation to a transcendent existence/experience is the main characteristic of holistic spirituality, which Karamelska derives from her study of the processes developing in Western European societies, in order to compare it with the contemporary situation in Bulgaria in her multi-layered and empirically dense research. Her conclusion is that since it is not tied to a specific historical situation, holistic spirituality ‘claims universal human relevance and cosmopolitanism’ (p. 65), which is why it successfully embedded itself into popular culture during the 1990s. This finding gives grounds for the introduction of sociologically relevant parameters, which is where I see the innovative contribution of the Karamelska’s research. I mean, first of all, the predominant participation of women in various forms of holistic spirituality, as well as the remapping of the urban environment with the emergence of new quasi-sacred places. In this regard, the author's observations about the relationship between popular forms of holistic spirituality (especially yoga) and Orthodoxy merit special attention.

The predominant participation of women of different ages and different social strata in forms of holistic spirituality is a theme that runs throughout the book and is discussed from different perspectives and at different levels. From this point of view, the misleading masculine singular in the title of the book, instead of the much more appropriate plural, is puzzling. With deep insight and critical sensitivity, Karamelska discusses several different hypotheses about the appeal of holistic spirituality to urban and highly educated women in particular: overcoming traditional gender-specific roles, resisting their essentialization, solving new dilemmas, opening protected spaces in the centers for holistic training, creating market ‘niches’ for services primarily aimed at women. The author maintains these hypotheses both in her work with autobiographical interviews with participants in holistic practices and in outlining the larger picture based on sociological surveys.

Another valuable contribution of the study is the understanding of the new communities forming around the spiritual practices under consideration. Although these communities are ‘wide but shallow’, they, as it becomes clear from the statements of the interviewees, largely compensate for the breakdown of traditionally inherited religious affiliations. Moreover, they are a form of collective legitimation of individuals seeking their self-expression and self-realization through the practices in question. The search for oneself and the ‘care for oneself’, as Karamelska critically argues, are too often at the expense of a ‘doctrinal reduction’ (p. 101), replacing contents with emotions, ‘seeking

truth in the pre-reflexivity of emotional perceptions' (p. 107). This position is at the same time an understandable reaction to the rigorism of Orthodox Christianity, practised within the framework of institutional religion. Some of the most interesting and pertinent pages in the book are the sections describing the ambiguous attitudes of practitioners of holistic spirituality towards the Orthodox Church, its dogmatics and rituals. The attitudes towards the symbolic repertoire of the church are selective and pastiche-like, aimed at building one's own, 'DIY', spiritual syntheses. However, the attitude towards other cults is similar in its situationality and reductionism, often detached from their cultural and historical context and adapted to the needs of the practitioners.

What particularly captures the readers and makes the study thick and convincing are not only the argumentative constructions, but also the empirical density, achieved through a kind of 'play with scale' (Revel). Karamelska competently analyzes data from large-scale representative surveys, such as the European Values Study, to build her hypotheses about the spread and influence of holistic spirituality. At the same time, the argumentation is organically derived from the author's in-depth narrative interviews with practitioners and trainers in centers for holistic spirituality in Sofia. I find this material particularly valuable as it provides a unique opportunity to understand the importance of spiritual practices and ideas in worldview formation, coping with life crises, inclusion in communities, lifestyle choices, and more generally – 'self-care'.

In this regard, I would like to emphasize not only the wealth of the empirical corpus in question and its potential to be used in future interpretations, but also the outstanding interpretive skills of the author, who is an established researcher in the field of biographical methods developed by the school of Fr. Schütze and G. Rosenthal. The section in which she argues for the possibilities, limitations, and specific opacities of biographical research is a valuable guide for future researchers that I intend to recommend to my students.

In conclusion, Teodora Karamelska's book is an essential contribution to the sociology of religion, which outlines an emerging and dynamic research field, traces important trends in it, draws relevant conclusions and, last but not least, demonstrates the potential of the reflexive-biographical approach to the researched phenomena.

2. Evaluation of the contributions in the other submitted publications (creative performances) made after the appointment to the academic position of 'chief assistant professor' or the academic position 'associate professor' (for professor candidates).

The majority of the articles presented by the applicant are in the field of the sociology of religion. Most of them are in peer-reviewed journals and collective volumes. One of the main topics is holistic spirituality, and publications on this topic are closely related to the monograph. Another important group of publications concerns the transformations of Orthodoxy in the conditions of the liberalization of spiritual practices and teachings. Two of the articles analyze the results of the European Values Study, where the author participated as a member of the Bulgarian team. These publications

fruitfully combine empirical density with critical interpretation of classic theoretical constructions into a deep and comprehensive approach.

Five articles are based on cases from Karamelska's work with narrative interviewing to develop the biographical approach in which the author is a recognized authority in the Bulgarian social sciences and humanities. In these works, methodological reflection on the potential and limitations of biographical research is successfully combined with close, in-depth reading of empirical material generated within projects on religion/religiosity and ethnic tensions.

