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THE NEW BOGOMILISM AND THE CONCEPT OF ORIGINAL SIN – AN APPROACH TOWARDS A CONTEMPORARY DUALISM?

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Abstract. The contemporary spiritual movement of modern Bogomilism claims to revive the teaching and practices of medieval Bogomilism, but what is the dogmatic core identity of this New or Neo-Bogomilism and is it relevant enough to ascribe the contemporary movement to known dualistic systems? A reconstruction of traditional dualistic interpretative framework surrounding the conception of Original Sin would contribute to the definition of a criteria of evaluation of new phenomena, such as New Bogomilism, as well as their philosophical relations and synthesis with contemporary culture, including information society and technologies.

Keywords: New Bogomilism; Theological and cultural anthropology; identity and otherness; concepts and images of dualistic ideas

In order to explore the question of the contemporary identity of Bogomilism, it is necessary to consider the broader framework of the question itself and the perspective of the inquirers. The modern information society is believed by some to be on the cusp of a new frontier that will transform the world as we know it and human existence as well. Simulacrums make the real and the virtual almost indistinguishable, thereby relativising notions, attitudes and expectations. In this context, we encounter images of archaic and forgotten teachings, such as Bogomilism, that resonate intimately with the sense of being entranced in this world of simulated truth and real tangible evil. There is a growing recognition of the potential for re-evaluating the historical interpretations of Bogomilism from the Middle Ages, as well as the contemporary “New Bogomil” interpretations of the “Bulgarian heresy”. These new interpretations seek to revitalise the medieval image through the lens of the modern information society and mass culture, utilising methodologies derived from contemporary scientific disciplines such as historiography and cultural anthropology.

1. Contemporary Bogomilism – what identity?

The methodology of postmodern scholarship facilitates the conceptualisation of Bogomilism via a hermeneutics of otherness, which portrays it as an appealing and collective representation of an unreal model of the other Christianity – that Christianity which has not historically prevailed, but which has, precisely because of this, preserved its otherness in relation to this world, and has remained “real” and attractive. This concept of “good Christians” as defined by the Bogomils, who have endured persecution at the hands of the “official Church” since the time of St. Constantine onwards (Ivanova 2023, p. 26), encapsulates the purity and attractiveness of this alternative Christianity. This is the reconstructed image of a “Christianity of the spirit”, that has been broken and exterminated in a barbaric and cruel manner, and yet it has proven capable of “leavening” and transforming European civilisation and culture, giving rise to the Renaissance. It is therefore possible for Neo-Bogomilism to conceive of Bogomilism as the foundation of modern European civilisation.¹ The Bogomil is reimagined as the medieval Other – the stigmatised heretic – transposed and reinterpreted, culturally and esoterically reconstructed in the modern age as a new and fascinating concept.

The emergence of New Bogomilism as a contemporary form of religiosity is indicative of a convergence of esoteric and occult elements, interwoven with elements of Christianity (the “true Christian” identity), and postmodern scientific methodologies. This synthesis facilitates the reinterpretation and reactualisation of Bogomilism in contemporary contexts, including its representation through modern information media. It is sought after by some in the present day, insofar as it is a subject of persecution, and insofar as the aura of miraculous acts and magical manifestations that excite the imagination, surrounds it - the “pure” images of the otherness in the Middle Ages, the one of the secret doctrine and the apocrypha, that seem so attractive with its rejected otherness.² A notable and pervasive instrument in this Bogomil otherness are the “fables”, which function as a medieval “medium” that, through its accessibility (verbal “memes”) rapidly disseminated, intrigues and gradually engages the listeners, drawing them into the ideological realm. The amalgamation of inquisitiveness, projection of reality, wishful thinking, and imagined identity has the potential to engender inner firmness, persistence, and even intransigence.³ Some scholars of Bogomilism perceive its primary sphere of influence to be medieval and Renaissance culture, scholarship, and education, which played a pivotal role in the dissemination of Old Bulgarian literature throughout the Slavic world, analogous to the dissemination of the Albigensian doctrine by the French (Stefan 2012, p. 91 – 92).

