

STATEMENT

By Prof. Dr. Martin Stefanov Kanoushev
Department „Philosophy and Sociology“
New Bulgarian University

Regarding the scientific output of Assistant Professor, Doctor Teodora Ivancheva Karamelska, participant in the competition for the academic position „Associate Professor“, announced by New Bulgarian University, field of higher education 3. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences, professional strand 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences, in issue 5 of *Durzhaven vestnik* (State newspaper – official legal bulletin) of 16 January 2023.

Assistant Professor, Doctor Teodora Karamelska is the only candidate in the competition for the academic position “Associate Professor” in the professional strand 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Studies, announced by New Bulgarian University. The competition is comprehensively relevant to the candidate's academic and educational profile, professional achievements, teaching works and research output.

Teodora Karamelska was born on 21 October 1975. She received MA in Cultural Studies from Sofia University „St. Kliment Ohridski“, together with a second degree in History, in 1998. In 2009, she obtained a PhD in Philosophy after successfully defending her thesis, entitled „Historicism as a Scientific Paradigm and Worldview in Germany in the 19th and the First Quarter of the 20th Century“. Since 2007, she has been a research fellow at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, in the period 2007 - 2011 she was a lecturer of undergraduate and graduate courses at the Department of History and Theory of Culture of the Sofia University and in „Matilda: a European Master's Programme on Women and Gender Relations“. Since 1 October 2011, she has been an assistant professor at the Department of Philosophy and Sociology of the New Bulgarian University, where every year she conducts lecture in History of Sociological Ideas, Classics in Sociology, Reading and Understanding Sociological Texts, Basic Sociological Concepts, Sociology of Communities, Sociology of Culture, Sociology of Inequalities, Sociology of Religions, Sociology of Ethnic Relations, Sociology of the City, Qualitative Methods, and Civil Education. She has specialised at the Faculty of Protestant Theology, Ludwig Maximilian University, Munich, Germany, (2001-2002); the Institute of European History, Mainz, Germany (2002-2003); the Institute for Academic Research, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK, (January-February 2009); the Methodical Centre for Social Sciences, Georg August University, Göttingen, Germany, (September-December

2010) and the Centre for Advanced Studies, Sofia, Bulgaria, (2014-2015). Her translations of classical works by thinkers such as Z. Freud, M. Weber, G. Simmel, V. Benjamin, K. Mannheim, T. Luckman, H.-G. Gadamer, A. Honneth and J. Weiss is a particularly contributive, as well as her research activities, a cumulative result of her participation in numerous national and international projects and in a number of prestigious academic forums in Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Georgia and Bulgaria with presented scientific reports. I must also highlight a significant individual contribution of Dr. Karamelska to the development of the Department of Philosophy and Sociology as Director of the Programme Board, as well as to the advancement of New Bulgarian University during the years in which she held the position of Director of the General Knowledge Courses.

The extremely significant professional activity of Dr. Teodora Karamelska systematically and consistently focused on scientific activities, in which she has unquestionably demonstrated both a committed and responsible, as well as an impressive personal presence. Karamelska's academic and public appearances reveal a critical orientation towards in-depth reflection on key, extremely topical and thematically relevant, socio-historical issues. Her entire oeuvre (consisting of two monographs, six studies (three in English and two co-authored) plus twenty-four articles (four in German, one in English and three co-authored) supplemented by seven compilations of academic collections and thematic journal issues) represents "the opus of a human life", recreated in academic terms, that is distinguished by methodological and theoretical innovation of author-created ideas, combined with an intensely developing analytical sensitivity to empirical reality. It is a confirmation of a full-bodied fulfilment of life experience in which the understanding of a profession, inseparable from the notion of a vocation, is rooted in the principled coincidence between extraordinary sociological competence and an insightful cognitive ability through the ceaseless searching for and finding of the profound personal meaning of one's own scholarly endeavours. To be humanities scientist-professional in our global contemporaneity means to be a creator, architect, and ambassador of new knowledge about human beings in their historically varying social world.

