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ICONOCLASM IN DUALISTIC HERESIES ACCORDING TO ANTI-HERETICAL WRITINGS IN EASTERN THEOLOGY FROM 10TH TO THE BEGINNING OF 13TH CENTURY

Boriana Nanova

Sofia University “St Kliment Ohridski”

Abstract. The present study aims to show the main arguments in the criticism of iconoclasm in some dualistic heresies in the works of Orthodox authors from the period 10th – 12th and the beginning of the 13th century. Via the analysis of dogmatic-polemical and anti-heretical works of Orthodox writers from the indicated period, the task of the present study is to prove the failure and lack of foundation of the heretical iconoclastic views of the representatives of the various dualistic heresies, especially in Bulgaria and Eastern Byzantine Empire. The veneration of holy images is based on the dogma of the Incarnation of God, which is fundamental in Orthodox understanding of the icon. The incarnation of the Word of God and the creation of man in the image of God are a prerequisite and basis for the likeness of God, hence for the depiction of the Mother of God, the saints and all the holy disembodied heavenly powers.

Keywords: iconoclasm; dualistic heresies; anti-heretical writings; icon veneration

Iconoclasm

Iconoclasm was a heresy that emerged during the reign of Emperor Leo III the Syrian (717 – 741) and his son Constantine V Copronymus (741 – 775), who, together with their supporters and followers, undertook the open persecution of icons and monasticism, which, in the words of protopresbyter John Meyendorff, was the core of “Christian nonconformism” (Meyendorff 1975, pp. 173 – 192). A dogmatic controversy was provoked, especially in clerical circles, which led to an open war against icons.

There are several reasons, and they are mostly socio-political and religious. Among the religious reasons, some practices that have caused controversy and confrontation are those that have displaced the essence of icon veneration, replacing them with an incorrect attitude towards the holy images. For example, the celebration of the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist on icons by clerics, instead

of on a consecrated Holy Altar, or the placing of scraped paint from icons in Holy Communion, and other practices.

In the first decades of the 8th century, the bishops of Asia Minor - Constantine Nacoliyski (from Phrygia), Thomas of Claudiopolis and Theodosius of Ephesus – were negatively disposed towards icon veneration. According to some researchers, an indirect influence on their ideology during this period was exerted by Paulicianism, which had the largest number of followers in this region (Koev, Bakalov 1967, pp. 130 – 136).

Among the heretical dualistic movements – Paulicianism, Manichaeism, Messalianism, and most of all Bogomilism, which are the subject of consideration in this article, there is a clear opposition to the basic dogmas of the Orthodox Church, including the dogma of icon veneration.

A prerequisite for the likeness of God is the Incarnation and birth of the Only Begotten Son of God. The consideration of this theological question, of course, requires a twofold understanding and explanation. The incarnation is a mystery. God is immeasurable, indescribable and boundless, (“...*You have neither heard His voice at any time nor seen His form*” (John. 5:37), and at the same time He is able to be depicted.

We see that the Christological dogma is always at the root of the icon problem. “*No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him*” (John. 1:18).

Based on Christology, the Orthodox understanding of the icon refers to the twofold truth about God. On the one hand, He is invisible and indescribable. At the same time, with the Incarnation of the Logos, of the Son of God, through and in Christ, God becomes visible to people (Yevtich, ep. Athanasius, pp. 23 – 64), which explains how it is possible for Him to be depicted.

In the Holy Scriptures of the New Testament, Christ is the Image of the Father (Tollefsen 2018, p. 125). The Son appears as the icon of God the Father, with Whom he is identical in everything, “differing only in hypostasis”¹. With the icon of Christ, the question of the depiction of God, who is by nature inimageable, is raised.

The Christology of the iconoclasts (Nestorians) distorts the truth about God by claiming that “if Christ paradoxically assumed flesh in His own hypostasis, but flesh without characteristics features, because it does not indicate someone, but rather a universal man: how then is it possible for this flesh to be found tangible and to be portrayed in different colors?” (St. Theodore Studites, Antiretucus 3)².

