



In search of a missing link: THE BOGOMILS AND ZOROASTRIANISM

The Balkan sect of Bogomils is usually perceived as a link between Eastern Manichaeism and Western Cathars. However, some vital Manichaean elements are missing in the Bogomil teachings—teachings that would thus seem closer in spirit to Zurvanism, a branch of Zoroastrianism. But where would one find the physical and temporal connection between the 10 century Slavic Bogomils and the ancient Iranians? And why did they survive longer than the Cathars?

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Questions concerning the nature and origin of evil have troubled humanity throughout the ages. Various religions have put forth a variety of solutions to these issues in an attempt to explain how and why a perfect god would create an imperfect world. All religions with a component of cosmogonic myth on how the universe (cosmos) came into being, have tried to solve this complex problem in one of two ways. Thus the source of evil is seen either as an integral element of initial creative forces, or as the result of personal choices made after the act of creation was complete.¹

The first scenario was proposed by such religious movements as Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism.² Here it was claimed that two mutually antagonistic forces organized two separate creations in opposition to one another, the one being good, and the other evil. According to the suggested definition of dualism as a religio-historical phenomenon—dualism is a doctrine that posits the existence of two fundamental causal principles underlying the existence of the world. This means that only such pairs of opposites can be dualistic when they are understood as principles or causes of the world and its constitutive elements, when they are involved in the demiurgic acts of cosmogony and anthropogony.³

Both Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism are dualist religions. Implicit in the beliefs held true by these religions is the notion of co-equal and co-eternal principles. Implicit in this notion is the belief that both good and evil exist and are acted upon from the very beginning. Thus we can see that Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism are two examples of radical dualism. In contrast with this

are the ideas inherent in what scholars refer to as moderate dualism – a dualism which claims that only one principle is primordial. According to this way of looking at the world the second principle derives from the first, and only subsequently plays a role in bringing the world into existence.

The second solution is provided as an explanation for the existence of evil in the world by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Here the notion of Satan is introduced in an attempt to provide a plausible explanation of the causes of human suffering. Problematically, the Christian understanding of these issues was hampered by multiple interpretations due to the vagueness with which Satan's origin and role are presented in the Bible itself. There is no full account of Satan to be found in any one place in the Old or New Testament, and the only way to understand the teaching of the Scriptures on this topic is to combine a number of references from the Bible with patristic and theological traditions. Furthermore, the first systematic attempt to explain the origin of Satan was made in 1214, when the Fourth Lateran Council decreed that God had created angels and that "[...] the devil and the other demons were indeed created by God good in their nature but they became bad through themselves." (Canon1.

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/latran4.html>). The Church itself thus contributed to the growing interest in dualist explanations that suggested much clearer and thus more easily intelligible explanations concerning the origin of evil, and the meaning of the imperfect world created by a perfect God. While Manichaeism was a religion created alongside Christianity, subsequent dualist movements such as Paulicianism and Bogomilism were initially formulated by priests and monks working within the confines of the Christian Church.

The emergence of Bogomilism

The earliest evidence of Bogomilism, a Bulgarian sect probably founded by the priest Bogomil, is a letter dated from between 940 and 950, and written by Theophylact, patriarch of Constantinople: "[...] about the heresy which has newly appeared." (Hamilton, 1998: 98). He defines it subsequently as "[...] a mixture of Manichaeism and Paulicianism." (Hamilton, 1998: 99). This acknowledgement in particular has contributed to a general assumption that Bogomilism is a synthesis of elements from earlier heretical traditions. Yet still, the

¹ This article constitutes a part of my research concerning the alleged transmission of dualist concepts in Southern and Eastern Europe in general, and in Russia in particular.

² Zoroastrianism (also known as Mazdaism) was established in about 1000 BC by the Iranian priest Zoroaster. It introduced the new message about the universal struggle between good and evil. Manichaeism, founded by the Persian Mani in the third century AD, was a religion of two principles having absolute distinct natures: light and darkness, good and evil, God and matter, being responsible for the creation of soul and body respectively.

³ The extensive version of my definition and a discussion on the nature of dualism in philosophical and religious contexts are presented in my PhD project, *Dualist Heresies and the Russian Orthodox Church 988-1299*, in progress.



