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## THE BOGOMIL RITUAL BEFORE THE CROSS AND ITS DOCTRINAL FOUNDATIONS

Ivan Christov

*Sofia University “St Kliment Ohridski”*

**Abstract.** *Panoplia Dogmatica* by Euthymios Zigabenos is undoubtedly the most important source for Bogomilism in Constantinople in the 12th century. The Title 27 offers a systematic exposition of this heresy, and gives a unique first-hand testimony from Basil the Physician, in the investigation of whom Zigabenos was engaged. One such first-hand testimony concerns the ritual that the Bogomils performed before the cross. The paper analyses it and establishes an inconsistency of Zigabenos’ interpretation with the words of the heresiarch, as well as internal contradictions in it. On this basis, a hypothesis is put forward about the real meaning of the Bogomil ritual before the cross. It symbolizes the choice of the true path – the path of the Bogomil, who chooses the cross of light over the demonic cross of death. At the heart of the Bogomil ritual is the bifurcation of this most important Christian symbol, which is directly related to their dualism.

**Keywords:** Bogomilism; heresy; dualism; cult; symbol; cross

Among the Byzantine sources on Bogomilism, Zigabenos’ “Full Armour of Belief (*Panoplia Dogmatica*)”<sup>1</sup> takes a special place. Although it shares the tendentiousness of similar polemical works, it is distinguished from them by its systematicity and concreteness. In fact, the *Panoplia* is the only systematic exposition of Bogomil doctrine that we have today (Hamilton, Hamilton, Stoyanov 1998, p. 38). This stems from the purpose for which it was written. Both the emperor and his daughter Anna Comnena, whose work the “*Alexiad*” is an important source for his fight against Bogomilism, highly valued Zigabenos’ learning and analytical abilities. That is why, Emperor Alexius I Comnenos personally assigned him to refute the main and most dangerous heresies from the history of the ancient church up to their time, exposing the errors contained in them in order to provide reliable armour in the hands of the Orthodox believers. However, the value of this work lies not only in its systematicity. Zigabenos participated in the investigation against the Bogomils and personally interrogated the heresiarch Basil, during which he took notes<sup>2</sup>. His testimonies are first-hand, which makes them particularly important.

### **A. The Bogomil doctrine of the cross**

Of particular interest among Zigabenos' testimonies are those about the Bogomil attitude to the cross. The insufficient testimonies from the mouths of the Bogomils themselves force us to turn to the anti-Bogomil polemic. I will briefly formulate the main points of the Bogomil view, as presented by its opponents.

Traditionally, it is reported that the Bogomils completely deny the cross (Borilov Synodik 2010, 15b11-14, 24b11-14). The following reasons are given for this:

1. The Bogomils deny the sacredness of the cross, because the Savior did not die on it, did not conquer death with his death, and therefore it is not an instrument of salvation. According to some testimonies, the Bogomils considered the death on the cross to be illusory. So Zigabenos says that Christ "was only seemingly exposed to the sufferings inherent in man, when he was crucified on a cross and "died". And when he rose, he completed the scene, revealed the drama and, taking off the mask, captured the apostate, chained him in thick and heavy chains, and imprisoned him in Tartarus" (Panoplia 27.11 154,2-6 (Berke)). That is, the so-called "death on the cross" is only a performance that he played to expose Satan. This semblance of the Savior's death among the Bogomils brought upon them the curse of Patriarch Theophylact: "For those who consider the cross and death of Christ and his resurrection to be apparent, a curse<sup>34</sup>". For the same reason, they are also anathematized in the Boril Synod: "Our God Christ... was seemingly crucified, ascended the defied flesh and left it in the air; to his former and present disciples, who claim this and call themselves apostles – anathema" (Borilov sinodik, 2010, pp. 121 – 122 [13b20-14a4]).

However, once the Bogomils desacralize the cross, in their eyes it is just wood and, like any wood, can be used as material for more useful things. Thus, Cosmas the Presbyter testifies that "heretics cut up crosses and make tools out of them" (Kozma, Beseda, 488b, Popruzhenko 1936, 5, 13-14).