Dr. Karamelska fully complies with all the requirements of the Academic Staff Development Act in the Republic of Bulgaria, as well as the internal regulations of New Bulgarian University for holding the academic position of "associate professor": she participated in the competition with an impressive volume, quality and results of scientific production, which exceeds many times these regulatory criteria, and which was published after the defence of her dissertation. Her monographic work *Believing but Not Religious*.

Bulgarian Contexts of Holistic Spirituality, NBU, Sofia, 2023, 235 pp. is immediately accompanied by thirteen studies (two in English and two co-authored) and nine articles (one in German and two co-authored) published in prestigious scientific journals and academic collections. Virtually all of the publications are not only of a high professional level, but also of are also consistently integrated into an overall research program whose sociological significance, originality and innovativeness are superlative. Furthermore, this agenda has also transforms into an educational one, because it shapes the academic profile of the lecture courses that Dr. Karamelska teaches and through which many students from different educational levels have passed. Undoubtedly, she ranks among the most dedicated, respected and praised lecturers at New Bulgarian University. The ability to recreate systematically sociological research into academic teaching by effectively managing the relationship between researcher and teacher through the key function of scientist-writer is an extraordinary challenge, which Dr. Karamelska overcomes successfully by coherently combining these professional roles.

The monograph of Dr. Theodora Karamelska *Believing but Not Religious. Bulgarian Contexts of Holistic Spirituality* is extremely topical (in terms of the genealogy and archaeology of holistic spirituality in late modernity), significant (in terms of the current state of philosophical and scientific reflections on the analysed social problem), original (in terms of the methodological approach used and the selection of empirical material), justified (in terms of the degree of argumentation and the level of evidentiality of the author's conclusions) and contributory (in terms of the reliability of the results obtained and the validity of the conclusions drawn) sociological research.

First, why does this monograph constitute topical research? Because the critical-reflective choice of an extremely important social problem, its precise formulation in a rigorous scientific task and the correct definition of the limits of the sociological subject are its irrevocable and acknowledged achievements. To think, understand, and interpret holistic spirituality through the topics of agreement and conflict between the subjective experience of the divine/transcendent and its significance for the construction and structuring of biographical trajectories, on the one hand, and the social discourses framing and channelling the spiritual experience of those who define themselves as „believers but not religious“ on the other hand, in short, to bring the contemporary transformations of religious experience into the analytical focus of one's scientific interest is to uncover and justify a number of key historical conditions for the (im)possibility of human agency in the global world.

Second, why does this monograph a significant research? Because it emphatically demonstrates a comprehensive, coherent and detailed knowledge of both the critical reflection through which the analytical movement of the exposition unfolds, and the current state of research building the thematic constellation of accumulated knowledge in the problem field. The logical coherence of the precise use of philosophical texts, sociological and cultural studies writings, biographical research and empirical data construct the theoretical premises for an interpretive understanding of the social mode of functioning of the contemporary religious field made up of new religious notions, experiences, practices, communities and “clerics“; they serve as a secure foundation in refining the scope of the objectives, establishing the degree of reliability of the hypotheses, and sustaining the level of validity of the results.

Third, why does this monograph an original research? Because it applies the biographical approach in a highly successful way to the contemporary situation of increasing individualisation in late modernity: a coherent methodology (presuppositions and limitations), constructed and adapted to the qualitative specificities of the object of study - the reconfiguration of biographical trajectories, their continuous recomposition, as an open-ended and incomplete “personal destiny“ (p. 166). Today, biography is a strategic task that each one solves not with the help of social normalizations of life path, but through his own actions, self-knowledge and self-reflection. The theoretical presuppositions and methodological limitations of the sociological perspective on the “reflexive-biographical dimension of religion” (p. 167), which are interpretively relevant, rigorously formulated, and consistently followed, call to the fore the need to use the tools of qualitative research, first and foremost, the in-depth narrative interview as an empirical technique for interpretively understanding subjectively lived experience in a particular cultural context.