To this and other untenable questions, in his dogmatic-polemical writings, and especially in Discourses against the iconoclasts, St. Theodore the Studite (759 – 826) responds with eloquent and logical arguments in favor of icon veneration. He uses both positive and negative arguments, with which he leads his opponents to absurd and untenable conclusions.

Using the apophatic method of explanation, he joins the statement that “God is infinite, limitless, formless, boundless” and has no external image (Tollefsen,

pp. 67 – 68). However, when the Son of God, because of His ineffable goodness towards us, became incarnate and became man, took on a human form and became like us, then the union of the unjoinable, the indescribable with the describable, the unlimited with the limited, the eternal with the temporal took place. Therefore, the Lord Jesus Christ is depicted in icons and the invisible becomes visible.

St. John of Damascus, in his work “Three Words in Defense of Icons”, adds another anthropological level to the icon, saying that man is also an icon because he is created in the image and likeness of God. “God Himself first made an image and showed it. Because He created the first man in the image of God” (St. John of Damascus, 2019)³.

At the Seventh Council of Nicaea (787), the main dogmatic “oros” related to icon veneration was presented very clearly. It reads as follows: “Thus, he who venerates the icon venerates the hypostasis of the person depicted on it” (Lossky 2013, p. 67).

God is unknowable and inaccessible, and yet man can communicate with Him. This antinomic relationship is characteristic of Christian mysticism and defines the question of the “attainability of the unattainable nature” (Lossky 2013, p. 67). That is, the Incarnation of the Word of God and the creation of man in God’s image, are the prerequisite and basis for the imageability of God.

Furthermore, “the honor rendered to an image passes to its prototype”, as in the words of St. John of Damascus, “the prototype is that which depicts, from which the depicted arises” (St. John of Damascus, 89; IV 16).

The existence of veneration for the icon of Christ is also conditioned “by the significance of the Mother of God, whose consent, “...*behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word*” (Luke 1:38), is a necessary circumstance for the Incarnation, which is the reason for God to become visible and describable” (Uspensky 2006, p. 121). According to the holy fathers, the depiction of the God-man Christ is based precisely on the imageability of His Mother.

Dualistic heresies

The main dualistic heresies in early Christianity were Gnosticism and Manichaeism, which in the 10th century degenerated into neo-Manichaeism and served as the basis for other dualistic heresies. In the Middle Ages, the most widespread were the Paulician and Bogomil heresies, which penetrated the Balkans through old Bulgarian and apocryphal literature, and later spread to other countries such as France, Italy, etc.

In this study, we will examine the gnostic-dualistic traditions and views of representatives of the heresies that preceded Bogomilism, such as Manichaeism, Paulicianism, Messalianism, and most of all, Bogomilism itself.

The Paulicians denied the Divine Incarnation and claimed that Christ “almost did not exist,” that He was a pronounceable word, but that He received existence from

Maria in the flesh (St. John of Damascus, 717 A, 65). At the same time, they did not recognize the ever-virginity of the Holy Mother of God, denying the prophecies in the Holy Scriptures, claiming that they did not refer to the Holy Virgin. This claim of theirs completely rejects the dogma of the Incarnation, which is the basis and prerequisite for icon veneration.

The Manichaeans' claim regarding the God-Man Christ, is that He appeared and suffered seemingly. They completely denied the sacred books of the Old Testament, and with it the prophecies of His appearance in the flesh. They affirmed the veneration of the sun and the moon, claiming that the world originated from good and evil, as eternally existing, and that not the whole world, but a part of it, originated from God (St. John of Damascus, 720B, 66).

The Massalians (prayers, or eutyches), which included other Hellenic heresies, denied the Church, baptism, the sacraments, the holy images, and the entire liturgical life, claiming that they could receive grace from the Holy Spirit without being baptized. They recognized only prayer, and above all the Lord's Prayer ("Our Father"). They lived an ascetic life, but "broke their vows without remorse" (St. John of Damascus, 736C) and slightly neglected excommunications.