2. The second motive for the denial of the cross, according to anti-heretical testimonies, contradicts the first, insofar as it does not deny the death on the cross. According to the Bogomils, it is hated by God because the Jews crucified his son Jesus on it. And if someone kills the king's son with a tree, can this tree be pleasing to the king? (Kozma, Beseda, 490ab, see Popruzhenko 1936, 6,23-7,4). This is stated even more directly in the anonymous anti-heretical treatise, which has come down to us in the MS Sen. 33 from the 15th century. There, it is stated, that the Bogomils do not honor the cross because it is a murderer of the Lord (Delatte 1927, 318,30 sq.). Therefore, this instrument of deicide cannot be venerated.

3. The third main motive for denying the cross is that it is the work of the devil. According to Jesus in the Secret Book, "when Satan learned that I was coming to this world, he sent his angel and took pieces of three trees and handed them over to the prophet Moses for my crucifixion on a cross. (Ivanov 2024<sup>2</sup>, p. 75)" Also in the Sermon of Cosmas we read: "They blaspheme not only the earth, but also the

heavens, saying that everything is at the will of the devil. They give the sky, the sun, the stars, the air, the earth, man, the church, crosses and everything divine to the devil. (Kozma, Beseda, 509b, see Popruzhenko 1936, 26,3-5)”

As can be seen, the anti-Bogomil testimonies are contradictory. The first contradiction that we noted is in the denial or recognition of the Savior death on the cross. However, it is not the only one. There is another, second contradiction, this time related to the third motive for the denial of the cross. We saw that the Bogomils associate it with the devil. Then it is not clear how his servant demons can be afraid of the cross – of his master work. However, we also have such testimonies. Cosmas the Presbyter testifies that according to the Bogomils, demons are afraid of the cross of God (Cosmas, Beseda, 488b, Popruzhenko 1936, 5,13). In his “Dialogue against Heresies” Simeon of Thessalonica writes that according to the Bogomils, the most honorable cross of the Lord is terrible for demons (PG 155, 73B).

In light of what has been said, the question arises whether the contradictions outlined in this way can be overcome. For the first, this is more difficult. Still, it could be said that the contradictory opinions are expressed in a different respect. In reality, death on the cross does not exist. The crucifixion is only a staging of God to expose Satan. In the end, he turns out to be his instrument. On the other hand, such a death on the cross exists in the devil’s plan, and Orthodox Christians, for whom it is real, are slaves to this plan and therefore the Savior dead is real to them. A logical option with regard to the second contradiction is to assume that according to the Bogomils there are two crosses – the cross of the crucifixion, revered by Orthodox Christians, and the true cross, the cross of light, revered by them. The first is an instrument of the devilish forces, who imagine that with it they can kill the Lord and it is dear to them. They are its creators and accept it as something of their own. In reality, however, its creation is according to the plan of God, who through the cross exposes the diabolic power. Therefore, ultimately, the demons must fear him, because the cross is their persecutor.

There is however a problem. Some testimonies speak against such a division of the cross into a cross of light, which according to the Divine plan is an expeller of demons, and a cross of crucifixion, which is work of the devilish forces and serves their plan. Presbyter Cosmas writes: “Out of fear of people, they go to church and venerate the cross and the icon, as those of them who returned to our true faith tell us, saying: “We do all this for people, and not from the heart. We secretly keep our faith. (Kozma, Beseda, 503a, Popruzhenko 1936, 19,3-7)” Euthymius of Periblepta also testifies to the Bogomil hypocrisy: “And they also make crosses, but not from faith, but blasphemously and with boldness (ἐμπαικτικῶς καὶ ὑβριστικῶς) just for show and deception (πρὸς ἐνδειξιν καὶ ἀπάτην ). If the demon-possessed Bogomils worship the cross only out of hypocrisy and for mimicry in front of the Orthodox, there is no “true cross” for them other than the cross of the crucifixion<sup>4</sup>.

On the other hand, some historical artifacts testify to a veneration of the cross among the Bogomils. There are symbolic images of the cross on tombstones in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as on the rings worn by the Bogomils. These images show a significant difference with the Orthodox tradition. Crosses are specific. They are “crosses of light” and, under the influence of Manichaeism, symbolize Christ as the eternal Sun. They depict Christ, not his physical death. They depict him as “gates”, as a “path” to the spiritual world (Kutšli, 2010, p. 162). They also symbolize the cosmic mission of Christ, “who restrains the Cosmos through the word” (Ibid.). As the publications of L. Stefanova and E. Ivanov in this miscellany demonstrate, similar images are also present in Greece, Serbia and Bulgaria. In his research, Soloviev proceeds from similar observations and claims that the Bogomils rejected the cross only as an instrument for the execution of Christ (Solov’ev, 1948, 1959). That is, they deny the cross of Orthodox Christians, and not the “true” cross, introducing their own understanding of this important Christian symbol<sup>5</sup>. Some indications of this understanding can be found in a testimony by Euthymios Zigabenos in the *Panoplia* 27.

