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THE ROLE OF BOGOMILISM IN THE THEOLOGICAL DEBATE BETWEEN PIETISTS AND ORTHODOX LUTHERANS

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Abstract. This study explores the connection between the medieval religious movement and the theology of the early Enlightenment – an aspect that has only been marginally addressed in scholarly research. First, it examines the work and influence of the radical Pietist Gottfried Arnold (1666 – 1714), who became known as a defender of all forms of heresy through his *Unpartheyische Kirchen- und Ketzer-Historie*. Opposing him stands the Wittenberg Byzantinist Johann Christoph Wolf (1683 – 1739), a central figure who, through his writings particularly his *Historia Bogomilorum* (1699 – 1715) – offered a new perspective in defending true church doctrine. This will be explored in the second and concluding part of the following article.

Keywords: Orthodox Lutherans; Pietism; Bogomils; Gottfried Arnold; Johann Christoph Wolf; Heresiography

Introduction

A rapprochement with the Eastern Churches from the Lutheran side allowed for a new approach to sources from the Early Church, which Martin Luther (1483 – 1546) referred to in his debate with the Catholic theologian Johannes Eck (1486 – 1543) in the summer of 1519. Luther used, among other things, the testimonies of the Church Fathers to refute claims about papal supremacy,¹ arguing that the Greek Church “continues the continuity of the Ancient Church”.²

Even more influential was the detailed engagement with the Eastern Church by Luther’s colleague and humanist Philipp Melanchthon (1497 – 1560), who, believing that the Church Fathers were closest to the biblical language, undertook intensive source research to relate the Church Fathers’ teachings to the Lutheran understanding of Scripture. In this search for the true identity of the Church and the alignment of the Church Fathers with the Bible, the understanding of heresy is reflected in numerous references to contemporary discussions, an understanding that, fundamentally, was the same as Luther’s and that of the Early Church. For Melanchthon, heresy was any deviation from the truth of Scripture, as was evident

in the “theological innovators” such as Nikolaus Storch († after 1536) from Zwickau. Storch even accused Melanchthon of being the beginning of the Church’s problems, claiming that he had spread a revelation contrary to Scripture – that “the saints should rebel against the authorities”.³

Following such false revelations and distorting the testimony of Scripture by attempting to correct it with human reason was understood by Melanchthon as heresy.⁴ To prevent heresy, Melanchthon believed that, alongside knowledge of ancient languages, submission to Christ and the Church’s teachings was necessary. An equally important and decisive interest in the authentic sources of the Early Church, which significantly influenced the further reception of ancient heresiography, can be observed during the early Enlightenment period. The only relevant literary references that can be found are a few articles by the already cited Günter Mühlpfordt, who did excellent preliminary work for further research projects. In his article *Bogomilenforschung zur Zeit der Aufklärung* (Bogomil Research in the Age of Enlightenment), Mühlpfordt pointed out an important underlying idea: the Bogomils were always instrumentalized by the respective parties, which inevitably led to the creation of various imaginations about this religious movement.⁵

Radical Pietist Gottfried Arnold as an originator of the new perspective on the Bogomils

Later, with the growing interest in sources reflecting the undisputed teachings of the Eastern Church, a more in-depth engagement with the old “errors” becomes apparent errors that were sometimes even considered true and “orthodox” by their nature. Such a new perspective emerged within the Pietist movement, which aimed to “renew the Christian life of both the individual believer and the Church as a whole”.⁶

Already in the work of the philosopher Christian Thomasius (1655 – 1728), who, according to Günter Mühlpfordt, was the first to “represent the natural law Enlightenment in Halle,” one finds the effort to rehabilitate the ancient heretics. He, along with other representatives of nonconformist thought, came to the university town of Halle, where they found a refuge for dissenters. Over time, this contributed to the establishment of Halle as a center of Pietism.⁷ Thomasius’s rejection of confessionalism marked a decisive break in theological thought. This opposition to clericalism allowed his students and successors to adopt a new perspective on heretics condemned by Christianity, fostering a newfound sympathy toward them. Jakob Thomasius (1622 – 1684) also contributed to the in-depth study of heresies. In his work *Schediasma historicum* (1665), he used Christian sources to argue against scholastic and mystical theology, asserting that these were products of pagan philosophy and significantly harmful to Christianity.⁸ As an example, he considers the Manichaeans to belong to the *gentilis error* because they claim that the Christian doctrine of creation – that all beings were created out of nothing – does not correspond to the truth.⁹