They claim that two powers dwell together in man, and that even the apostles were not free from the influence of one of them (i.e. the power of evil). For them, evil is evil by nature. Regarding the creation of man, they believed that "man must acquire two souls, one common with other men and one heavenly" (St. John of Damascus, 736A-D).

The distorted idea of the representatives of these three dualistic heresies regarding the Incarnation, as well as their idea of the creation of man and creation, are the basis of their iconoclastic sentiments. This is because icon veneration stems primarily from the dogma of the Incarnation of the Son of God, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, from the Virgin Mary, and also from the dogma of the creation of man in the image of God.

Anti-heretical writings

Evidence of the Paulician heresy, which arose in the period 7th – 12th centuries in the Eastern Roman Empire and in the Arab Caliphate, are the early sources: "Letters" of Patriarch Photius, who calls the Paulicians – Manichaeans, "Tractate" of Peter the Monk, and the "History" of Peter of Sicily, who for some time was the representative of Byzantium to the Paulicians.

Early Byzantine sources consider Paulicianism to be a variant of Manichaeism. At the same time, some of the religious views of the Paulicians contrasted with those of the Manichaeans, especially in terms of iconoclasm, rejection of Church hierarchy, and asceticism.

A characteristic feature of the Paulician doctrine is the so-called docetism. They rejected the Incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ in the flesh, led an ascetic life,

but also rejected the sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. They did not revere the sacred books of the Old Testament, but fully recognized the Four Gospels and the Apostle, knowing their texts by heart, which they considered to be true baptism.

Later, in the 12th century, the Byzantine church writer Euthymius Zigabenus made a comprehensive refutation of the views of Paulicianism in his anti-heretical corpus “Panoplia Dogmatica” or “Full Armour of Belief”.

A key moment in the religious doctrine of the Paulicians, in Zigabenus’ work, is the rejection of the human nature of the Lord Jesus Christ, considering Him to be the word of God the Father, sent into the material world, and call His Incarnation an appearance. They identified the Lord Jesus Christ with Archangel Michael. Paulicians viewed the world as a dualistic paradigm. That is, everything material is evil, and the world of ideas is good, created by God the Father.

(The influence of Paulicianism was strongest in the 9th century. In the following centuries, the Paulicians, as a result of the Crusades, settled in other parts of the empire, especially in its border areas, forming a lasting community in the Balkans with its center in Philippopolis).

One of the early anti-heretical works “Useful History, Refutation, and Overthrow of the Hollow and Foolish Heresy of the Manichaeans, who are also called Paulicians, dedicated to the Archbishop of Bulgaria” by Peter of Sicily (Peter Sikeliotes, or Πέτρος Σικελιώτης), was completed in 872 AD.

In the preface to the Patriarch of Bulgaria, concerning the Incarnation, refuting the heretics’ claim that Christ descended from heaven, he writes the following: Christ did not descend His body from heaven, but received it on earth, which does not distinguish it from our bodies. By crucifying Himself on the Cross, He irrigated the earth with drops of His Holy Blood, making it fragrant. All this He brought as a gift to the human race for salvation, by inflicting a mortal wound in the heart of the enemy (Bartikian 1961, p. 122).

With the coming to earth of our Lord Jesus Christ, and through his communion with us, all idolatry is “thrown out.” Heretics, he (Peter of Sicily) says, including Paul of Samosata, serve numerous, diverse, and vile idols, but the time of true knowledge of God is coming (Bartikian 1961, p. 120).

In Orthodox theology, the view of icon veneration, as we have mentioned, is based on the idea of the Incarnation. At the heart of this dogma is another key moment that allows for the likeness of God, and that is the creation of man in the image of God.

The recognition of the Mother of God as the Holy Virgin – Theotokos, also has a close connection with Christological dogma, and hence with icon veneration and iconology, as well as with eschatology or the image of the future Kingdom.

By denying the perpetual virginity of the Holy Mother, who remained always a Virgin, before, during, and after the birth of her Divine Son, the Paulicians

denied the divine origin of the Lord Jesus Christ, and thus the dogma of man's salvation.

Moreover, they not only did not glorify the ever-virginity of the Holy Mother of God, not honoring her "even among the common people", but they claimed that "Christ was not born from her, but He received His body from heaven" (Bartikian 1961, p. 124).