### **B. Zigabenos on the Bogomil ritual before the cross**

In the *Panoplia* Zigabenos reports on a peculiar ritual of the Bogomils, revealing their attitude to the cross. His testimony is unique and has no analogue in any other historical source. It was recorded from the mouth of the heresiarch Basil, after which Zigabenos gives his commentary. This gives it authenticity, at least in that part of it which conveys the words of the heresiarch, given Zigabenos’ tendency to expand the Bogomil doctrine with elements from other heresies of that time and to turn the name Bogomil into a label and a synonym for heretic in general. In the earlier text *De haeresi Bogomilorum narratio*<sup>6</sup>, only the first part is present without the subsequent commentary. Let us first look at the full text of the testimony in the *Panoplia*, and then will proceed to its analysis:

After that the one, who was exposed as **the leader of the heresy**, was asked by us why the demon-possessed (οἱ δαιμονῶντες) rush to the cross and bark (καθυλακτοῦσιν<sup>7</sup>), and **he replied** that the cross is loved most of all by the demons who dwell in them, because it is their work, and said that they themselves prepared it for the murder (εἰς ἀναίρεσιν) of the Savior. Sometimes they theatrically commit an outrage upon it (καθυβρίζειν τοῦτον ἐν ὑποκρίσει) and often voluntarily (ἐκουσίως) flee from him, so that, seeing this, people might rather honor him as an enemy and a persecutor of demons (ὥς ἐχθρὸν καὶ διώκτην τῶν δαιμονίων).

However, **according to us**, the truth is not like that. They are attracted by the power of the cross (ὕπὸ τῆς τοῦ Σταυροῦ δυνάμεως) and against their will (ἄκοντας). After all, the barking and convulsions of the body in those obsessed by demons, as well as the shaking, are evidence of the torment of the demons. They are committing an outrage upon the cross because it is an enemy and flee because he is a persecutor. *Panopl.* PG 27.15, 1312A,9-B,9 [27.19 p.163,1-13 (Berke)]”

As can be seen, Zigabenos' testimony consists of two parts. In the first, he conveys the words of the Bogomil leader, Basil (see *Panoplia* 163, 1-7 (Berke)). Presented analytically by points, its content is as follows:

1. The actions described are performed in front of the people present. The committing an outrage is said to be ἐν ὑποκρίσει – i.e. in a theatrical, staged way. It happens not on regular bases but sometimes.

2. These actions have a symbolic meaning and contain an instruction for the public – to venerate the cross rather as a persecutor of demons and their enemy.

3. The ritual includes a) movement towards the cross; b) committing an outrage; c) retreat from the cross.

a) Those possessed by demons rush to the cross, attracted by it as a demonic work. Their demonic possession is demonstrated by making animal sounds (barking). The Bogomils would hardly present themselves in this way. Rather, they expose traditional Christians – they are who is attracted by the cross of crucifixion, the instrument for the murder of the Lord!

b) Committing an outrage upon the cross. It is not specified what it consists of. The verbs ὑβρίζειν and καθυβρίζειν are used, which can mean both outraging actions and foul words.

c) Retreating from the cross, which shows its true nature – not a demonic instrument of murder (for crucifixion) that attracts those possessed by demons, but on the contrary, a persecutor of demons that makes them flee.

The second part of Zigabenos' testimony contains his interpretation of the meaning of the Bogomil ritual before the cross [*Panoplia*, p.163, 8-13 (Berke)]

The main points in it are as follows:

1. Zigabenos states that Bogomils possessed by demons approach the cross, but not because it is the work of demons, but against their will – they are attracted by the holy power of the cross.

2. The outrage upon the cross is an expression of the attitude towards it of the demonic forces, for whom it is an enemy.