precise time and place of the origin of Bogomilism remain unknown, although it is strongly suggested that the skills and personality of the priest Bogomil may have contributed to crystallization of the movement and its rapid spread (Stoyanov, 2000:162). Having had strong influence on the emergence of Catharism, the sect of Bogomils has attracted the attention of scholars searching for an explanation concerning the vitality of ideas recognisable in distant cultures and times. Additionally, the expansion of dualist notions in different times and places in European history has spurred important debate between structuralists and diffusionists in the field of religious history. The first approach, structuralism, proposes that dualist notions are an offshoot of a universal human structure rooted in the sub-conscious of the human mind and the physiology of the human brain, and are therefore common to all homosapiens. The adherents of the second approach – the diffusionists – claim on the other hand that a single historical and geographical origin of an idea exists, and its geographical extension can be explained by cultural diffusion and adaptation. By now, the majority of scholars working within the field of religious dualism have endorsed the diffusionist perspective assuming, implicit or explicit, a chain of dualist manifestations formed as a linear model, where each of emerging religious or heretic movements is in direct geographical and temporal connections with the other. Three major names should be mentioned here as exercising the greatest influence over the scholarly work being done in this area: Dmitrii Obolensky, Steven Runciman, and Yuri Stoyanov. All of these writers are adherents of the diffusionist approach. But each of them came up with differing solutions to the problem of how to fill the temporal gap between the occurrence of Manichaeism (app. third – sixth century) and Paulicianism (app. ninth century) in the European part of Byzantium, and how to explain noticeable dogmatic differences between Paulicianism and Bogomilism. Thus it is clear that while simple Diffusionism might contain some methodological disadvantages, the primary assumption of a linear chain needs further modification if issues concerning this gap of centuries are to be appropriately addressed.

The purpose of this article is not to solve this complex problem. On the other hand, posing relevant questions as to the character of Bogomil teaching in comparison with other religious ideas occurring in the region of Balkan through centuries, may contribute to a solution acceptable to structuralists and diffusionists alike.

The Bogomil doctrine

The lack of documentation and the scarcity of sources haunt scholars studying the theologies and practices of heretical Christian sects since in most cases the original texts written by the heretics themselves were condemned as subversive by the Catholic and Orthodox churches and destroyed. In consequence, scholars are forced to rely on materials which were subsequently produced by the opponents of these movements. There-

fore such materials must be handled with extreme caution. Thus, the life and thoughts of the Bogomils and their leaders are primarily known from ecclesiastical writings of their adversaries: Anna Comnena (1083-c.1153), the eldest child of Emperor Alexius Comnenus; Euthymius Zigabenus (d. 1118), a learned monk enjoying the favour of Alexius Comnenus, and Cosmas the priest,⁴ from the patriarchal letters and from encyclicals. The only Bogomil text, the *Secret Book (Liber Sancti Johannis)*, is known in two Latin translations in the possession of the Catholic Church since their confiscation by the Inquisition of Carcassonne. Although, according to the Italian Cathar prefect Raynerius, the *Book* was brought to Italy by the Cathar bishop visiting Bulgaria in c. 1190 (which is accepted as a reliable testimony by the majority of scholars), we must face the fact that the date and place of the origin of the *Secret Book* remains unknown (Hamilton, 1998: 253-254). All these reservations notwithstanding, the sources allow us to reconstruct the Bogomil religious system quite convincingly as none of the available writings contradicts one another. So that even viewed through the lens of the emotionally charged phraseology of the majority of the ecclesiastical works concerning Bogomilism, the pamphlets, discourses, and the Bogomil texts themselves provide complementary images of a persuasively unified picture of the rites, dogmas, structure, and belief set of the Bogomils. The following extracts from Euthymius Zigabenus' *Dogmatic Panoply*, whose work itself is a compilation of other accounts added to his own interrogation of a Bogomil leader Basil, who was accused of heresy by Alexius Comnenus in the eleventh century, in Constantinople, are fully comparable to both the first account, *The Discourse of the Priest Cosmas Against Bogomils* (tenth century, Bulgaria) and to *The Secret Book* (probably tenth - eleventh centuries, probably Bulgaria). On their attitude towards canonical books, Zigabenus writes:

They reject all the books of Moses and the God who is described in them [...], as being written in accordance with the plan of Satan. [...] They accept and honour only seven [...]; that is, the Psalter, the sixteen Prophets, the Gospel according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and the seventh book, the Acts of the Apostles together with the Epistles and the Apocalypse of John the Divine (Hamilton, 1998:182).

The rejection of the Old Testament was a logical consequence of their assumption of Satanic origin of this scripture, although a letter from around 1045 written by Euthymius of the Periblepton monastery testified that the Bogomils read the entire Bible, and knew its passages by heart in order to act as true Christians: "I cannot deceive a Christian otherwise than by pretending to be a monk; we call ourselves Christian and appear in every way to act as Christians do, and put for-

⁴ We know nothing about Cosmas apart from what we can deduce from his discourse. He was a priest but also possessed an exhaustive knowledge of Bulgarian monasticism. Cosmas wrote his work after the death of Tsar Peter (927-969) but most likely before his canonisation in 972.



ward the holy scriptures as our teaching". (Hamilton, 1998: 146). Otherwise, the fact that the Bogomils knew the Scriptures perfectly well, and used this knowledge to convince others of the truth of their orthodoxy, which made it difficult to distinguish them from ordinary Orthodox Christians, is mentioned in several polemical scripts using often the well-known rhetorical figure - hiding the wolf under the fleece - about the deceitful Bogomils.