The claim that after the Divine Birth, the Holy Mother of God gave birth to another son with Joseph, renders meaningless the Christological basis of the Orthodox faith and its eschatological essence.

The Paulicians did not recognize the testimonies of the prophets who foretold the coming of Christ into the world and His Birth by the Holy Virgin Mary. They denied the image and power of the honorable Cross of Christ. They did not recognize icons and the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, which in the Orthodox understanding with its iconicity is a pre-rendering of the Kingdom of God. The Paulicians convinced their supporters that at the Last Supper, Christ gave His disciples not bread and wine, but His "symbolic messages" in the form of bread and wine (Bartikian 1961, p. 125).

Similar to Paulineism was the heresy of Manichaeism (3rd century). An early dualistic heresy, close to Gnosticism, which did not have as much influence in the West, Manichaeism included a variety of religious traditions, and later served as the basis for Islam.

The most distinctive feature of the Manichaean dualism is the recognition of two principles in the structure of the world – of the evil god and the good one.

In the exposition of Peter of Sicily we read: One god, they said, who founded the land and the sea, is the creator of the world over which he rules, and the other, whom they call "the heavenly father", has power not in this world, but in the world to come (Bartikian 1961, p. 124).

They claimed: "You believe in God, the creator of the world, and we believe in the one about whom the Lord says in the Gospel: *"... You have neither heard His voice at any time nor seen His form"* (John. 5:37).

The Manichaeans did not recognize the Old Testament. They believed that the world existed in an equal struggle between good and evil, and that this struggle was eternal, with no winner.

Some authors make a connection between Manichaeism and the later Bogomilism. In the Byzantine model of the iconoclastic polemic, they even call the iconoclasts "Manicheans," although scholars point primarily to the Paulician heresy as the cause of iconoclasm within Byzantium. By distorting the Gospel and the Apostle, they distorted the truth (Bartikian 1961, p. 123, note 28).

An early source in refutation of Manichaeism is the work "Against Heresies" (also known as "Adversus Haereses") by St. Epiphanius of Cyprus († 403), who is mentioned in the work of St. John of Damascus: "Three Treatises on the Divine

Images: Apologia against those who decry holy images” (St. John of Damascus, XVIII, p. 38).

Against heresies, including that of the Manichaeans, St. John Damascene says the following regarding the image: “You blaspheme matter and call it despicable, but the Divine Scripture exalts it as wonderful (...) I do not worship matter, I worship the God of matter, who became matter for my sake and deigned to inhabit matter, who worked out my salvation through matter” (St. John of Damascus, XIX p. 38).

The main source with reference to Bogomilism is “Discourse Against the Bogomils” (circa 972) by Presbyter Cosma. A valuable work against the Bogomil heresy is also the “Panoplia Dogmatica” by Euthymius Zigabenos from the 11th century, which reveals the views of the bogomil Basil and the author’s refutations. Other sources from this period are the works of ecclesiastical writers Euthymius of Acmonia and Michael Pselus (d. 1078).

A complete exposition of the Bogomil doctrine is an apocryphal work called “The Gospel of John” or “The Secret Book” (Jordanov, Iv. 2024, p. 66), the original of which in Bulgarian has not been preserved to this day, but only some later translations into Latin.

The basis of the Bogomil doctrine is the consideration of the world in a dualistic discourse. The Bogomils considered the material world to be the work of the evil god, and the spiritual world to be the will of the good one. In Bogomil cosmogony and anthropogony, importance is given to the spiritual over the carnal, to the spirit over matter, to the soul over the body. Thus, the ancestors of man, Adam and Eve, turn out to be the creation of two forces – good and evil. Their flesh comes from the evil, and their soul is inspired by God (Angelov 1993, p. 10).

In the work of Euthymius Zigabenos, the main anti-heretical arguments against Bogomils relate to the distorted understanding of the dogma of the Triune God, of the Incarnation of the Son of God, and of holy images. “They say that the Son was clothed in flesh, in immaterial and divine flesh, which does not need food, because He said, My food is to do the will of My Father. Maintaining this, they call the entire story of the Savior’s appearance in human form imaginary” (Angelov, Primov, Batakliiev 1967, p. 77).

