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THE FIGURATIVE REPRESENTATIONS IN THE DUALISTIC TEACHING OF THE BOGOMILS

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Abstract. In the article, I will focus on the figurative representations of *good* and *evil*, where the dominant image of evil becomes the reason for developing a demonized ontology, which has been expressed in various social and religious movements. The aim is to show that by emphasizing the demonic beginning, the Bogomil views of the world lead to a blurring of the idea of man as the likeness of God and, consequently, to a depersonalization of the human image. Set within this doomed world, the Bogomils’ pursuit of perfection is reduced to the acquisition of “supernatural insights” in a deeply fanatical hierarchical environment.

Keywords: dualism; Bogomils; demonization; imagination; tradition

Introduction

The departure from the image of God foregrounds the question of the origin and nature of the visible world, which diverges from the ancient biblical tradition of creation. How justified was the urge of the sincere and consistently professing Bogomilism man to a higher, almost immaterial world, to an ideally organized society, built on the principles of brotherly relations, freedom, and equality, in the Middle Ages? The idealistic ideas in the teachings of the Bogomils are diluted in a not-so-perfectly organized society in which they try to impose their imaginary reality.

I. The dualism of the Bogomils

I.1. The images of God and His two sons

For many modern people, Bogomilism is perceived not so much as one of the most widespread heretical teachings in the Middle Ages, but rather as an esoteric belief that continues to attract its followers. This medieval phenomenon left deep traces in the historical development of Christian Europe and a rich figurative tradition, built primarily on oral traditions and based on older dualistic teachings. Many scholars, including Petar Mutafovich, define Bogomilism as a dualistic doctrine preaching a complete denial of statehood and the religious foundation on

which it rested in medieval Bulgaria.¹ The roots of the Bogomil heresy can be found as early as the 1st century, in the teachings of the Gnostics and Manichaeans, who provided the basis for the development of most of the subsequent heretical teachings.² Characteristic of Bogomil beliefs is the fundamental antagonism between two fundamental principles – good and evil, which are always in a cause-and-effect relationship in an insoluble cosmic conflict³. In comparison with the cosmic dualism of the Gnostics⁴, which, going to the extreme in its denial of the material world, also rejects God, in the Bogomil conceptions God nevertheless remains at the top of a celestial hierarchy, while at the same time fully embodying absolute Good. His antagonistic counterpart in the person of Satan is placed one level lower in this same hierarchy as the demiurge and the complete creator of the visible world.

We can turn our attention to the very process of the development of heretical teachings in Christianity, to realize that each of them tried in vain to define strictly and in a cause-and-effect order phenomena and dogmatic definitions that carry both a rational and metaphysical meaning⁵. The Bogomil doctrine is attributed to the tradition of religious dualism, which is developed in one of the main and early mythologies, namely that the devil is the eldest son of God. This concept is considered one of the earliest, allowing to make a connection between paganism and heresies in Bulgaria⁶. The understanding of the genesis of Satan is a reason to speak of monarchical dualism among the Bogomils, where we recognize the trinitarian theory of God and His two sons – Satanael and Jesus Christ⁶.

1.2. The image of evil in the face of Satanael

In his anti-heretical work “Discourse Against the Bogomils”, Presbyter Cosmas conveys the views of the Bogomil heretics, who emphasize the place of evil power⁷. Satanael is an evil angel who possesses creative potential and is the creator of the visible world. According to Yordan Ivanov, the “religious-metaphysical spirit” of priest Bogomil approaches the Christian monotheistic dogma to attract his followers from within Orthodox Christianity.⁸ The concepts of Good and Evil among the Bogomils are perceived not only in an abstract sense but have figurative equivalents, respectively in the person of the good God and the evil demiurge⁹. Despite the religious prohibition on depicting God both in ancient Israel and in the Islamic world, the primary need for Him to be described finds expression in both religions in the prophetic vision¹⁰. In Bogomil imagery, the Invisible Father also acquires the relative outlines of a specific image, with indirectly implied anthropomorphic characteristics. Thus, God, who should stand high above the visible world, being the personification of absolute Good, also appears at the top of an administrative tax system in the angelic world. In the Gospel of John, we read:

[...]the angel Satan ascended to the other angels in the fifth heaven and spoke to each of them in this way: “How much do you owe your master? – A hundred measures of wheat,” one of them answered him. “Take a pen and write: forty.” And

to the others he said: "And how much do you owe your master? – Seven jars of oil." [...] "Sit down," said Satan to him, "and write fifty." He ascended through all the heavens and with similar words tempted the angels of the Invisible Father as far as the fifth heaven ¹¹.