As concerning the Bogomil explanation of the origin of Satan, Zigabenus reported that:

They say that the demon whom the saviour called Satan himself is also a son of God the Father, called Satanael; He came before the Son, the Word [Jesus], and is stronger, as befits the first-born. [...] Satan is the steward, second to the Father, having the same form and dress as He does, and he sits at His right hand on a throne. [...] He was intoxicated by this, and being carried away [...] he plotted a rebellion, and having done so, he seized the opportunity to test some of the ministering powers. He said that if they wanted to lessen the load of their service, they should follow him and join him in breaking away from the Father. [...] Then to the aforesaid angels who were enticed by the lightening of their burdensome services and other excessive demands, he said: 'I will place my throne upon the clouds, and I will be like unto the Most High'. (Hamilton, 1989:183).

In the subsequent chapter, Zigabenus gives an account concerning the Bogomil cosmological myth, a myth which states that Satanael was cast down from above, and that he was unable to sit upon the waters because the earth did not as yet exist. "But since he had the form and dress of God and possessed the power of the Demiurge to summon the powers which had fallen along with him and to embolden them, he said, 'Since God made the heaven and the earth, [...] I too will make a second heaven, being the second God'". (Hamilton, 1998: 184). Afterwards, Satan created the earth in the way described in Genesis. Having explained the origin of evil and the creation of the world, the Bogomils fulfilled their systematic theology by advancing an anthropological myth stating that Satan:

[...] moulded the body of Adam from earth mixed with water, and made him stand up, and some moisture ran down to his right foot, and leaking out through his big toe, ran twisting on to the ground and made the shape of snake. Satanael gathered together the breath that was in him and breathed life into the body [...] and his breath, running down through the emptiness, ran down to the right foot in the same way, and, leaking through the big toe, ran out into the twisted drop. This instantly became alive, and separating from the toe, crawled away. (Hamilton, 1998: 184)

Satan's attempt to create a human being failed then, and he decided to ask God the Father for help. Because God is good, he sent his breath so that Adam became alive, and so Eve was made. Then, Satan slipped into the inward parts of the serpent, deceived Eve, slept with her, and made her pregnant. According to the Bogomils, Cain and his sister Calomena were the result of Satan's intercourse with Eve. In addition, Bogomil teachings maintain that Calomena was killed by Cain, which leads back to the Biblical story of Cain and Abel.

In general, several similarities with Biblical accounts are to be found in Bogomil teaching, which only reinforce the assumption that Bogomilism was a genuine Christian sect. As stressed earlier, the Bogomils were well trained in Scriptures, and they realized that a complete theological system could not exist without the eschatological story, a myth describing the last things. Thus they taught that God the creator and cosmocrator, the ruler of cosmos, realized that in helping Satan in his act of creation, he consequently created an evil world, and decided to send forth his Son, the word, called by the Bogomils the Archangel Michael. According to Bogomil cosmology Michael was subsequently born not out of the Virgin, but entered into her right ear and went out as he had entered. According to Bogomil myth, the Virgin never gave birth to God's son, but instead found him lying swaddled in the cave. After the apparent crucifixion, the Son bound Satanael with a thick and heavy chain and shut him in Tartarus taking from his name the angelic syllable -el. Satan's reign on the earth has yet not ended as according to the Bogomils: "Every man has a resident demon, who teaches him evil and leads him to evil actions, and when he is dead, it inhabits his remains and stays in his tomb, and awaits the resurrection, to be punished along with him, and is not separated from him, even in punishment" (Hamilton, 1998: 194). Zigabenus adds afterwards that the Bogomils borrowed this apprehension from the Massalian (or Messalian) heresy. In general, these two heresies were usually juxtaposed and considered equal, although the differences between them are much more significant than the similarities. The reasons why the adversaries of Bogomilism associated it with Massalianism can be found in common demonology and the similar patterns of prayer. The Massalians – members of a sect that originated in Mesopotamia about 360 AD and survived in the East until the eighth century, were called "praying people." This was because they understood the words of St Paul "pray continuously" quite literally, and they did no work of any kind in order to dedicate their whole day to prayer without cease. The principal tenet of their faith was that every person inherited a demon from his ancestors – a demon who had possession of that person's soul from the moment of his birth, and which would always lead them to evil. They believed further, utilising a botanical metaphor that baptism cut away the outside branches of sin, but could not free the soul of this demon, and that baptism was therefore useless. According to this system of belief, only constant prayer could drive the demon out. Finally when the demon had been expelled, the Holy Spirit would descend and give visible and sensible marks of His presence. After this had occurred, the Holy Spirit delivered the body from all the uprisings of passion, and the soul from the inclination to evil and the Bogomilist no longer needed to fast, or to concern himself with controlling lust according to the precepts of the Gospel. Scholars are divided on the question of the importance of Massalianism in the development of other dualistic sects, in particular Bogomilism. Yuri Stoyanov mentions the Massalians in passing, (Stoy-



anov, 2000: 129-130), while Steven Runciman considers them to be the main source of inspiration for the Bogomil heresy claiming, based on Michael Psellus' (1018-after 1078) work, *De Daemonum operatione*, that the Massalian communities were settled in Thrace from whence their doctrines could easily infect the Bulgarians. (Runciman, 1955: 90-91).