Fourth, why does this monograph constitute a justified research? Because in terms of the degree of argumentation and the level of evidentiality, its conclusions are credible, valid and reliable, hence it is theoretically generated and empirically verified true knowledge. They have arrived at through a single synthetic process in three analytical moves. First, a critical deconstruction of the notion of “holistic spirituality” as a particular form of organization and “personal management of religious experience” (p. 17) existing today alongside and in opposition to the classical types, the church and the sect. The social erosion of institutionalized religiosity, whose genealogical roots lie in the mystical experience of the divine/transcendent, not only intensifies the processes of subjectivation of religious experience by focusing it on “immediate communication with God” (p. 37),

but also makes possible the overall transformation of religious individualism into modern individualism. Then, a historical reconstruction of the conditions of possibility of the “subjective turn”, because of which a new form of religious consciousness is constructed and established. A worldview phenomenon unknown before late modernity has emerged: the “ethics of authenticity”; it not only problematizes social normalizations of life trajectories, but also progressively expands to encompass more and more spheres of life. On the agenda is “expressive individualism” (p. 45). Finally, a sociological diagnosis of the current relationship between actors, forces, ideologies, forms and practices in the contemporary religious field: the radical opposition between traditional Christianity and holistic spirituality. Here the political stakes are of crucial importance, since the question is one of life and death: who is it, the ecclesiastical institution or the individual subject, which will constitute man's fundamental relationship with the divine/transcendent; therefore, who is it that, in constructing the value horizon of modern man, will give meaning to his life.

Fifth, why does this monograph a contributory research? Because the reflexive choice of a super-significant analytical subject, the application of a relevant methodological approach and the selection of adequate empirical material constitute the key prerequisites for the construction, adaptation and approbation of the conceptual chain “spirituality – religion – church – sect – mysticism” as a cognitive tool for the critical study of the genesis of religious individualism, the fragmentation of the religious field and the transformations of religious experience in late modernity. How and why, in such a global context, does the current situation in post-communist Bulgaria look like? There is still no “holistic normalization” here, much less a “holistic revolution”: native forms of “holistic awakening” are the product/effect of (re)composing faith notions and exercises from Eastern cultures, and practices build faith communities that are flexible, dynamic, and tolerant of regularity of participation; they are individualized, non-institutionalized and non-ordered, structurally non-hierarchical and functionally unbounded; temporally open and spatially autonomous; ritually informalized, normatively defiant and value-personalized; in short, a “faith without belonging” (p. 77).

One contribution of key importance, giving completeness to the others - as with inner conviction and academic integrity I acknowledge the authorship of all contributions, correctly formulated by Dr. Karamelska – of the monograph is: the innovative mapping of the spiritual topology of urban space as a “state of mind” (p. 113), which makes possible the development of individual independence and the affirmation of the unique personality.

“To be different,” means having one's own spiritual path, but also residing with other subjects in a holistic community. To this, I will add a precise analysis of the discursive strategies of power resistance of orthodox Christianity against holistic spirituality; an unending battle presented on the social stage as a series of present and future conflicts over the redistribution of symbolic resources in the religious field. This battle is of utmost importance, as victory in it will legitimize in a new historical way the right to govern the sacred; hence, who will guide, control and sanction the vital behaviour of believers.

Finally, it is with great collegial satisfaction that I will say that Dr. Karamelska is an extremely talented, responsible and deserving sociologist; in her personality professionalism, vocation and integrity coincide perfectly. In my opinion, from this day forward, any self-described humanitarian scientist who will conduct his or her research in the sociology of religions and biographical methods, and who is guided by the principles of the academic ethos, should acknowledge the significant achievements of Dr. Teodora Karamelska, known in detail and refer correctly to her monograph *Believing But Not Religious. Bulgarian Contexts of Holistic Spirituality*.

Conclusion: Based on the theses, arguments, and evidence I have substantiated above, I am internally convinced - and intellectually pleased to state - that Assistant Professor, Dr. Teodora Ivancheva Karamelska is a humanitarian scientist of outstanding professional accomplishments and an outstanding university professor. Dr. Karamelska's comprehensive teaching, research, publication, administrative and public activities are an unqualified defence of her candidature for the academic position of “Associate Professor” in the professional strand 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences.

As a member of the Scientific Jury, I will unconditional vote “YES” for the choosing of her candidature for this position.

20 April 2024 r.

Sofia

Prof. Dr. Martin Kanoushev