

## OPINION

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scientific field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Culture Sciences

regarding the materials submitted for the competition  
for the academic position of Associate Professor  
in professional field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Culture Sciences,  
announced in the State Gazette 5/16.01.2024,  
with candidate Assistant Professor, PhD Teodora Ivancheva Karamelska

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

Assistant professor, PhD Teodora Karamelska is the only candidate in the NBU announced competition for the academic position of Associate Professor in professional field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences. The overall research and educational activity of the candidate not only corresponds to the minimum national requirements and the requirements of the NBU, but significantly exceeds them in group 4 (publication activity), group 5 (citations) and groups 7 and 8 (teaching, educational and organizational activity and working with students). Moreover, although only three scientific and educational projects (1 national and 2 international) are indicated in *Self-Assessment\_long-term attestation* – those that started after the appointment of Teodora Karamelska as a lecturer at NBU (01.10.2011), the candidate's biographical reference clearly shows involvement in ten research projects (one of which individual; three ending in 2012 and 2013). It can only be regretted that the formal criteria cannot capture a fundamental characteristic of the applicant – her impeccable academic integrity.

### **II. Research Activities and Results**

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

Assistant professor, PhD Teodora Karamelska participates in the competition with a monograph *Believer, but not religious. Bulgarian Contexts of Holistic Spirituality* (Sofia, NBU Publishing House, 2023, 229 p.) and 22 articles and studies, of which 19 in Bulgarian, two in

English (one in the prestigious Routledge publishing house), one in German. Four of the publications are co-authored.

The monograph is a significant contribution to the field of sociology of religion in several respects:

First, the work singles out holistic spirituality as an independent research object focusing on the transformations of religiosity in late modernity, and builds an original conception of its meaning through the related study of the social projections and personal dimensions of “this peculiar new ‘enchantment’ of the world” (p. 9). The solid theoretical basis of the sociological problematization of the forms of holistic spirituality is built in a reflexive dialogue, on the one hand, with the categorical legacy of Georg Simmel, Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch, who in the early twentieth century first began to unravel the contradictory dynamics between religion and modernity, and, on the other hand, with contemporary analyses of the so-called “subjective turn” and the New Age movement. Thus, the figure “believer but not religious” as a generalizing image of the multiplicity of holistic-spiritual experiences is revealed in a historical-genealogical, sociocultural and biographical perspective.

Second, the monograph represents the first study of contemporary forms of holistic spirituality in Bulgarian society, with their specific manifestations revealed and explained through a subtle and precise comparison of Bulgarian and Western European temporality in the course of societal transformations. Here I would like to note in particular that this is an original study by the author, in which the method of the in-depth biographical interview, the theory and methodology of which Dr Teodora Karamelska not only masters but also develops, and the analysis of data from representative sociological studies mutually construct the contradictory picture of contemporary religious individualism/subjectivism in the conditions of growing uncertainty of the world and the declining adequacy of traditional religious institutions.

Last but not least, the monograph legitimizes the notion of holistic spirituality in the social sciences in Bulgaria as a concept that does not simply describe a new empirical reality, but as a theoretical construct necessary for the analysis of the manifestations of this reality. I would like to emphasize in particular that this is not a question of borrowing a foreign term, but of carefully and precisely constructing the concept and introducing it into the Bulgarian social science vocabulary as an opportunity for an equal dialogue with the international scientific community.

The remaining 12 articles related to the problem-thematic field of the monographic work confirm Dr Karamelska’s enduring research interests in the field of sociology of religion, her solid theoretical culture and erudition, her sensitivity to detail and nuance. In these

publications paradoxes and tendencies in the transformations of the belief experience in the contemporary Bulgarian society are made explicit for the first time, which are theoretically and empirically solidified in the monographic work. The tendencies identified by Dr Teodora Karamelska towards the culturalization of the two traditional religions in Bulgaria, Eastern Orthodoxy and Islam (2, 8)<sup>1</sup>, towards the restructuring of urban space through the separation of discrete and fluid forms of spiritual practices (3), towards the paradoxical coexistence of spiritual notions of the unity of “mind, body and spirit” and subjective models of interpreting the world with elements of “meaningfully reduced and de-historicized sacred texts” (11, 14), of individuation and depersonalization of the self (12), of striving for individual experience of the transcendent and seeking social contacts enrich knowledge of the interconnected dynamics between changing social, worldview, and institutional environments and changing strategies for coping with life crises and reversals.

2. Evaluation of the contributions in the other attached publications (creative performances) made after the appointment of the academic position “Assistant professor”.

According to the candidate’s self-description, the remaining publications included in the competition are in the fields of history of sociology, history and methodology of the biographical method, and the sociological study of dementia care. Accepting the contributions formulated by Dr Karamelska, I would add two more achievements, to the extent that they unite the analytical merits of all publications.

First, the theoretical analyses of the historical legacies of Weber, Simmel, and Freud (9, 16, 19, 20) and of contemporary theorists of the biographical method (18) are not ends in themselves. They construct the interpretive framework of the genesis of holistic spirituality and of the biographical method not as a tool for accessing empirical information, but as a cognitive approach to the simultaneous reconstruction and disamalgamation of individual life experience and social dynamics.