Four additional articles are in the field of the history of sociology, in particular the ideas of its classics such as Max Weber and Georg Simmel. The author analyzes key concepts, reconstructing the cultural-historical context of their development and their applicability in modern sociological research.

Finally, two of the articles, resulting from recent research projects, are devoted to the care of elderly people with dementia and the consequences of practising this care primarily within the families of the patients. These publications contribute to the development of another new research field in the social sciences, which problematizes the concept of care and the dimensions of care in the contemporary society.

In addition to Teodora Karamelska's original publications, her significant contribution to the social science literature in the Bulgarian language comprises a number of translations of classics of German sociology such as Simmel, Troeltsch, Mannheim, and others. She was awarded the Prize of the Union of Translators in Bulgaria for the translation of *The Fragmentary Character of Life* by G. Simmel.

3. Citations/references.

Dr. Karamelska's work has been cited by colleagues working with biographical methods, including myself, as well as by researchers of religiosity, trauma, caregiving, etc. As can be seen from the assessment table required according to the Law on the Development of Academic Staff, the points collected from the citations exceed the required minimum. No less importantly, her translations are a valuable aid in teaching sociology, cultural studies, philosophy, social anthropology – an impact that cannot be adequately captured by a citation index.

4. Evaluation of the results of participation in research or creative projects and the exploitation of the results.

Dr. Karamelska has participated in ten research projects, some of them international. In the framework of these projects, she has tested and improved her skills in the work with qualitative methods, has mastered a wide range of topics, has participated in numerous scientific forums, including international ones, and has realized significant publications. Last but not least, this research experience has been integrated in her academic work, which is evident in the titles of the courses she has developed and taught.

III. Teaching and academic activities

1. Teaching and other academic activities, work with the digital training module ‘MOODLE – NBU’, students’ internship placement, work with undergraduate and PhD students.

For the past 14 years, Dr. Teodora Karamelska has developed and conducted over 25 courses in the bachelor’s programs in sociology and philosophy at the NBU, and in the MA programs ‘Social Entrepreneurship’ and ‘Language and Public Sphere’ of NBU, as well as in the master’s program in Gender and Women’s History at the department for Cultural Studies at Sofia University. For some of these courses, she has developed original training and learning materials. She has supervised four diploma theses and has participated in commissions for state examinations. The subject matter of her teaching activity is very broad, which is a convincing proof of her academic potential. In addition, Dr. Karamelska has provided internship placements for sociology students at several marketing and polling companies and other organisations, thereby contributing to the maintenance of the high quality of the education in sociology at the NBU and its connection with the labour market.

2. Work with Erasmus students.

Dr. Karamelska has conducted individual tutorings in sociology in German language for exchange students incoming in the frame of the Erasmus program.

3. Evaluations from student surveys.

The average rating from student surveys for the last 10 semesters is impressively high: 4.77 on a five-point scale.

IV. Administrative and social activities

Dr. Karamelska is well known for her committed administrative, organizational and coordination activities both in the NBU and in other academic structures. She is the coordinator of the ‘Philosophy and Sociology’ department under the Erasmus program, director of the Program Board, program consultant for general education courses at NBU (2020-2023) and member of the NBU Library Board. In addition, he is a long-term managing editor of the journal *Sociologicheski Problemi*, and since 2020 – its Deputy Editor-in-Chief. She has participated in the organization of numerous academic forums: seminars, conferences, schools.

V. Personal impressions of the candidate (if any)

I have known Teodora Karamelska since her student years in Cultural Studies at the Sofia University ‘St. Kliment Ohridski’, as well as from her participation in several research projects that I have supervised: ‘MICROCON: Micro Level Analysis of Violent

Conflicts’ (2007-2010), ‘Marking Transitions and Meaning across the Life Course: Memories of Religious and Secular Ceremonies in Eastern and Western Europe’ (2010-2012), ‘An Oral History of Communism in Bulgaria (1944-1989)’ (2010-2012) and ‘Patterns of Anxiety: Life Narratives and Narrative Models in Post-Socialist Societies’ (2011- 2013). She is an extremely responsible, disciplined, self-critical and thorough researcher with original creative ideas and a rare talent for teamwork and constructive communication with colleagues and students.

VI. Comments and recommendations on the candidate’s activities and achievements

I recommend more ambitious publication activity in the future targeting international peer-reviewed journals, for which Dr. Karamelska has proven her potential.

Conclusion: Based on the above, I recommend without hesitation to the respected Academic Council of the New Bulgarian University to elect Dr. Teodora Ivancheva Karamelska as an associate professor in Professional Field 3.1 Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Studies. This choice will not only be a well-deserved advancement of her academic career, but also a benefit for the New Bulgarian University in terms of academic staff.

Date: 07.05.2023

Signature:

Daniela Koleva