The inclination toward heretics and self-identification with them is evident in the theologian and radical Pietist Gottfried Arnold (1666 – 1714).¹⁰ In his work *Die Erste Liebe* (First Love) (1696), he examined the teachings of the Bogomils, drawing on *De haeresibus* by John of Damascus († 759) and other writings.¹¹ He critically questioned the orthodox view that one should “not examine dogma out of curiosity” and that striving for the simplicity of faith was not a proper path to true belief.¹² According to Arnold, those who practiced a strict way of life were “called Bogomili by the godless priests”. He then presents various translations of the name “Bogomili”. Arnold further compares the Bogomils to other heretical groups such as the Messalians, as they also tended toward a simplicity of faith, praying “without ceasing, namely without doubt in their hearts”,¹³ as per Scripture. For Arnold, the primary reason for the blessedness of the Bogomils lies in their severe persecution, which he sees as clear evidence of the decline of the Eastern Church.

Moreover, in his *Unpartheyische Kirchen- und Ketzer-Historie* (1699 – 1715), Arnold reached the same conclusion – namely, that all heresies persecuted by the state church were bearers of the true faith. Of particular interest is his reference to “a sect of Basil, friends of a *medici*, who were called “Bogomilos”, as they refused to bind themselves to common errors and doctrines”.¹⁴ The reason for this selection of heretics was likely the fact that Bogomilism was “the most distinct and widespread heresy” in the Byzantine Empire and continued to gain followers during the High Middle Ages.¹⁵ Engagement with the literature and teachings of the Bogomils had already advanced considerably in Arnold’s lifetime, particularly due to Byzantine heresiography by Euthymios Zigabenos, “whose knowledge Arnold had acquired through Friedrich Spanheim (1632 – 1701)¹⁶ and Kaspar Sagittarius (1643 – 1694)”.¹⁷ As Jürgen Büchsel noted, Arnold’s aim was to portray Christians who demonstrated true obedience to God and His eternal truths. However, according to the Bogomil understanding, enlightenment through the Spirit was indispensable, as it ultimately enabled the impartiality of the church community.¹⁸ Impartiality thus became the instrument for creating a “pan-Pietist community,” which sought independence from the ruling church while simultaneously engaging in resistance against it.

According to Arnold, true Christians’ aversion to the decaying church only emerged in the 4th century, when members of the state church sought only material well-being and confined doctrine to “concepts and terms”.¹⁹ Meanwhile, heretics were persecuted because they refused to accept such artificial terminology as Christian. Through this reversal of its original function, the church itself transformed into a kind of inquisitorial institution. Arnold subsumed the Bogomils under this category of unjustly persecuted heretics, seeing them, in contrast to the state church, as a striking model of an exemplary Christian community. Another reason for his extraordinary affinity toward the Bogomils was the religious principle of the “Christianity of Action” (*das Christentum der Tat*), according to which life and faith must be in

harmony.²⁰ Arnold sought this faith model in the strict, even ascetic, lifestyle of the Bogomils, who rebelled against overweening clerics and hypocritical Christians, thus resembling the first Christian confessors. In Arnold's broadest sense, the Bogomils functioned as proto-Pietists in the Western world, representing all heretics within the sphere of the Eastern Church.²¹ The deliberate embedding of the Bogomil narrative into contemporary debates aimed to discredit the opposing party by invoking the ascetic lifestyle of the Byzantine Bogomils. This is evident in the instrumentalization of key terms central to later debates: when Arnold speaks of Bogomils, he implicitly refers to Pietists; consequently, their opponents are branded as the persecutors of the Bogomils, namely "overweening clerics and hypocritical Christians".²²

Johann Christoph Wolf as an "Orthodox" Opposition to the Bogomils

The concept of Christianity constructed by Arnold was criticized by the Wittenberg theologian, Byzantinist, Orientalist, and a representative of Lutheran "Orthodoxy"²³ Johann Christoph Wolf (1683 – 1739)²⁴ in his work *Historia Bogomilorum*, published in Wittenberg in 1712.²⁵ This work sparked an extensive debate between Pietists and representatives of Lutheran orthodoxy. Wolf had already laid the groundwork for his depiction of the Bogomils in his earlier engagement with Manichaeism in Hamburg, which was published in 1707 as *Manichaeismus ante Manichaeos*, alongside his critique of the French Enlightenment philosopher Pierre Bayle (1647 – 1706). Furthermore, one can consider Wolf's *Absurda Hallensia* as a work of opposition, in which he subjects the erroneous views of Halle professors to sharp criticism. This work is relevant because the opinion it presents represents the entire Lutheran Orthodoxy. Wolf attacks many theologians from Halle, among them the proponents of Arnold's *Ketzerhistorie*. This alone attests to the fact that the Bogomil reference – placing Wolf among the Messalians – was well-known and widely spread.²⁶ For example, he reproached Jakob Spener, one of the most prominent founders and representatives of Pietism, for not having read *Ketzerhistorie*, which led to his ignorance and fallacies about heresies. Therefore, Halle's theologians should focus on refuting heresies, not defending them.²⁷