However, the question remains: can we truly comprehend the essence of the Bogomils at all, or is every attempt to do so a form of “remake”? Such “agnosticism” is reflected as well in the ideology of the Neo-Bogomilism, which poses questions such as the following: can we be certain that Christianity is the doctrine bequeathed

to His disciples by Jesus Christ, or is it instead the “superfluous and costly” “official” church serving the empire, the power? The present paper will seek to explore this reinvention of the Bogomil identity by those who currently self-identify, either directly or indirectly, with the name of this doctrine. The virtual identity of the New Bogomilism can be conceptualised as an imagined otherness in a hermeneutic circle that aims to safely reconstruct heresy as otherness and as the dwelling place of otherness. The implemented method combines a cultural (regarding the context) and theological approach, pertaining to the inner criteria of identification of the Bogomil teaching.

2. The Original Sin and dualism

Several important questions, that establish a solid foundation for the subsequent discussion should be posed. How does (New) Bogomilism relate to the problem of Original Sin and could we use the concept of sin as a relevant criterion for dualism? What preconceptions do we bring to the debate and what definition of dualism will we use? Is it a more particular modern dualism and what are the limits of our knowledge in relation to heresy?

According to the Secret Book of the Bogomils, also known as John’s Evangelium (Apocrypha), the concept of man as a servant of the devil is articulated (§5), with the subsequent dispatch of two angels into the clay bodies of Adam and Eve by the devil. The assertion is that man is the possession and “plaything” of a dark master, rendering evil and sin inevitable. The Fall is unavoidable, yet the “mechanics” and “technology” of sin and evil remain discernible. The First Sin, as outlined in the Secret Book, is defined as the act of coitus,⁶ where the creation is said to have been seduced and abused by its evil demiurge,⁷ driven by the desire to abduct and appropriate the divine spark, the soul, or to destroy the creation from within due to the soul’s attachment to God. The offspring of Cain is believed to be the result of the lust of the fallen angel and the abused creation-woman, and the birth of Abel is said to have occurred from the union of Eve with Adam.⁸ The precise timing of the expulsion of humankind from paradise remains ambiguous within the Apocrypha, however, the fallen angel’s loss of faculties and form is subsequent to the act of violence against the woman,⁹ resulting in the offspring of evil Cain killing the righteous son of man, Abel. Thus, entrapped within this realm of malevolence, humankind is confronted with an intractable predicament: to be the arena of the ceaseless conflict between the forces of good and evil, a recurrent “game” of good and evil that unfolds in the cycle of reincarnations. In this “game,” the “player” progressively enhances his virtue until ultimately achieving the culmination of the “game” and, by shedding all traces of evil, attaining a state of fusion with the deity.

The secret knowledge that Bogomilism brings to fallen man is that he lives in an evil body - a vessel of evil and sin. The Bogomil anthropological doctrine states that man is an angel incarnated by deception - an angelic entity-soul trapped in a

body of clay. The concept of deliverance from evil entails the renunciation of the physical and the earthly, and the focus on the spiritual realm, signifying the release from the constraints of the body and its malevolent energies. All bodily manifestations and bondages entrap humanity in the domain of evil, rendering it a slave to the sinister master, the fallen emperor of this world, who professes to be a god. The Bogomil, therefore, is an active opponent of all power in this world (cf. the second temptation of Christ in Luke 4:5-8), and instead defends the freedom of spirit and truth – “the sprouts of light” (cf. Kutzli 2023, pp. 101 – 102) – in the wrapping of the evil body of sin and darkness. The Bogomil is a proponent of reason and spirituality, and the concept of a divine spark that can only be realised through opposition to and separation from evil.