The cosmogonic and cosmological myths presented above provide evidence that Bogomilism is unequivocally a dualist religion of the moderate type. The first, primordial principle is equal with the almighty God from the Old Testament, although his creation of heaven and earth are rivalled by his elder son, Demiurge/Satanael. The Bogomil version of the creation of humankind differs considerably from the Biblical, although it clearly shows that the Bible, whether as a positive or negative inspiration, constitutes the primary foundation around which their religious doctrine has been built. Thus, Bogomilism represents a Christian sect. Unlike Manichaeism that, although being explicitly inspired by Christianity and other religions, has been able to dissociate itself from them. On the other hand, the Bogomil version of the creation of the first man hides significant features that somehow connect Bogomilism with Manichaeism and additionally with certain aspects of Christian Gnostic movements.

Bogomilism: – a link between Manichaeism and Catharism?

As mentioned earlier, scholars have never questioned the assumption that Bogomilism is a dualistic religion. Nor have disagreements been raised concerning the notion that Bogomilism falls within the category of moderate dualism, a dualism which assumes that the second, evil principle, the creator of the visible universe, derives from the first, good one. Although it is known that around the late twelfth century, a new radical type of Bogomilism arose in the area south of Philippopolis, and that this new *Church of Dragovitia* had tried to infiltrate, with some success, the Italian and French Cathars, this has no bearing on the assumptions upon which the original sect of Bogomils based their beliefs (Hamilton, 1998: 250-253). What remains for scholarly debate, however, is a possible connection between Bogomilism and Manichaeism as passed on through Massalianism and Paulicianism.⁵ Although Steven Runciman considers such a direct link to be a

⁵ The sect of Paulicians arose, according to their own legend, under the reign of Constans II (641-668) in the region of Armenia. The sect was commonly labelled as Manichaean, though the only sources we possess are the reports given by their adversaries. We do know, however, that the Paulicians refused the sacrament of communion and the veneration of icons and cross as well as they rejected the Old Testament and preached *false belief* in two gods - the one of cosmos and the one of heaven. Because of the military character of the Paulician communities, they were described as a *fifth column*, and accused for the collaboration with the Muslims. Several Byzantine emperors persecuted the Paulicians so that they either searched strongholds outside their original centres or were resettled by force.

well-documented fact, he fails to confront significant elements in Bogomil thought – elements that are entirely absent in literature of these two supposed *transmitters* of the Manichaean dualist ideas. First, the Bogomils lived an ascetic life. They abstained from sexual intercourse, eating meat and drinking wine. As the Paulicians did not practice asceticism this element of Bogomilism had at any rate to come from somewhere else. Furthermore, Byzantine theologians deliberately labelled Bogomil asceticism as Massalianism, and this label was freely accepted by Runciman. It could be argued that his confidence was due to uncritical interpretation of hostile sources, including material provided by institutional religious authorities. For example he adopts and defends the arguments of Zigabenus and Anna Comnena, who had claimed that the Bogomils' beliefs were derived from a blending of Paulicianism and Massalianism, simply because they "were trained theologians" (Runciman, 1955: 90). The problem of assumed Massalian influence is even more complicated. Although this sect lived according to strict ascetic rules, there is no evidence that organized Massalian societies survived beyond the seventh century. If one takes into consideration the pioneering study of Columba Stewart tracing the history of this movement it becomes clear that the controversy surrounding the Massalians, in which they were condemned for heterodoxy by the Council of Ephesus in 431 AD, owes more to the misinterpretation and misunderstanding of their symbolic early Syriac Christianity by the sophisticated Greek theologians than to actual dualism within the Massalian tradition. (Stewart, 1991). Indeed, any religious ascetic practise expressed in untraditional terminology has run the risk of being characterized as deviant especially within a larger context of victorious theologians defending church policy. Therefore scholars need to be cautious about basing their theories on notions which assume that contemporary characterizations made by church authorities are more than partially correct.

Thus it can be shown that Paulicianism and Massalianism are not the religious movements which have provided the foundation upon which Bogomilistic practices are based. So in seeking clues as to the roots of this movement we can turn our attention towards other dualist religions, in particular Manichaeism – a religion made up of elements that contain both Gnosticism, dualist cosmogony, and ascetic practices as found also in Bogomilism. Yet, the religion of Mani had died out in Byzantium by the time Bogomilism appeared, and the only communities surviving in Baghdad at the time suffered persecution and took refuge in Samarkand. Although at that time there were still Manichaeans among the Uighurs in China and in Turfan, it is not logical to assume that their missionaries would have been able to introduce Manichaean beliefs into tenth century Bulgaria. First because of the great distances involved, but also because contemporary language barriers would have made such missionising very difficult.