In some Eastern religions, Satan, as the main authority, dominates even God, and is revered as the creator of the visible world¹². Probably, similar beliefs were also held by some Bogomil sects, familiar with the epistles of St. Apostle Paul or with texts from patristic literature and in particular with Word 28 of St. Gregory Nazianzen, in which he hints at the metaphysical meaning of the story of the Apostle Paul, who was caught up to the third heaven ¹³.

II. Bogomil's imagery in stone reliefs and crosses

If the Bogomil concept of the divine trinity is defined as monarchical dualism, then in Bogomil ontology we can find radical dualistic views on the creation of the world. According to Presbyter Cosmas, in the Bogomil teaching "God did not create the heavens, nor the earth, nor all visible things"¹⁴. In some oral traditions that have come down to us, the entire picture of the created world is presented as a consequence of two opposing principles – the power of creation and the power of destruction¹⁵. The power of creation and the power of destruction are represented as two intersecting ellipses. The vertical ellipse represents the creative power of creation and is identified with Good, while the horizontal ellipse is the power of destruction. The observed embodiment of the abstract image of the power of creation is characteristic of Bogomil figurative thinking. Similar to the parable of the forgiveness of debts with the help of Satan, here the aim is to rethink the creative potential as a materialized energy, which, however, gradually weakens in the course of the story of creation, at the expense of the power of destruction, which takes precedence in the created world.

II.1. Stone reliefs from Bosnia and Herzegovina

Although the teachings of the Bogomils leave many questions unanswered regarding their views and way of life, some assumptions can still be made regarding some stone images considered Bogomils' by some researchers¹⁶. There are also opposing opinions from scholars such as Dubravko Lovrenović, who rejects the Bogomil character of the stone steles¹⁷. However, it is historically certain that followers of Bogomilism, called "Pataren" and "Kudugers", preached the same ideas in Bosnia between the 12th and 15th centuries¹⁸. Darinka Karadžova provides a broad overview of existing research on the phenomenon common in these lands, known as stone tombstones with relief images and graffiti, called "stečki"¹⁹. She defines these monuments as an "ancient heritage", related to Bogomil mystical traditions and imagery²⁰. Karadžova's subject of study are the images of figures arranged and depicting the "rachenitsa" dance and the "horo" dance – "of the most different types"²¹. In the images presented, a male figure is often found, who closes

the circle of the dance, and whom some researchers recognize as the Bogomil leader – the *dedetc*.

Insofar as Bogomil figurative thinking is related to Christian symbolism in most cases, these are equal-armed crosses that express ideas of a dualistic nature. Rudolf Kutzli distinguishes Christomorphic elements from those that have a cosmological and philosophical meaning²². For example, in the stone slabs from Šarampovo, Bosnia, the crosses express the absence of matter in another, higher dimension, in which the heavenly and the earthly are united through the cross²³. The stone steles inspire not so much a feeling for the dead to whom they are dedicated, but the hope of resurrection and spirituality. Many tombstones with spirals carved on them are in the National Museum in Sarajevo. As an ancient symbol, widespread throughout the world, the spiral conveys the idea of the cyclical nature of existence - the nascent life, its primary form and development until its end and the subsequent resurrection. However, here we must note that in the Bogomil ideas, the resurrection of man differs radically from the Christian understanding.²⁴ In the legends and traditions of the Bogomils, the resurrection is presented as a polarized judgment on the person, who is reborn according to whether he was righteous or sinful before he died. It is noteworthy that in Bosnian tombstones, spirals are usually combined with the cross – as a tree of life, and in many cases they are combined with it, creating the image of a blossoming cross. The tree of life develops upwards in a spiral and ends with a small figure in the profile of a bird – a symbol of the Spirit²⁵.

The stone reliefs from Bosnia and Herzegovina convey the basic ideas of the Bogomils about the creation of the world. The spiral, as a prehistoric symbol expresses the life cycle of being and at the same time the unification of the two opposing principles in the creation of the world. In many of the Bogomil crosses, one can find the motifs of the flowering cross, whose arms forge into symmetrical spirals, or anthropomorphized spirals – references to the masculine and feminine principles, in a harmoniously developed composition, crowned with a solar symbol.