From Wolf's perspective, the Pietists have fallen into many heresies precisely because they accept everything that aligns with Scripture. The Bogomils play a key role in this, as their way of life directly corresponds to the teachings of the Gospel. In this sense, Wolf argues, they could even accept the Quran, since much of it also aligns with the Bible.²⁸ This point of criticism is of essential importance in the context of the early Enlightenment because, for the Enlightenment thinkers, Scripture became the dogmatic foundation. For orthodox Lutherans, however, the Bible had to be interpreted strictly according to the so-called apostolic method, meaning that all figurative and typological statements in the Gospel were to be replaced with clear and comprehensible concepts.²⁹

As a close friend of Johann Albert Fabricius (1668 – 1736),³⁰ who facilitated access to anti-Bogomil writings through his *Bibliotheca Graeca* (1705 – 1728) in Hamburg, Wolf was the first scholar to make a significant contribution to the academic study of the Bogomils through his strong command of Greek. However, despite his excellent knowledge of ancient Greek, the objective portrayal of the Bogomils was hindered by the fact that Wolf and his like-minded scholars had access only to anti-Bogomil texts. By examining Greek manuscript sources in the Bodleian Library (Oxford), Wolf gained an overview of early heresiographical accounts and contextualized the Bogomils within the contemporary polemic against G. Arnold. Using *Panoplia dogmatike* by Euthymios Zigabenos († after 1118) – whose critique of the Bogomils Wolf fully incorporated – alongside *Alexias* by Anna Komnene († 1153)³¹, *De opinionibus haereticorum* by Constantine Harmenopulos († 1385)³² and other works, Wolf attempted to reconstruct the origins and doctrines of the heresy according to the scholarly standards of the Enlightenment. Notably, in this context, Wolf bases his *Historia* on the long-established work of the Church Father Augustine († 430), *De haeresibus*. Specifically, he uses Chapter 46, the section on the Manichaeans, as the foundation for the three-part structure underlying his study: 1. *Origo* (Origin); 2. *Doctrina* (Doctrine); 3. *Mores* (Morals).³³ Already in the Middle Ages, *De haeresibus* enjoyed great popularity and was instrumental in the assessment of all forms of heresy.³⁴ Many new religious movements, which were difficult to identify according to medieval standards, were equated with the Manichaeans – *De haeresibus* serving as a key reference in this process. A pioneer in this regard was Adémar of Chabannes († 1034), who referred to a group of heretics active in Aquitaine during his lifetime as Manichaeans. These individuals rejected Christian baptism and the power of the cross (*negantes baptismum sanctum et crucis virtutem*),³⁵ which already suggests a Bogomil influence. In fact, Daniel Callahan has unequivocally demonstrated that the so-called Manichaeans mentioned by Adémar could have been none other than the Bogomils. It has already been established that a sect was active in the French Périgord region, whose doctrines and customs closely aligned with those of the Bogomils:

“Both groups had no use for the Mass or sacraments, especially the Eucharist. Both groups abstained from meat and wine. Each had a strong aversion to the cross or depiction of the human Christ. Both were averse to entering churches as places of worship. Both condemned worldly wealth. Both could make simple rustics intellectually able to defend their new beliefs”.³⁶

This sect could have later spread to Orléans as well, as Adémar himself reports, referring to them as “*rusticus* from Périgord”.³⁷ The heretics of Orléans, though practicing in secrecy, were also opposed to the teachings and person of Christ. All these findings suggest a certain influence of the Bogomils on the medieval West, as well as the reception of Augustine’s *De haeresibus*, which was also used by Wolf – though with a more elaborate argumentation.

