

OPINION

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

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Dr. Teodora Karamelska is the only candidate for the academic position of Associate Professor in the professional field 3.1 Sociology, Anthropology and Culture Studies. The submitted documents certify that her scientific research and teaching achievements, administrative and public activities fully meet and even exceed the minimum national requirements of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria for holding the academic position of “Associate Professor””, as well as the Regulation on the Development of the Academic Staff of the NBU.

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II. Research Activities and Results

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Dr. Teodora Karamelska's research interests are related mainly to the religious notions and attitudes of the Bulgarians in late modernity.

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This is the topic of the presented habilitation thesis, entitled *Believer but not religious, Bulgarian Contexts of Holistic Spirituality*, published by the New Bulgarian University in 2023. It is an advantage of any habilitation thesis if it dedicated to a less researched topic, it is even more advantageous if this topic is related to a socially “invisible”, but at the same time significant and widely discussed problem in society. The presented habilitation thesis fully meets these two expectations, moreover that research perspectives, presented and developed in the monograph could be described as innovative and original.

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The monograph examines “transformations of religiosity in late modernity”, and its stated aim is “to present that in the contemporary Bulgarian post-communist context, in addition to attempts to revitalize the country's traditional Eastern Orthodoxy, religiosity has taken other significant social forms worthy of sociological analysis”.

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The monograph is divided into an introduction, three chapters, and a conclusion. The first chapter fully corresponds to its title, “Religion and Modernity: Theoretical Problematizations”, where, based on the theoretical generalizations of Georg Simmel, Max Weber, and Ernst Trölltsch, are

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examined “main characteristics of spirituality as a specific form of the organization of religious experience, existing alongside the other two main sociological types, the church and the sect”. After analyzing this typology, the author introduces and explains the concept of “holistic spirituality”. Most important in this chapter is the distinction between “religion”, explained as “enclosed in institutionalized ritual and predetermined normativity”, and “spirituality”, as related to subjective experience.

The second chapter, “Cultural Representations of Holistic Spirituality”, examines the application of this theoretical model in the contemporary Bulgarian social context, including the Orthodox Church's attitude toward these new phenomena. The analysis is based on clear empirical data from the research project “Mind, Body and Spirit: Women's Religiousness between Spirituality and Holistic Practices”, complemented by results from the representative European Values Survey and in-depth biographical interviews. All this allows the author not only to trace the application of a well-defined and explained sociological model to Bulgarian society, but also to take into account the specific Bulgarian experience related to the legacy of the secularization policy of the communist state.

In the third chapter, “Biographical Research in a Sociological Context”, the author discusses and analyzes, on the basis of selected in-depth interviews, some key points of the transformation of religious experience in specific cases and examples.

It can be summarized that a major achievement of the proposed habilitation monograph is that it follows a clear and comprehensible methodology, which is based on a well-developed and widely recognized in the sociology theoretical model and compares the conclusion of this theoretical model with clear and convincing empirical data for Bulgaria, which allows drawing relevant conclusions. As the author convincingly concludes, “the experience of individual freedom in holistic spirituality is one of the factors for the erosion of historically formed community ties”. All this leads to an increased complexity in the religious field, making it possible to define the people carrying this holistic spirituality as “believers, though not religious”. An important additional conclusion from the whole study is that among the main bearers of this “holistic spirituality” are highly educated and self-identified as successful women, which creates the possibility of their “slipping out of their traditionally assigned socio-gender identities” without them giving up their specific tasks and roles.

The presented monograph summarizes the author's long-standing interest in “holistic spirituality” in particular, and more generally - in the transformations in attitudes towards religiosity in Bulgarian society. The monograph builds on and summarizes themes and issues developed in

numerous articles submitted for the competition and published in Bulgarian and foreign scientific journals. Last but not least, these articles also present a comparative perspective between Bulgaria and Romania regarding these transformations in the post-communist context, which makes it possible to trace the different paths taken by societies in the two countries, which could be explained by different policies towards religion, pursued by the two neighboring countries under communism.