Hence the contributions related to the application of the biographical method to the study of specific research objects, be they religious activities through the prism of the state-Orthodox Church relationship (17), traumas of ethnic identity (13), and the everyday care and experiences of relatives of dementia patients (4, 6). The dual heuristic potential of narrative

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<sup>1</sup> The publication numbering used is according to the document *Karamelska\_contributing\_moments, list of publications and classroom hours*.

biographical construction for self-knowledge of both society (the tensions between social structures, norms, patterns on the one hand, and individual strategies for overcoming them on the other, the delegitimization of biographical patterns and the continuing social non-recognition of ethnic differences in Bulgaria) and the individual (the discovery of biographical resources for coping with liminal life situations) is shown.

### 3. Quoting from other authors.

The citations from other authors identified by the candidate are correctly presented. Publications of Dr Teodora Karamelska have been cited in peer-reviewed monographs and collective volumes and in non-refereed peer-reviewed journals

### 4. Evaluation of the results of participation in research and creative projects and application of the obtained results in practice.

The most convincing proof of the high academic results of Dr Teodora Karamelska's participation in research projects is her publication activity in prestigious Bulgarian and international publishing houses.

## **III. Educational and teaching activities**

Dr Teodora Karamelska's educational and teaching activity is impressive as

a) volume – for the period 2010-2024, the candidate has conducted 27 different academic courses, which means approximately two new courses per academic year;

b) diversity, thematically, by educational level and by the nature of the pedagogical commitment – the courses cover a wide range of sociological disciplines and sub-disciplines and are offered to students from the bachelor's programs "Sociology" and "Philosophy", from the master's programs "Social Entrepreneurship" and "Language and publicity. Philosophical and sociological approaches to language" and the general education program of the NBU. During the mentioned period, Dr Karamelka organized student internships in ten agencies and organizations, investing in this activity time, effort and academic authority (*Certificate\_internships*);

c) quality – the high average score from the student satisfaction surveys is an indisputable certificate for the work of Assistant professor Teodora Karamelska as a teacher who imparts not only knowledge but also a professional ethos.

#### **IV. Administrative and public activities**

In addition to intensive study and research work, the academic profile of Dr Karamelska is distinguished by serious administrative commitments. Member of the NBU Library Council (2017–2018), coordinator of the Department of Philosophy and Sociology under the Erasmus program, deputy director of the Center for the Study of European Values at the NBU (since 2016) are responsibilities that show not only recognition and trust from the collegium, but also a high sense of responsibility and empathy for organizational and voluntary activities, without which no institution and professional community could exist.

#### **V. Personal impressions of the candidate**

I know Assistant Professor, Dr Teodora Karamelska as a research fellow at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the BAS, responsible secretary of the journal *Sociological Problems* for 11 years and deputy editor-in chief of the journal since 2020. In my professional career, I have never met such a dedicated, selfless, intellectually generous and humble colleague as her. The journal *Sociological Problems* owes the impeccable language and polygraphic appearance of each article, the regularity of the publication of each issue, and the attraction of original Bulgarian and foreign authors to her precision, criticism, uncompromisingness and broad academic culture. Taking into account the peculiarities of the Bulgarian academic ethos, in which accuracy, precision, responsibility to the text do not represent commonly shared values and norms, Dr Karamelska's efforts, invisible to the reader and even to individual authors, are invaluable for the high academic standing of the journal.

And in another respect the Bulgarian social science community owes a debt of gratitude to Teodora Karamelska. Thanks to her translations from German, classical and contemporary scholars and writers are accessible to teachers, researchers, students and the non-academic public in brilliant Bulgarian. It is enough to mention a few significant authors – Simmel, Weber, Troeltsch, Freud, Honneth, Gadamer, Mannheim, Weiss, Assen Ignatov and the amount of translations – 11 books, 22 articles in the journal *Sociological Problems*, 8 in the journal *Critique and Humanism*, 7 in the journal *Christianity and Culture*, 7 in other journals and collective collections, in order to imagine the investment of time and effort in creating a public space of high science and culture in contemporary Bulgarian society.

## **VI. Opinions, recommendations and notes on the activities and achievements of the candidate**

In the perspective of the horizon opened by Dr Karamelska's monographic work, I would like to pose two questions whose relevance to the Bulgarian context could be verified in future research:

First, given that the practice of holistic spirituality is more common among women with high educational status, good financial opportunities, living in large cities, could one expect an increase in social differentiation along the lines of belief experience and the formation of a kind of subculture on the border of elitism and populism?

Second, how can it be explained that in the eclectic amalgam of texts, arguments, and practices used by the "believers but not the religious" in Bulgaria, references to Amerindian practices and teachings are almost not present, not to say absent?

### **Conclusion**

On the basis of the significant achievements and high results of the teaching, research and publication activities of the candidate I give a positive assessment of her overall academic activity and I confidently and categorically propose that the Assistant professor, Dr Teodora Ivancheva Karamelska to be admitted for election by the esteemed Academic Council of NBU to the academic position of Associate Professor in the professional field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences.

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Подпис:

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