One of the beliefs of the Bogomils is that Christ was not the God-man, but only the word of God, “who only seemingly was born, acted, and died” (Angelov, Primov, Batakliiev 1967, p. 87).

Their attitude towards the dogma of the Holy Trinity, affirmed at the ecumenical councils, was also incorrect. The Bogomils viewed the Persons of God as something temporary, impermanent, not as hypostases of God, but as “words” (Angelov, Primov, Batakliiev 1967, p. 87).

They misinterpreted the texts of the Holy Scripture and said that the highest god does not dwell in temples made by hands. They called icons idols of the

pagans, work of human hands, made of gold and silver (Angelov, Primov, Batakliiev 1967, p. 77).

Euthymius Zigabenus denounces the heretics, reproaching them for not knowing what an idol is and what an icon is, calling their idols fake, “having accepted false divinity.” The prototypes of our icons, he says, “are truly real and are exactly what they are called. Those are idols of wicked people, and these are images of saints” (Angelov, Primov, Batakliiev 1967, p. 78).

In Chapter XXIV of his “*Panoplia Dogmatica*”, Euthymius Zigabenus presents the refutations of the Patriarch of Constantinople Photius against the views of the “so-called” Paulicians, similar to the Manichaeans, regarding the “two principles”, exposing their blasphemy against the Holy Mother of God, against the honorable Cross of Christ, against the temple, the images and against the misunderstanding of the divine Incarnation (Radeva 2015)⁴.

In the first part of his “Discourse” Presbyter Cosma, like E. Zigabenus, also raises the topic of icons and of Holy Cross of the Lord. He denounces the heresy of the Bogomils, who believed that it was not right to worship and honor the Holy Cross, because it was simply wood, an instrument of death, not of life, and was the work of evil forces (Angelov 1993, pp. 191 – 192).

Their negative attitude towards icon veneration was expressed in the incorrect interpretation of the words of St. Paul the Apostle about idols, with the statement that “it is not fitting to worship gold or silver, made by human art (Prezb. Cosma, Discourse)”⁵.

In response to this distorted interpretation of the sacred texts, Presbyter Cosma replies: “Do you see, heretic, that your words are false and deceptive when you say: ‘Those who worship icons resemble the Hellenes?... When we worship an icon, we do not worship the paint, nor the board, but the one who was with this image and who is painted, similar to himself, as he was in appearance – whether old or young’ (Prezb. Cosma, Discourse)”⁶.

We, the Orthodox people, says Prezb. Cosma, when we see the image of our Lord Jesus Christ, or of the Mother of God the Most Holy Theotokos, or of some saint depicted on the icon, we bow down and pray “from the depths of our hearts”⁷, through their intercession, to receive forgiveness for our sins.

From what has been said so far, we can conclude that the pagans (in this case the Bogomils) did not make a distinction between an icon and an idol, but considered the worshipers of icons, in the words of the venerable Cosma, to be idolaters, which made them similar to the Hellenes (Prezb. Cosma, Discourse)⁸.

Against the claim of the iconoclast Bogomils that paying homage to an icon means venerating it as an object, Prezb. Cosma presents the Orthodox view of veneration of the icon, which is an image and symbol of the divine.

The Holy Fathers, as well as Prezb. Cosma, believed that by paying homage to the image, we worship the Prototype of God, and not plaster, paint, and wooden images, as the heretics claim (Angelov 1993, p. 193).

The Bogomils' negative attitude towards icons brings them closer to the iconoclasts in Byzantium, who we know caused serious controversy in clerical circles, leading to a fierce struggle in defense of holy images. The heretics supported the iconoclast emperors, and all pious emperors believed that they should be rejected by the Church clergy.

The fight against iconoclastic policy officially ended with the Church council convened in Constantinople in 843 AD, at which the iconoclasts were denounced and anathematized.