In the specific dualistic conception of the First Sin, the Bogomil doctrine suggests a kind of externalisation of evil. The concept of evil is posited as an external force, distinct from the individual. The self is regarded as inherently good, with the task being to purge evil, which is interpreted as a form of energy emanating from matter. The concept of matter-in-man is seen as the origin of evil-in-man, which is regarded as a foreign element to the self. The salvation process is therefore understood as a liberation from evil matter through a process of dematerialisation and transformation into pure spirit. If one is considered to be an angel-in-clay (flesh), then evil is not a constituent of the self: I am enslaved to evil and I must rebel, revolt and free myself from the system of this world, which is evil itself.

According to the Bogomils, the world is a subjugating invention of the evil demiurge: the empire is evil, the imperial church is evil; matter is evil, and no sanctification of matter is possible, which is why the sacraments and piety (the Liturgy, the Cross, the icons) are not possible – any piety is impossible in this world, and no confession of the coming of Christ in flesh is possible as well (the docetic essence of Bogomilism). The Bogomils’ idea that the First Sin is unavoidable act of evil is intricately tied to their belief system. In this system, described by the Secret Book of the Bogomils, the inherent state of evil is not the result of free choice or a condition of captivity, but is instead an element of their contingent being, given by creation. Their path to liberation lies, according to this belief system, in the detachment from matter deemed to be inherently malevolent. The Bogomil is seen as merely dissociating and rejecting matter rather than embracing, transforming or “healing” it. The concept of sin is inherently linked to childbearing, and the voluntary renunciation of parenthood is regarded as the privilege of “the perfect ones” and renunciation of the evil status quo. This is further compounded by the belief that children are viewed as future slaves to the evil ruler of this world (Ivanova 2023, 165). Nevertheless, the issue of sin is also evident in a specific manner in Presbyter Cosmas’s critique, wherein the Bogomilism is regarded as a possible solely due to the sinful inconsistency of the orthodox clergy (E.Stefan 2012, p. 121).

The dogmatic question of the Fall, which occupies a central position within the framework of Orthodox Christianity, is marginalised within the context of the Bogomil doctrine. The Fall, in this sense, is not regarded as a watershed event, in contrast to the creation of man itself. Indeed, the mere act of creation is perceived as a Fall, signifying the onset of the sorrowful history of this world of evil and the tragic history of man within it. The implications of this act of abrogation are indicative of one form of dualism or another (soft or hard), but also of a more profound underlying principle. The reinterpretation of the Bogomil worldview has been shown to deviate from dogmatic discourse and its specific language, opting instead for parable language and “fables”. This shift has resulted in the comfortable reconciliation of various apocryphal versions of the Bogomil cosmogony. These versions can be regarded as allegory, a speech of the otherness, which can be conceptualised as integral modus of identity for Bogomilism.

The reconstructed image of the (Neo-)Bogomil is synthetic in nature, having been constructed through the application of both scientific and occult knowledge. The guiding principle here is not that of sin and repentance as a personal inner struggle and volition of freedom, but rather as a path of spiritual self-cultivation and growth to a perfect Bogomil, master of the Secret Knowledge. This encompasses the manifestation of seemingly magical practices that combine and can only be understood through modern physics and esoteric principles.¹⁰ Consequently, the question of Original Sin does not radically confront the neopagan Bogomil, but rather, it is interiorised within the overarching system of cosmogony and liberation as salvation.

3. The other Christian redefined

The new historical reading of the Bogomilism establishes several persistent topoi of otherness, a reinterpretation that challenges the traditional reading (Vachkova 2017, pp. 114, 125-126). The identifying core of “heresy” is dislodged and, in a particular way, “brought closer” to Orthodoxy in several important steps. First is the historical continuity of alternative Christianity in the Balkan lands along the semantic trace: the Thracians – the Bulgarians – the other Christianity – the Church of Serdica – episcopo Domnio – episcopo Bonosius – the Bogomils. Relying on references to ancient Christian quasi-dualistic ideas (Vachkova 2017, pp. 127-128), the new thesis claims that Bogomilism represents not heresy but “an attempt to preserve apostolic traditions” (Vachkova 2017, p. 155). A central tenet of this identity is the dichotomy between charisma and institution, which is characterised by the imperial church’s suppression of charismatic Christianity, associated with the School of Alexandria and Origen, in favour of an institutionalised imperial Christian cult. This transformation of the role of the emperor from a deity of the pagan Roman Empire to an “external bishop” of the Christian empire is a significant aspect of this identity (Ivanova 2023, p. 26). Consequently, it is possible to interpret the emperor