3. The retreat from the cross shows his holy power to cast out demons.

If we were to present in a generalized way the differences between the words of the heresiarch and their interpretation by Zigabenos, we could present them in the following table:

### **The heresiarch**

- Those possessed by demons flock to the cross of their own free will, as if to something related, because it is a demonic work.
- The Orthodox are possessed by demons.
- Those who turn away from the cross flee not condemned and driven away by it, but of their own free will and this happens those present to be showned in what sense they should venerate it.
- The cross is only an enemy and persecutor of demons, and if it is to be venerated, then only as such.

### **Zigabenos**

- Those possessed by demons flock before the cross against their will, attracted by its holy power.
- The Bogomils are possessed by demons.
- Before the cross, those who turn away from it testify to their demonic possession and are driven away by it. There is no mention of some public and a message to the people present at all.
- The cross is not only an enemy and a persecutor of demons, but above all an instrument of salvation.

### **C. Dissonances in Zigabenos' testimony**

1. It seems absurd that the Bogomils should depict themselves rushing towards the cross with a barking that exposes them as possessed by demons. In this way, they rather present the opposing side. Zigabenos could have resorted to a frequently used polemical technique – to turn the blade of the attack against those who carry it out: in fact, it is not we, but you who are possessed by demons!

2. In his interpretation of the ritual before the cross, Zigabenos presents the Bogomils as a satanized crowd of vandals, whose actions have nothing to do with Christianity. However, this exposes them not as heretics, but as degenerates. At all times there have been rabble who desecrate the symbols of faith, but they are perceived not as heretics, but as low-class elements. Then, is Zigabenos not showing a tendency for apologetic distortion, and can we accept his interpretation as historically accurate?

3. It seems strange that after the holy power of the Cross manages to attract the demoniacs, instead of keeping them with it and sanctifying them, they are exposed, condemned and expelled. Does Zigabenos equate the actions of the cross with the actions of the emperor, who has predisposed and attracted Basil the Physician to himself in order to test his heresy and condemn him? It is before the emperor that the heresiarch reveals all his demoniacness. Does this analogy not reveal an ideologeme in the minds of the Byzantines, for whom the emperor is the vicar of Christ on earth and his actions have a sacred character? Then is the action of the holy cross of exposing and persecuting the heretics similar to them? If so, there is a predetermined scheme in the interpretation, which is another reason to doubt its historical reliability.

#### **D. Strengths and weaknesses in Zigabenos' testimony**

1. We owe to Zigabenos the most complete information about the Bogomil heresy compared to all Byzantine sources. In particular, only in him do we find a description of actions before the cross, which were in public, and the words of the heresiarch quoted by him indicate the presence of a symbolic meaning for the instruction of those present.

2. Zigabenos is a brilliant Christian apologist. His work "Full Armour of Belief" gives an answer to all the main heresies that troubled Christians for a whole millennium.

However, what is a virtue in the Christian theologian-apologist creates difficulties in using him as a historical source. His testimonies should be perceived critically, provided that his goal was not so much to inform about the Bogomil heresy as to expose and discredit it. For this purpose, tools that are not inherent to a historian also help.

Our project on the Bogomils is scientific and aims to give as objective a picture of medieval Bogomilism as possible, in order to compare its contemporary epigones with it. This implies distancing oneself from the testimonies of the apologists and analyzing their objectivity.

#### **E. A possible solution to the problems in Zigabenos' testimony**

Considering that, for apologetic purposes, Zigabenos turns the accusation of the heretics against the Orthodox, that they are possessed by demons, against them, which distorts Basil's words, we have every reason to seek an interpretation different from what he offers us.

1. The Bogomils do not depict themselves rushing to the cross with barking and do not expose themselves in such an elementary way. With these actions they represent traditional Christians worshipping the cross of crucifixion, which according to Bogomil ideas is a demonic instrument of murder; they worship it because it is the work of the demons who have possessed them.

2. A spectacle is sometimes played out in front of the cross, in which this instrument of death is theatrically outraged upon. This cannot be done by the crowd of barking Orthodox believers. The demonic spirit in them should rather recognize it as a demonic work related to itself. They have no reason to outrage upon it. Here it is time to pay attention to the words of the heresiarch that this outrage is done "sometimes". What if have they once reached the cross, the truth is revealed to them – the true cross is that of the Bogomils? But not all of them accept it. Those who remain orthodox and therefore possessed by demons outrage upon it and on their own free will run away. This does not happen always, because many accept the way of Bogomilism.