The decrees against the iconoclasts established in the Synodikon of the Sunday of Orthodoxy were also included in the Synodikon of Bulgarian Tsar Boril (early 13th century), the translated part of which contains an article against iconoclasm and against Bogomilism.

The iconoclastic heresy was officially rejected by the Church, but it did not cease. The views of the iconoclasts had a big influence on the dualistic views of the Paulicians and Bogomils. The clash between the representatives of the canonical Church and the representatives of the heretical movements continued for several more centuries.

The controversy over icons also concerned the attitude towards the miracle-working of faith, through the veneration of holy images and relics, and towards the Resurrection, as the eschatological aspect of this veneration.

In this regard, St. Paul the Apostle says that "...we walk by faith..." (2 Cor. 5:7) and we live according to our vision in the spiritual world "*and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, and your faith is also in vain*" (1 Cor. 15:14).

The representatives of the dualistic heresies misinterpreted the Epistles of St. Paul, seeing in his theology a denial of the carnal and an elevation of the spiritual principle in man. When the holy Apostle spoke of the "carnal" man, he meant the sin in man, and not his body, which, like the soul, was created in the image and likeness of God.

The life-giving Spirit of God in man, according to St. Paul's theology, is the fruit of spiritual life and asceticism. Therefore, in his reasoning, the Greek theologian, John Romanides⁹, says that it is not correct to interpret the text in the Epistle to the Romans in a dualistic way: "*For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am fleshly, sold under sin*" (Rom. 7:14). The concept of carnal (σαρκικός) in the understanding of the holy Apostle does not necessarily mean a sinful person, full of evil desires. In his address to the Christians in Corinth, St. Paul says that they are "*a letter from Christ*"... "*written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts*" (2 Cor. 3:3).

The coming of the Word of God in the flesh, confessed with heart and mind, through the Holy Scripture and through icons, for those who proclaim the Gospel, as it is said in the Boril Synodikon, "the benefit should be the same both when the word is spoken and when the truth is proclaimed through images" (Dimitrov 1999)¹⁰.

For those "who know the Word and preach it, and also through the honest icons, through which the eyes of the beholders are sanctified and through which their minds are raised to

the knowledge of God, as well as through the divine temples and the sacred vessels and through other sacred utensils” all this is for the benefit of the believers (Dimitrov 1999)¹¹.

Conclusions and summary

In this study, the main dogmatic arguments of some Orthodox authors against iconoclasm in the dualistic heresies like Paulicianism, Manichaeism, Messalianism and above all, Bogomilism, were presented.

Icon veneration is part of the Church’s Tradition. The icon is an important element of the unified body of this Tradition. With its symbolic language, it depicts another reality, liturgically participating in the divine life manifested to man.

NOTES

1. St. John of Damascus. About the icons. I, 9; PG 94, 1240. Look at: Hieromonk Athanasius, 1990. History and theology of holy icons. In: *Spirituality of Orthodoxy, Belgrade*, pp. 23 – 64 [in Surbian]. Available from: <https://www.pravoslavie.bg/?p=9682> (viewed – 2025-03-02).
2. Migne. col. 329, 332.
3. St. John of Damascus. 2019, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, Sofia. XX, p. 39 [in Bulgarian].
4. Euthymius Zigabenus. *Panoplia Dogmatica*. XXIV, pp. 1191 – 1210. In: Radeva, D. 2015, pp. 522 – 534.
5. Angelov, D., 1993, p. 192.
6. Ibid, p. 192.
7. Ibid, p. 192.
8. Ibid, p. 192, 2016.
9. Romanides, J. *The spiritual man: The image of God [in Bulgarian]*. Available from: <https://dveri.bg/wdqa4> (viewed – 2025-03-02).
10. *Synodicon of Tsar Boril. Articles against iconoclasm*. In: Dimitrov, E. 1999, pp. 57 – 61 [in Bulgarian].
11. Ibid, pp. 57 – 61.

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✉ **PostDoc Boriana Nanova, Dr.**

ORCID iD: 0009-0003-5587-5568

Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, Bulgaria

E-mail: boriana.nanova@gmail.com