and imperial Orthodoxy as representing world evil, in contrast to the “true Christians,” the “good people” who are persistently targeted, as depicted in the ancient Christian tradition (cf. Ivanova 2023, 45 – 46). The institution is opposed to the spirit, the macrocosm to the microcosm, the material temple to the heart-temple, the power of authority, ecclesiastical norms and piety to the inner light and development of the *bonus homo* (“good man,” cf. Kutzli 2023, pp. 101 – 102).

Secondly, there is the line of interpretation of the relationship-synthesis of Bogomilism-Orthodoxy, realised through iconographic image-codes read in a Bogomil key. Of particular pertinence for our purposes here is the capacity to draw parallels at the symbolic-imaginative level, by which a (Neo-)Bogomil identification can be inferred relevant to the question of the First Sin. The *topoi* selected from the thread of symbolic synthesis demonstrate such a bearing. The angelic essence associated with winged images of Christ and the Virgin Mary is re-identified in relation to the Bogomil understanding of the angelic essence of the human soul and being, and the Docetic view of salvation (Vachkova 2017, pp. 138, 141, 152; Ivanova 2023, p. 141; Angelov 1961, p. 110; Obolenski 1998, p. 87). The specifically Bogomil sacrament of *consolamentum* is imagined in the scene of the Baptism of Christ in the Jordan (Theophany, Epiphany). The stylised figure of the Baptist and the stylised serpent-demons under the Saviour’s feet are interpreted as a dualistically conceived victory over Satan by Christ (Vachkova 2017, p. 166). The interpretation of the ladder of St. John’s is developed in parallel with the Bogomil “ladder to heaven”, the sacred dance of the ascent *kolo*, and the Thracian “ladder to heaven” (tunnel) on the basis of external characteristics (Vachkova 2017, pp. 133 – 135; Ivanova 2023, p. 194). The *kephalophores*, which depict martyrs bearing their severed heads, are stylised in the key of the dualistically conceived being of liberation from matter (Vachkova 2017, p. 165), rather than as a mark of eschatology and resurrection in the flesh of the martyr. This line of iconographic identification and translation aims to refute the traditional view of the dualistic negation of icons and the cross. The iconography is imbued with the capacity to impart (Neo-)Bogomil messages, and the Cross is denied solely as an instrument of death, that is to say, the Crucifixion is rejected, while the “true” Cross of light, already associated with the Second Advent, is the object of veneration (Vachkova 2017, p. 119; Kutzli 2023, pp. 161 – 162, 164).

The third level of interpretation, which is based on the preceding two, reinterprets the categorisation of Bogomil’s doctrine by proposing a symbolic approach rather than a dogmatic one, which is referred to as opposition of “dualism or mystical realism” (Vachkova 2017, p. 174). The symbolic images employed by the Bogomils are regarded as mystic-realistic, encapsulating two realities within a single concept, rather than adhering to a dualistic perspective (Vachkova 2017, p. 178). Consequently, any accusation of dualism within the framework of New Bogomilism under scrutiny should be interpreted as a misinterpretation or a misreading of the symbolic codes employed. The mimicry

of dualism in Bogomil ethics, which allows for pretence and deception for a particular purpose,¹¹ has led to the assertion that the Bogomil is “indistinguishable from the Orthodox” (Vachkova 2017, p. 183). In this regard, the re-identification of Bogomilism in proximity to Hesychasm is of particular importance (Ivanova 2023, p. 141; Vachkova 2017, pp. 116 – 119).