In the introduction to his *Historia*, Wolf already points to the goal of his study: he aims to prove that the information about the Bogomils in Euthymios Zigabenos' writings is reliable and irrefutable. Wolf seeks to counter Arnold's view, who, due to his "malice, uncontrollable temper, and tendency to invent new heresies", dared to question Zigabenos' work.³⁸ Beginning with the name "Bogomili", J.C. Wolf attempts to demonstrate that Arnold's misunderstanding of this sect is indicative of his lack of knowledge of the Greek language. As a trained philologist and Orientalist, Wolf carefully approaches the sources and emphasizes that the evidence provided by the Greek Church, in contrast to Arnold, who accused the Greek Church of fabrication, forgery, and the inconsistency of its sources, remains uncontested. Arnold primarily focused on the fact that Basileios, the leader of the Byzantine Bogomils, was burned, while other heretics who sided with him were allowed to live.³⁹ Wolf relies on F. Spanheim and other scholars in his circle who distinguish the fabricated aspects of the Bogomil narrative from the truth, which Arnold apparently failed to do. This especially concerns the name "Bogomili", which Arnold mistakenly derives from the Bulgarian language, meaning "beloved by God".⁴⁰ Since the name has an appealing sound, the heretics were drawn to it. However, their main aim was to distort the truth, a task which the founder of this group eagerly undertook. Therefore, in Wolf's view, it is more likely that the name "Bogomili" originated from the name of the founder of the sect, as was the case with the Manichaeans and Mohammedans.⁴¹

Regarding the doctrine of the Bogomils, Wolf accuses Arnold of supporting the absurdity of the Bogomils, particularly the belief in representing God in human form. For Wolf, the important issue is that Zigabenos is not the only witness to this doctrine; other supporters of this heresy existed at various times.⁴² According to Wolf, the rejection of the person of Christ led the Bogomils to invent their own Christ, who, by nature, only appeared to have a body. In these and other statements, the Bogomils were said to imitate the Manichaeans. Wolf also associates Arnold as an advocate for the heretics who interpreted the human nature of Christ in a fantastical manner.⁴³ Wolf links this to the dualistic doctrine of good and evil, which, in his view, strongly suggests a Manichaean origin.⁴⁴ As justification for why Euthymios omits or refrains from providing an expanded account, Wolf adds at the end of his section on the teachings of the Bogomils that he had been forbidden to bring to light all the follies of the Bogomils.⁴⁵

In the concluding section on the morals of the Bogomils, various forms of their false morality are presented, which were quite obviously also directed at the Pietists. For instance, Wolf refrains from listing examples of pseudo-piety (*pietatis speciem*) from his own time, stating that there were already more than enough.⁴⁶ This is hardly surprising, as the entire work was intended to challenge the false claims of the Pietists, portraying them as the modern-day Bogomils.

Results

This study attempted to highlight the discrepancies between the Pietists and the Lutherans by examining the transmission of the Bogomil doctrine, which became a subject of theological disputes. In the introductory section, we observed that interest in Eastern theology stemmed from the Protestant belief that it represented the true Christian doctrine. These efforts translated into action when Pietists began to engage extensively with ancient heresies. Gottfried Arnold viewed all heresies as parts of the true Church, whereas the “Orthodox” Lutherans sided with the official (partisan) Church on this issue.

Arnold’s opponent, Johann Christoph Wolf, wrote his work *History of the Bogomils* to provide a well-founded response to Pietism – namely, to prove that Bogomilism was and remained a heresy. To achieve this, Wolf utilized both Byzantine and contemporary sources, analyzing them through philological and historical methods in accordance with Enlightenment scholarly standards. However, in his three-part treatise, the Bogomils were indirectly compared to the Pietists, as Wolf applied his intermediate conclusions to the latter. This creates a coherent picture of a largely unknown debate in the early Enlightenment, in which the Bogomils, as one of the most prominent medieval sects, played a significant role.

NOTES

1. Luther 1884, p. 276.
2. Benz 1952, p. 9.
3. Kuropka 2002, pp. 108 – 109.
4. Kuropka 2002, pp. 110 – 112.
5. Mühlpfordt 1968, pp. 255 – 262.
6. Otte 2021, p. 18.
7. Mühlpfordt 1968, p. 256; Mühlpfordt 1987, p. 43.
8. Häfner 1997, p. 156.
9. Thomasius 1665, p. 13, §19c.
10. The following work is significant for the life and career of Gottfried Arnold as a theologian, as well as for his main work: Dibelius 1873.
11. Arnold 1696.
12. Joh. Damasc., *De haeresibus*, 88, 4 – 6: Ἀγαθὸν οὖν ἐστὶ μᾶλλον ἀπλουστέως τινὰ πορεύεσθαι καὶ μηδὲν δόγμα γνωστικῆς πραγματείας πολυπραγμονεῖν. Kotter 1981, p. 57.
13. Arnold 1696, p. 460.
14. Arnold 1699, p. 392.
15. Mühlpfodt 1995, p. 212.
16. Spanheim 1689, pp. 526 – 527.
17. Illert 2023, p. 83. Among other things, K. Sagittarius presented an important compilation of historical sources that provided the Pietists with access to the key passages about the Bogomils. See Sagittarius 1718, pp. 21 – 25.