All this allows the generalization that the candidate Dr. Teodora Karamelska is already one of the leading sociologists in Bulgaria on the topic of transformations of religious attitudes in the Bulgarian society, which is a sign, on the one hand, of the consistency of her scientific interests, and on the other - of her independent and original approach, combined with a very good knowledge of the world literature on this subject. Moreover, this problem often remains “invisible” for sociology and other social sciences, which makes the candidate's contributions useful for other scientific disciplines, as evidenced by the citations of her scientific works by other Bulgarian and foreign scientists mentioned in the competition procedure.

In this field should be mentioned and commended also Dr Karamelska's translations of specialized scientific literature, awarded by the Union of Translators in Bulgaria, which not only enriches her personal interests and research, but also contributes to the broadening of the scientific horizons in Bulgaria.

II. Teaching and learning activities

Dr. Teodora Karamelska has a rich and successful teaching practice at New Bulgarian University. As the attached documentation proves, she has taught and continues to teach numerous courses in the Bachelor's Program in Sociology, Bachelor's Program in Philosophy - Distance Learning, Master's Program in Social Entrepreneurship, Master's Program in Language and Publicity. Philosophical and Sociological Approaches to Language, as well as number of general education courses, all of which she provides with the necessary teaching materials in the Moodle system. She has also made efforts to organize and provide internships for students in established Bulgarian sociological agencies. She has also participated in the project for the research of possibilities for the optimization of the minor programs at the New Bulgarian University, she is also the coordinator of the Department of Philosophy and Sociology under the Erasmus program. She has supervised 5 theses written by graduates of the Faculty of Bachelor's Degree and has participated in the graduation committees of a number of other students. This is confirmed by the high level of student satisfaction in the courses taught by Assistant Professor Dr. Theodora Karamelska.

IV. Administrative and Public activities

The administrative and public activities of the candidate Dr. Teodora Karamelska include membership in a number of administrative and scientific committees - deputy director of the Center for the Study of European Values at the NBU (since 2016); member of the editorial board and deputy editor-in-chief of the *Sociological Problems*, a publication of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology and membership in the Bulgarian Sociological Association and in the Biographical Studies Section of the German Sociological Society. Among her administrative positions one could also mention her membership in the Library Council of the NBU for the period 2017-2018.

V. Personal impressions of the candidate

I know Assistant Professor Dr. Teodora Karamelska both as a colleague and lecturer at the Department of Philosophy and Sociology of the New Bulgarian University and as an author in the *Christianity and Culture* Journal. My impressions of her are entirely positive, and I can say that she is a conscientious researcher and translator of scientific texts, a loyal colleague who works with students in a very responsible way. Her desire to maintain a good working and academic atmosphere is impressive, as is her ability to work in a team. In addition to her undoubted qualities as a teacher and researcher, she is characterized by her collegiality, willingness to cooperate, and ability to work in a team, qualities that further support her candidacy for the academic position of Associate Professor at NBU.

VI. Opinions, Recommendations and Comments

From the materials I have read, I would recommend greater terminological precision in the use of certain historical religious realities and terms. The reason for this remark is the literal translation into Bulgarian of the sixteenth-century term “Baptists”, the subject of the research of Ernst Trölltsch. In Bulgarian the term is translated literally, while in Bulgarian the name of this religious denomination is established as “Baptists” (respectively “Anabaptists”), and they are known under this name in the Bulgarian historical science. This is also the name the “Baptists” use for themselves in Bulgaria, including when they tried to re-enter the country immediately after the end of communism, which marked the beginning of one of the new religious phenomena in Bulgaria (“revivals”, or “awakenings”, according to their own terminology). Disputes in science about the use of certain terms and especially about their Bulgarian equivalents are constant, so this remark is made with a clear awareness of the impossibility of achieving complete terminological precision, and with understating for the freedom of a researcher in translating certain terms in Bulgarian.

Conclusion

All that has been said so far allows me to conclude that Senior Assistant Professor Dr. Teodora Karamelska is an established researcher in the field of sociology, a leading expert on the topic of the transformations of the religious experience in Bulgarian in the context of late modernity. This gives me the reason to express with full conviction my positive opinion about the candidacy of Assistant Professor Dr. Teodora Karamelska for the academic position of Associate Professor in the professional field 3.1 “Sociology, Anthropology and Culture Studies” at the New Bulgarian University. As a member of the scientific jury I will vote positively for her candidacy and recommend her for election by the Academic Council of the NBU.

Sofia, 7 May 2024

(Prof. Momchil Metodiev, dn)