So it is that scholars have turned their attention to Zoroastrianism, the very first historically documented religion containing a systematic doctrine of the beginning and of the last things. This pre-Islamic Iranian religion (which originated approximately 1000 BC) introduced the concept of two mutually antagonistic forces organising two opposed creations, one good and the other evil. In Zoroastrianism however the two forces are in the constant struggle with each other, and this contrasts with later dualistic systems including Bogomilism in one critical way: – according to Zarathustra, the material world was created wholly good. But after the first creation, the evil that is incapable of producing a material world hijacked the material forms in order to fill them up with the evil spirit. Directing our attention again to ancient Persia we find that the Bogomil creation myth seems in fact to be more similar to the myth advanced by Zurvanism. Although the scholars discuss whether Zurvanism was an ancient Iranian religion older than Zoroastrianism and partly adopted by the latter (Nyberg, 1931), or whether it originated in the second part of the Achaemenian period (late fifth century BC) as the outcome of the contact between Zoroastrianism and the Babylonian civilisation (Henning, 1951), the religion of Zurvan, the highest God and personification of time, was widespread in the Middle East from northern and eastern Iran to Babylonia. By the Sasanian period (AD 224-651), Zurvanite theology had gained a substantial number of followers among Zoroastrian priests and Iranian nobles and scholars. Yet there are no temples that can be associated with the worship of Zurvan, no special priesthood, nor can any particular rituals be attributed to him. There are several sources for Zurvanism, both Iranian religious books, and the accounts given by foreign writers, primarily Greeks, Syrians and Armenians. The European version of the Zurvanite creation myth tells us that upon realizing that his wife expected twins, Zurvan decided that the firstborn, Ohrmazd (Ahura Mazda), would rule the universe. Ahreman, the evil twin, learning of Zurvan's decision from the naïve Ohrmazd, ripped his way out of the womb and demanded his birthright. Upon learning of this Zurvan established a finite period of 9,000 years during which Ahreman would be in charge, after which time Ohrmazd would gain absolute power. Having set this cosmic cycle into motion, Zurvan's relevance ended. The Zurvanic myth explains the appearance of the opposite deities, but there is no mention of the origin of Zurvan's female spouse (Choksy, 1999:757). It appears that Zurvanism sought to bring together the origins and functions of Zoroastrianism's chief deities, the good Ahura Mazda and the evil Angra Mainyu, through an entity whose actions created both. Moreover, it explained why and how cosmogony occurred, stressing the role of time as well as constructing a theological explanation for the origins and purposes of good and evil. Zurvanism thus appears to be a partly monotheistic religion, and a template for moderate dualist religions, providing a solution to the problem of good and evil which is similar to that put forth by Bogomilism. But how the Bogomils, or

any Balkan Slavs, have come in contact with ancient Persian Zurvanism? John the Exarch, a priest writing during the reign of Bulgarian Tsar Symeon (893-927), denounced Manichaeans and pagan Slavs "who are not ashamed to call the devil the eldest son of God". (Obolensky, 1948: 89). Some scholars have put forth a theory that explains Bogomil familiarity and even adoption of the Zurvanic creation myth about two sons of the highest deity, Zurvan, by Bulgarian Turkish tribes at a time when they lived in the area of Persia and before they migrated west to the Balkan Peninsula. (Stoyanov, 2000: 163, 273-274).⁶ First taking this theory into consideration, John the Exarch's remark becomes less puzzling and hence generates a plausible explanation of some remarkable differences between the Bogomils and other dualist heresies that they were commonly compared with.

Although much of the ancient history of the Bulgarians remains obscure, it is suggested that the proto-Bulgarians inhabited areas in southern Central Asia between Iran and Turkestan in the early Christian era (Eremiian, 1963). According to this theory, in the fourth and fifth centuries, by which time the Hunnic expansion had pushed Bulgarian tribes towards the Caucasus-Caspian region and further into Europe, contact with the Zoroastrian religion had already been established. This provides an explanation for the existence of dualist traditions, in particular the cult of twin brothers, as observed in the Balkan area, mainly in Thrace and Macedonia. Yet, this theory has several serious methodological and theoretical disadvantages that need to be acknowledged and explored. First, we cannot be certain (although it is not improbable) that the Bulgarians adopted the Zurvanic mythology, or at least the chief idea of the supreme god and his two sons associated with the good and the evil principles, and carried it with them for centuries while wandering from the Asiatic steppes to the Balkans. The theoretical weakness inherent in this assumption is the premise that requires the evidence of geographical distribution of religious ideas to provide an explanation of their appearance in cultures which are distant from each other. In principle, there is nothing wrong with such a premise, but if the theories in question are justified based on very small amounts of data, the results of studies based on such theories must be acknowledged as a working hypothesis at best, and pure speculation at worst.