The numerous visions and interpretative “appropriations” of iconographic and other elements that are compatible with and justify the identity of Neo-Bogomilism are stylised into a kind of stamp or “brand” of Bogomilism. The concept of a clandestine, esoteric doctrine that can be readily substantiated and visualised through the utilisation of semiotic systems can be interpreted as a postmodern strategy for constructing a reinterpretive simulacrum. In this paradigm, identified lacunae in controversial or unpopular historical facts can be effectively incorporated and re-compiled into a new historical narrative.

4. What (modern) dualism?

The challenge of the chosen topic necessitates a final self-reflection on the research method, which we have attempted to achieve in this stage by tracing some persistent topoi in the New Bogomil reinterpretation of the Old Bogomil topoi. The notion of Original Sin, as interpreted in the classical Bogomil text, particularly in the Secret Book and other apocryphal sources, can be understood as a distinct form of dualism that is both cosmogonic and anthropological in nature. A notable research thesis concerning Bogomil dualism posits that dualistic influences are inherently adaptable and dynamic, influenced by interactions with other sects, such as the Paulicians and the Manicheans (Stefan 2012, pp. 91– 92). Conversely, the academic New Bogomilistic synthesis proposes the concept of a more nuanced dualism, in which a non-dogmatic identification with early (seen as “non-dogmatic”) Christianity is implied, and hence the idea of a proximity between Orthodoxy (Hesychasm) and (New) Bogomilism is promoted, while the classical image of dualistic Bogomilism is defined as an anachronistic misunderstanding (Vachkova 2017, p. 10; cf. Obolenski 1998, p. 93).

The Neo-Bogomil thesis, which proposes a synthesis of Bogomil knowledge within an Orthodox framework and its subsequent influence in moderating the dualistic character, should be investigated as a system of topoi, encompassing verbal, figurative, and other aspects. However, this analysis should not be regarded as a system of dogmatic locations, given the hypothesis of the non-dogmatic nature of Bogomil identification.¹² In addition, there are references to the Bogomils in a general sense in other contemporary occult and esoteric teachings associated with certain media,¹³ which exhibit manifestations of a more rigid dualism. A notable point of divergence in the Neo-Bogomil interpretations pertains to the thesis that no persecution against the Bogomils ever transpired (Vachkova 2017, p. 111), thereby challenging the radical esotericist perspective that accuses the Church of perpetrat-

ing a grave sin by persecuting the Bogomils.¹⁴

The issue of Original Sin, as interpreted within Neo-Bogomilism as a pre-conditioned evil principle, reveals that the Bogomil tradition employs a distinct, non-dogmatic mode of expression, characterised by symbolism and paradox (fable). Consequently, the analysis and dialogue with this tradition necessitate a different “translation” and hermeneutics. Bogomilism can be understood as a non-dogmatic response to a dogmatic inquiry, such as the origin of evil and the soul of man (the conception), etc. In this sense, it can be seen as the antithesis of dogmatic thought, a hypostatized otherness (alter ego) of the dogmatic itself, inherently dualistic and “apophatic”. The notion of a cryptic spiritual doctrine, inaccessible to all, fosters the development of a malleable and elusive mimic identity, capable of readily evading dogmatism. This is exemplified by the Bogomil’s capacity for transmutation, as illustrated by the fabulous Boyan the Mage and the feigned Orthodox Bogomils, who, at a subsequent stage, also adopt an outward manifestation of Islam.

The image of the Bogomil in Neo-Bogomilism is reinterpreted through a cultural-historical construction that circumvents any dogmatism, effectively nullifying the very name of the Bogomils through the thesis of medieval misunderstanding of the doctrine, rendering it an almost empty topos and sema that must be refilled with different meanings. This re-actualisation engenders a renewed interest in Bogomilism, thereby opening up new avenues for research and establishing distinct areas of interest, even within its academic avant-garde. The implementation of this contemporary Bogomilism within the mainstream of Orthodoxy is sought through the thesis of proximity with Hesychasm.