3. The subsequent actions of those who have not chosen Bogomilism indicate the path that must be followed. Before the eyes of the community, they turn



away from the true cross. The traditional Christians voluntarily flee from him realizing that it is their enemy and persecutor of demons. This is the way it to be venerated.

4. In this way, the actions before the cross symbolize the choice of the true path – the path of the Bogomil, who chooses the cross of light over the demonic cross of death.

#### **F. The bifurcation of the cross in the context of Bogomil dualism**

An important point in the words of the heresiarch, as quoted by Zigabenos, is that the denial of the cross of death does not cancel the veneration of the cross that drives away demons – the sanctifying cross. The observations we made on his testimony provide another argument in support of the thesis that the Bogomils have not completely rejected the symbol of the cross. They rejected it only as an instrument for the murder of Christ. This explains why images of crosses are found on the tombstones of the Bogomils. These images are diverse: crosses of light, crosses with vines, crosses of lilies, “Christomorphic” crosses (Kutzli, 166). The use of the cross in Bogomil burials is hardly due only to their desire to mimic as Orthodox Christians due to fear of persecution, or to mislead the pagan Christians and more easily to seduce them, as some testimonies speak of. These “true” crosses are under dualistic Manichaean influence and symbolize Christ as the light and good principle, opposing the dark and evil principle – Satan. They depict Christ and his cosmic mission, but in no way his death. The Bogomils distance themselves from the Christian cross of the crucifixion and in its place place another “spiritual” cross, which they believe is the true one.

#### **Conclusions and summary**

The interpretation presented here is a hypothesis for which it is difficult to provide decisive arguments. Yet it is at least good in that it provides an answer to discrepancies in Zigabenos’ testimony that have not attracted the attention of researchers until now. Although heretics, the Bogomils are believers, not ordinary vandals. Least of all, they would have expounded themselves as possessed by demons. Therefore, what we learn from Zigabenos that they performed in public is not an act of vandalism, but a ritual subordinated to their dualistic doctrine. A ritual symbolizing the choice of light and good over demonism and evil. This is symbolized by the choice of the true cross, with which the Bogomils remain. This does not happen always. Those who serve demons and do not accept the Bogomil teachings remain unchanged – they approach the cross of the crucifixion, attracted by its demonic essence, themselves demonstrating their possession by demons. However, when the true cross shines, replacing the Orthodox one, a part of them, who does not accept it and does not embrace Bogomilism, decide to leave and remain possessed by the devil’s forces. The right choice does not happen always and that is why a theatrical outrage upon



cross is sometimes (but not always) performed, symbolizing the evil choice of those who remain Orthodox. At the heart of the Bogomil ritual is the bifurcation of the cross, which is directly related to their dualism.

#### NOTES

1. The work *Panoplia* most likely dates back to 1114. See RIGO, A. 2009, p. 32. It is also possible that it was written two decades later. See Parpulov, Г., Kusabu, H. 2019, 66 – 67.
2. See the testimony of Zigabenos himself at the end of *Panoplia*, where he shares the pain and inner resistance with which he listened to Basil the Physician, for which reason he “willingly passed over many things and wrote down only fragmentary words. PG 1332A,7-12 [184,11-14 (Berke)]” The translation from Greek here and throughout the article is mine.
3. Patriarh Teofilakt do Petăr, tsar na Bălgariya. – Angelov, D., Primov, B., Batakliiev, G. 1967, p. 43.
4. Euthymii monachi coenobii Peribletae epistula invectiva contra Phundagiagitas sive Bogomilos haereticos. – Ficker, 1908, 28, 5 – 7.
5. See SOLOVIEV, A.V., 1959; GRUBER, H., 1965; KUTSLI, R., 2023 [in Bulgarian translation].
6. Written for the council of Constantinople 1110 – 1112 (PBE 17, 449) and then supplemented and transformed, it served as the basis for the Title 27 in the *Panoplia*.
7. They are barking, not cursing, like in the translation in GIBI 10, p. 65. As stated in Zigabenos' interpretation, making such animal sounds testifies to their possession by demons.

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✉ **Prof. Dr. Ivan Christov**

ORCID iD: 0000-0001-9900-5423

WoS Researcher ID: G-9488-2012

Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Bulgaria

E-mail: ichri@theo.uni-sofia.bg