Many of the never-ending discussions and controversies among scholars on this issue are due to the scarcity of data. If we had enough source material, we might be able to erect a reasonable structure. As it is, we have only fragments based on rumours: one Byzantine account by John the Exarch, who might or might not have mistaken Manichaeism for other movements and/or may have misinterpreted the meaning of pagan beliefs. We have one relief carved at the entrance of a cave

⁶Unfortunately, he only touches on this interesting theory briefly.



preserved only as a sketch in a work from 1889 and in fragments as a photo from 1901. The relief depicts two groups separated from one another. The first consists of a man on foot carrying a sword, two horsemen carrying swords and facing each other, and another man on foot with a sword. The second group includes a horseman pursuing a roe deer, which is being teased by a dog, and a Bowman facing the rider and deer. To his right is a cross (Wenzel, 1961: 89-107). The motif of two horsemen opposing one another is found on several fourteenth –fifteenth century tombstones called *stećci* in Bosnia and Herzegovina and is commonly interpreted as a representation of jousting knights and thought to be a simply illustration of scenes of everyday life (Bihalji-Merin, Benac, 1964). Since this theory, like many others concerning the meaning of iconographical material, is built around circumstantial evidence, some unorthodox counter interpretations emerge from time to time. Among them, the suggestion that the *stećci* are the manifestation of an ancient cult of twin heroes, Hyperochus and Amadocus, described by Pausanias, a Greek geographer and traveller from the second century AD, in his main work *Description of Greece* (Pausanias, 1935: 1.4.1). It is claimed that this cult existed in the region of Herzegovina up until as late as the fourteenth century, and that the same cult had found its way to these regions as early as in the second century AD (Wenzel, 1961: 90). The occurrence of the woman figure standing between the two horsemen, a very common motive on the Bosnian *stećci*, is of particular relevance because the only similar motive occurs in a second – fourth century – tablet of local Danubian and late Roman origin. This theory is furthermore supported by certain early scholarly traditions that had attributed these tablets to a specifically Danubian mystery cult. According to these sources the tablets were assumed to contain some Mithraic, and thus classical Hellenistic elements, built around the figures of a major female deity as well as the two brothers or heroes with the initiation rituals as its main characteristic feature (Wenzel, 1961: 92; Rostovcev, 1925; Cumont, 1896-1899). It is also interesting to note that the Thracians, being considered by the Greeks to be great drinkers and wild revelers, have had a great influence on the history of civilisation and religion in the ancient world. This they accomplished through the gift of a more total vision of humanity and of its destiny in their eschatological expectations. The peculiar Thracian conception of the soul and the journey to the beyond has hence introduced the concept of immortality and provided an alternative to the strictly rationalistic or agnostic views of the Greeks. The Thracian monuments of the *mounted Heros* typically representing a horseman and dedicated to *Heron* or *Heros* (which means a person of the nether world) are nothing less than the representations for deification. In other words, the person erecting the monument has made himself immortal and divine. (Bianchi, 1978: 151-159).

The inscription carved on the tombstone from 1094 in Radimlja, Stolac, seems to be an example of Bogomil

influence on the Bosnian Church in the early periods. In addition it provides an example of the strength and staying power of the ideas described above concerning the soul and its journey:

You, who read my stone, maybe you travel to the stars. And you went back because there is nothing there, and you are yourself again. A man can see what he has not seen, he can hear what he has not heard, he can taste what he has not tasted, he can be there, where he has not been, but he always can find himself or he can find nothing.

(<http://www.bosnia.org.uk/bosnia/viewitem.cfm?itemID=428&>).

The inscription can be interpreted as the belief in the notion of an immortal soul which is able to leave the body and yet to return again to the life of this world. This concept does not need the idea of Jesus the giver of resurrection, which in turn seems to recall the dualist conception of the Bogomils.

Other theories trace some tenets observed in the practice of the Christian sect of the Bogomils back to pre-Christian Thracian Orphism supposedly adopted by Slavic tribes that inhabited this area several hundred years later. These ideas draw from similar core concepts by seeking the explanations of specific dualist traits in past practices (in this case among proto-Slavs) rather than in other religious movements from remote cultures, such as those from the East (Nikolova, 2005). In general, older theories, dating from as far back as the turn of the last century, leading to hypotheses which draw conclusions about the link between medieval dualist heresies from the Balkan Peninsula and from Slavic pre-Christian cosmogonic myths, have begun to dominate modern scholarship in the present. This is due to dissatisfaction with the vagueness of previous, in principle, unverifiable theories. One popular theme is that of the cosmogonic tradition of the *earth-diver*, recorded in Eastern Europe, and which describes the world as being created by two primal figures moving about on the surface of the waters. Recently scholars have linked this tradition to the Bogomil creation myth and claimed that it was also developed under the influence of Iranian dualism, and modified afterwards in Gnostic and Manichaean circles. The modified Gnostic and Manichaean beliefs were then spread into central and Northern Asia wherefrom they were brought to Eastern Europe by the Paulicians and adopted by the Bogomils (Dragomanov, 1984; Jacobson, 1985: 5). Even when questioning the central role of the Iranian dualist traditions, the main idea that religious beliefs followed the movement of tribes migrating from Asia and towards North America, gains adherents. According to these assumptions, the earth-diver cosmogonies displaying dualist elements, conditioned the general movement towards dualism, and its survival in South and East Slavonic traditions could make the appeal of Christian dualist heresies stronger (Stoyanov, 2000: 138).