The influence of Neo-Bogomilism should not be exaggerated, but neither should it be underestimated by reductive stylization to modern “fables.” On the one hand, New Bogomilism addresses the mass agnosticism (or non-dogmatism) characteristic of the milieu, secondly the obviousness and trivialisation of evil (the basis for dualistic intuitions), and thirdly the symbolic codes in the age of the image, the information society, and simulacrum (“fables” as language and medium). Indeed, the dualism of the New Bogomilistic homo bonus in a particular way also implies the “dualism” of the contemporary homo informaticus, who desires technological immortality, liberation from the body, illness and infirmity. The contemporary Bogomilism seems to offer a view of man as a higher “technology” called to perfection in overcoming the “game,” the “system,” or the “matrix.” The contemporary “play-man” has transcended his existential centre beyond the body and its divine iconicity, potentially virtualising his “self” to the point of “disembodiment” or “reincarnation”. This suggests that dualism is evolving into a technological reality that supersedes eschatology. Consequently, within the context of a de-iconised human entity shaped “in the image of God,” it is the three-word true Gospel of John that offers solace and hope in the face of existential desolation – The “Word became flesh” (John 1:14).

NOTES

1. A common place (see e.g., Brockett 2013, p. 86; Vachkova 2017, p. 116; Gecheva 2007, p. 66; Ivanova 2023, p. 133 etc.) that is disputed, however, by a number of contemporary scholars, representative of Reformed theology.
2. E.g. apocrypha, dream books, divinations, compilations of Talmudic, Gnostic, Manichaean narratives and creations synthesized with images and ideas from Slavic heritage (E.Stefan 2012, pp. 81 – 87).
3. Already Athanasius of Jerusalem (13th century) called the works of Bogomil “false fables” (E.Stefan 2012, pp. 80 – 81).
4. “I believe in God, but not in the church, the institution” - this idea is widespread in today’s Bulgaria. This idea is also connected with the understanding that the church is a “superfluous costly social structure” which is not necessary for the communication between man and God (cf. Ivanova 2023, p. 159).
5. According to another version, the soul is acquired by agreement from God, see in Zigabenus (Angelov et al. 1967, p. 75).
6. Such an interpretation is categorically rejected by Orthodox theology, as explicitly mentioned in an official text such as the Synaxarion of Cheesefare Sunday, when the expulsion of Adam from paradise is commemorated (see Triod Postnaya [I], M. 2002, fol. 73r).
7. According to the Vienna Text of the Secret Book, §5, which is missing in the Carcassonne text, where only the intercourse of Adam and Eve takes place (cf. Angelov et al. 1967, pp. 101 – 102).
8. Cf. fragments of Zigabenus, *Panoplia Dogmatica* (Angelov et al. 1967, 75,77).
9. Different versions in Zygabenus and the Secret Book (cf. Angelov 1961, p. 108).
10. The thesis posits that the supernatural charismatic abilities of the “perfect ones” manifest as “magic” to others, yet in reality represent a form of higher science, interconnected with cosmic energy. This notion finds parallels in contemporary scientific thought, as reflected in the works of Nikola Tesla (cf. Ivanova 2023, pp. 185 – 186, 188, 201).
11. The so-called “salvation at all costs” formula (cf. Vachkova 2017, pp. 230, 267).
12. The thesis that the Bogomils have no established dogma and cult at all (E.Stefan 2012, 68-9).
13. Such media as “Videlei” (<https://videlei.com/>), “Portal 12” (<https://portal12.bg/>) etc.
14. A common place in numerous texts and sources, available online, i.e. in: Pet’r D’nov: *Uchitelyat, Lechitelyat, Prorok’t* – Peter Dunov: The Teacher, the Healer, the Prophet [in Bulgarian], vol. 3, Stara Zagora, 2009, p. 19. Digital surrogate available from https://stariknigi.bg/pdf_viewer/web/viewer.php?pid=Uchitelyat_Lechitelyat_Prorokat_t3 [Viewed 2024-3-3].

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