18. Büchsel 1970, p. 81.
19. Büchsel 1970, p. 86.
20. Mühlpfodt 1995, p. 206.
21. Mühlpfodt 1995, p. 210.
22. Mühlpfodt 1995, p. 215.
23. As Christian Witt aptly noted, the term “Orthodoxy” is a complex construct that consists of “historical, theological, and institutional” aspects. In the context of early modern religious processes, this term assumes significant importance, as it becomes a standard for theology that meets the requirements of Protestantism and thus forms a contrast to the term Heterodoxy. In other words, “Orthodoxy” stands in opposition to heresy and represents pure, doctrinal teaching within the Church, presenting its principles as “singularly orthodox”. Witt 2021, p. 45. In Arnold’s work, the distinction between “true” and “false” also becomes apparent: “He is able to distinguish ‘true’ from ‘false’ Orthodoxy”; the latter, as a label, is then applied to his contemporary opponents. Witt 2021, p. 65.
24. J.C. Wolf is best known for his four-volume work *Bibliotheca Hebraea* (1715 – 1733), a comprehensive bibliography of Jewish literature that remains a valuable reference for Judaic studies. In this work, he cataloged numerous Hebrew manuscripts and printed books, analyzed their contents, and provided an overview of Jewish scholars and their works.
25. Furthermore, it must be stated that the *Historia* by J.C. Wolf, in this regard, not only holds particular significance for the research of the Bogomilism but also reveals a lively interest in the teachings of the Bogomils among other theologians such as Anton Winckler (1637 – 1707), Johann Albert Fabricius (1587 – 1617), Samuel Andreae (1640 – 1699), Herman Witsius (1636-1708), and others. These theologians are important witnesses to the intensive engagement with Bogomils’ ideas and their relation to the transformation of the term “heresy”. Despite this, they have received little attention in contemporary scholarly literature, much like the writings published after G. Arnold’s *Ketzerhistorie*. Breul 2021, p. 32.
26. Wolf 1707, p. 146.
27. Wolf 1707, p. 148.
28. Wolf 1707, p. 178.
29. Reinhardt 1970, pp. 12 – 14.
30. According to the Lutheran theologian Johann Thieß, Fabricius worked in Hamburg as a professor of morality and eloquence and authored several theological and philological works. Thieß 1783, p. 174, §168. In Hamburg, which was considered a stronghold of “Orthodox” scholarship, he met Wolf and had a significant influence on him.
31. For Anna Komnene, the Bogomils were those who “feigned virtue”: Anna Komnene, *Alexias*, 15, 8. Reinsch 2001, pp. 539 – 542.
32. Constantine Harmenopoulos was a canonist in Thessaloniki who became famous for his canonical collection *Hexabiblos*, which enjoyed great popularity in Byzantium as a handbook. See Fögen 1992, p. 902. Among his polemical works is *De opinionibus haereticorum*, which was transmitted, for example, by the theologian Johann von Fuchte (1568 – 1622). This comprehensive work

- lists many heresies and provides commentary on them. After a brief note on the name of the heresy, Harmenopoulos refers to the Bogomils as *pars sectae Masalianorum* and points to their rejection of both the Old and New Testaments.
33. See Mühlpfordt 1968, p. 257.
 34. For an extended reception history of *De haeresibus*, see: Kudella 2022, pp. 159 – 164.
 35. Adémar de Chabannes, *Chronicon* 3,49. Bourgain 1999, p. 170.
 36. Callahan 2006, p. 36.
 37. Callahan 2006, p. 36.
 38. Wolf 1712, pp. A2 – A3.
 39. Arnold 1699, p. 392.
 40. Wolf 1712, pp. 2-3.
 41. Wolf 1712, p. 5.
 42. Wolf 1712, p. 56.
 43. Wolf 1712, p. 62.
 44. Wolf 1712, pp. 76 – 77.
 45. Wolf 1712, p. 98.
 46. Wolf 1712, p. 129.

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