The rise and fall of Bogomilism

Having emerged in the second part of the tenth century, scholars agree that Bogomilism attracted a considerable number of adherents as it spread to the centre of Byzantine orthodoxy, to Constantinople. The Byzantine annexations of Bulgaria in 972–987 and 1018–1185 must have made this penetration easier. Beginning in 1045, according to earliest available records, so-called Byzantine Bogomilism was practiced in the Constantinopolitan monastery (Hamilton, 1998: 142-164). In addition evidence survives which indicates that the Bogomil heresy spread to many parts of the Byzantine Empire at this time. Yet in the aftermath of this no immediate action was taken against the Bogomil heresy. It is argued that this was due to the political circumstances during the years following the death of Basil II in 1025. During the following sixteen years, the thirteen emperors who held power, having been pre-occupied with invasion or threat of invasion by Normans, Patzinaks, and Turks, were unable to direct attention to threats posed by unorthodox religious movements within the empire, even if dissident and sectarian in nature. The patriarchs, themselves supposedly the guardians of the purity of orthodox dogma against heretic thought, seemed to be paralysed by the threat of external attack and directed their energy against the non-Chalcedonian Christians of the eastern provinces rather than against the Bogomil heretics.⁷ Thus it was only after some time that, Patriarch Cosmas (1075-1081) took action against Bogomilism and wrote the letters to the metropolitan of Larissa in Thessaly, – the letters in which he anathematized the sect (Hamilton, 1998: 165-166). Other members of the Orthodox establishment did not look upon the Bogomils as a particularly dangerous threat to their orthodoxy, although believers in their provinces were also seriously under the sway of the dualist movement. Theophylact of Ochrida, Archbishop of Bulgaria (1090-1118), mentioned them only in passing although he ruled over the see that had been the cradle of heretic Bogomils (Obolensky, 1988: 34-82). Finally, Emperor Alexius Comnenus (1081-1118) is seen to have attempted to accuse the Byzantine Bogomils of heresy and put them on trial, probably alarmed by the rumours that some of the great families in Constantinople were at risk of becoming adherents of the movement (Stoyanov, 2000: 176-177). In the very same period, Alexius' daughter Anna, a well-educated secular historian, and Euthymius Zigabenus, his theologian, wrote their works, which are the chief sources for our understanding of Bogomilism. The trial of the Bogomil Basil (c.1098) reported by Anna Comnena stopped the persecutions temporarily. Later, a series of trials were held in Constantinople, which culminated in 1143 when a Synod in Constantinople deposed and excommunicated

two bishops of the diocese of Tyana in south-eastern Asia Minor. One year later the same synod condemned and excommunicated the monk Niphon for preaching Bogomilism in Cappadocia. Finally, in February 1147 it condemned and deposed Patriarch Cosmas as a Bogomil (Stoyanov, 2000: 219-225). This was the difficult period in the history of Byzantium not alone because of the heretics, who apparently were able to infiltrate and gain the recruits from among all religious communities, including the seemingly closed and well-defended monasteries. As well, beginning in about 1146, the Christian States established by the First Crusade and the Western princes, attempted to annex the Byzantine territory while they simultaneously defended themselves against the Muslims. When in 1176 the Byzantine army suffered a shattering defeat to Seljuk at Antioch, the future of the empire was sealed. The sack of Constantinople in 1204 by the Fourth Crusade was the beginning of the end of the period of imperial Byzantine power, and from that moment on the empire concerned itself exclusively with matters of survival. Meanwhile, the Bogomils could quite freely preach their ideas, and by the early 1320s, they had allegedly established themselves in the monastic centre of the entire Orthodox world, on Mount Athos (Hamilton, 1998: 278-282; 283-284).

In the meantime, the Council of Trnovo condemned the Bogomil heresy in February 1211 in the presence of Bulgarian Tsar Boril (1207-1218): "Because our guileful Enemy has sown the Manichaeic heresy throughout all the Bulgarian land and mixed it with Messalianism." (Hamilton, 1998: 260-261) During the Second Bulgarian Empire (1186-1393), Bogomilism experienced a great flourishing and then a decline and rapid disappearance.⁸ At the end of the twelfth century, a new Balkan country began to emerge. Because of Serbia's geographical position, the penetration of Bogomilism from neighbouring Macedonia was quite unhindered. One after another, the Balkan countries: Bulgaria, Bosnia and Serbia, began to free themselves from the burdensome tutelage of Byzantium, – a Byzantium that as a result of the establishment of the Latin Empire of Constantinople, became a mere shadow of its former self. The loss of the Balkan states might have been an unusually bitter pill to swallow as the Pope, a former dogmatic enemy, overtook spiritual guidance from the orthodox patriarch. In the early thirteenth century, the Papacy became involved in combating Bogomilism in Bosnia. This occurred after the vatican received warning from the legate in Languedoc that a heretical antipope had arisen "in the districts of Bosnia, Croatia and Dalmatia, next to Hungary" (Hamilton, 1998: 258). This in spite of the agreement in Bolina-Polje made between the papal legate and the Bosnian Ban Kulin on

⁷ The non-Chalcedonian Christians, or Oriental Orthodoxy, encounter several Eastern Churches such as, Armenian, Syriac and Coptic that recognise only the first three ecumenical councils. The schism occurred in the 5th century and resulted in refusal to accept the dogmas promulgated by the Council in Chalcedon about the two natures of Jesus – one divine and one human.

⁸ D. Obolensky mentions several factors favouring the spread of heresy: national hatred of the Greeks, the tension produced by continual wars, and the religious toleration of the Bulgarian authorities. (Obolensky, 1948: 234)



30th April 1203 when the Ban agreed to a papal inquiry about their orthodoxy and to

[...] have an altar and a cross, and [...] read the books of the New and Old Testament as the Roman Church does. [...] and [...] not accept anyone who is reliably identified as a Manichaean or any other heretic to live among us. (Hamilton, 1998: 258).

Yet, the Bogomil congregations still flourished. By the end of the thirteenth century, a bishop was appointed, a bishop whose function it would be to oversee the Bosnian Church, and advise the Bosnian ruler or even to act as a political authority himself if necessary (Runciman, 1995: 108).⁹ In 1325, Pope John XXII complained to Prince Stephen Kotromanič that

a great company of heretics has come together from many different places to the principality of Bosnia, in the confident hope of disseminating their foul error and of remaining there in safety. (Hamilton, 1998: 277).

By that time, six dualist churches were established, and an Italian inquisitor, who mentions them all: "The Church of Slavonia, the Church of the Latins of Constantinople, the Church of the Greeks of the same place, the Church of Philadelphia in Romania, the Church of Bulgaria, the Church of Dragovitia" (Hamilton, 1998: 275), is the last western writer to make any reference to contemporary dualist movements in Bulgaria or Byzantium.

It has been suggested that in Bulgaria, in the province of Vidin, Bogomilism persisted even into the second half of the fourteenth century. Indeed the Franciscan missionaries claimed to have found a colony (200,000) of heretics, whom they successfully converted to the Catholic faith. However, this particular record, specifically regarding the exact number of Bogomils, should be looked upon cautiously as some scholars would argue that the totals are an exaggeration. (Loos, 1974: 334; Hamilton, 1998: 54-55) Nonetheless, most historians agree that Bogomilism survived in what remained of the Byzantine Empire up to the eve of the Ottoman conquest. Which is much longer than Bogomilism's sister faith in Western Europe, Catharism.

Unsolved Questions

No one would question the notion that Bogomilism was a dualist movement with great influence on the history

⁹ Some scholars do not regard the Bosnian Church as dualistic. D. Obolensky points out the complexity of this problem, as there are notable differences in doctrine between the Bogomils and the Bosnians Patarenes. (Obolensky, 1948: 285). J.V.A. Fine's main thesis is that the Bosnian Church was a Slavic liturgy church, relatively orthodox in theology that was derived from the Catholic organization in the thirteenth century. (Fine, 1975). The truth may lie in the middle: the Bosnian Church evaluated from being a private sect to become an organised church supported by a ruler and thus institutionalized adopting still more theological dogmas from the orthodox Christianity.

of the Balkan peoples. Nor would scholars disagree that the Bogomil doctrine concerning Satan as the second principle spread into Constantinople, the centre of Christian orthodoxy, and into Western Europe, where the soil was fertile for the growth of such ideas. Yet many questions still remain unanswered. For example, how would one explain the role of Bogomilism as a link in the thousand year long chain leading from Iranian Zoroastrianism to the heterodox and orthodox beliefs and practices existing in Byzantium at the time of the Albigensian crusade? Many scholars would argue that Manichaeism was the religion that had the greatest influence on the teachings of Bogomilism during its penetration into Europe. This is why the terms *Manichaean* and *neo-Manichaean* entered the vocabulary of scholars working with such heresies. Unfortunately, *a priori* assumptions of a Manichaean legacy hide several unsolved problems. First, Manichaean dualism rolled across Europe in two waves separated by an interval of three centuries. Thus, the urgent task was to single out the dualist movements active in that period in the Balkans. Certain scholars have claimed that the Paulicians and the Massalians were the dualist movements in question, though their dogmatic teachings and way of life included elements that were wholly absent from Bogomilism. Another problem with this notion is that the religion of Mani represents a radical type of dualism where the two principles, lightness and darkness are the only existing forces that enter into the act of creation. Additionally Manichaeism is more radical in its view of the origin of evil than Zoroastrianism, and far more extreme than Zurvanism. In Zurvanism we see clearly a myth about a supreme god and a pair of twins, one good and one evil, whom God has chosen to rule the universe. The myth is very similar to the Bogomil teaching about a good God and his sons: Satan and Christ. So the question can be asked: Was Bogomilism inspired by Zurvanist mythology, and then preserved by the proto-Bulgarians as they wandered from the Asiatic steppes to the Balkan Peninsula, – an area where the cult of twin heroes already existed in the second century? To answer this interesting question a detailed study is urgently needed. Such a study should include various disciplines including archaeology. For unfortunately, until such a project is undertaken, the study of Bogomilism in particular, and of heretical medieval sects in general, will only result in questionable theories based on sparse and partial data at best, and pure speculation at worst.

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