II.2. Stone crosses from Chalkidona, Greece

One of the places that can shed light on the semantic dualism of Bogomil symbols is the old cemetery near the village of Chalkidona, Northern Greece ²⁶. During my visit there in 2024, I was able to photograph numerous stone crosses spread over an area of about two acres. The stone crosses scattered around are from much older times and are known in the area as Bogomil tombstones. In shape, they are massive, carved from soft stone, uniform crosses. Despite their seemingly chaotic arrangement, upon closer inspection it is seen that the tombstones are grouped, with several smaller crosses located around a larger, prominent cross (Fig. 1). The crosses are isosceles, with a small base and their arms encompass a circle (Fig. 3, 4). No traces of inscriptions are observed on the tombstones. In the center of the crosses are carved solar symbols, similar to Bogomil's figurative symbolism.



Figure 1. General appearance of grave crosses (photo: personal archive)



Figure 2, 3. Stone crosses from the old Bogomil cemetery in the village of Halkidona (Ilidzhievo), Northern Greece (photo: personal archive, 2024)

Their semantic interpretation is largely based on the similarities with similar symbols from the stećaks in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The crosses from Chalkidona

largely coincide with the Bogomil idea of the two intersecting ellipses, with the vertical one embodying the force of creation, and the horizontal one – the force of destruction. If in reality, in the monuments from Bosnia, the dualistic views of the Bogomils are expressed through opposing pairs, which ultimately do not have a completely antagonistic character, then in the crosses from Chalkidona one can notice an absolutization of the dualistic idea and its derivation into a semantic image of Bogomilism. Similar stone crosses, but in a simpler form, exist in the old cemetery of the village of Garlo, near Breznik (Fig. 5). They are also inscribed in a circle and are grouped in several around a central one. They may be documentary evidence of a Bogomil community dating back to the late Middle Ages.



Figure 4. Tombstone crosses from the Old Cemetery near the village of Garlo, Breznik Municipality (Bulgaria) (photos: personal archive, 2025)

Bogomil imagery is developed as part of a heretical Christian doctrine, the roots of which lie deep in the dualistic views of the more ancient religions that preceded Christianity, such as Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism and Judaism. The ideas that fueled the doctrine interacted with local cults and traditions, forming a specific figurative language for the Bogomil heresy. The *demonologisation* of being, characteristic of the Bogomil doctrine, makes senseless the rediscovery of the Divine principle in every form of life and gives human existence a utopian hue. In studying figurative thinking in Bogomil monuments, one can establish not only the external form of the Bogomil dualistic idea, but also the manifestations of the

deep spiritual division of personal consciousness between the tendentiously sought gnostic metaphysical vitality and the objectively conditioned reality, in which the Church of Christ, despite the contradictions it must overcome, remains the social model for upholding spiritual, national and personal identity.

NOTES

1. MUTAFCHIEV, P. 1934: 1 – 16). In: MINCZEW, G. 9/2020, p. 15. Despite numerous studies on the personality of priest Bogomil, who is considered the leader of the most widespread medieval heresy, his name remains shrouded in mystery. Several other names are known that are believed to be related to that of the main heresiarch of the Bogomils. First, this is the heretic monk Theophilus, whose name some researchers identify as a Greek version of the name Bogomil. Second, this is the name of the author of apocryphal texts Jeremiah, whose work “The Legend of the Cross” is distributed outside Bulgaria both in the West and in the East. In addition to Jeremiah, two other authors of apocryphal literature at the beginning of Bogomilism in our country are Sydor Fryazin and Jacob Tsental – both of Frankish origin. In the famous anti-heretical work “Dogmatic Armory” (“Δογματική πανοπλία”) by Evtimii Zigavin, in chapter 27, there is talk of the heresiarch Bogomil, whose name, according to the author, is translated into Bulgarian as “beloved of God” and “anointed by God”. (PG, vol. CXXX, col. 1309a), in: MINCZEW, G., 2013, p. 113 – 130. <http://dx.doi.org/10.18778/2084-140X.03.08>.
2. The Manichaeans are described by St. John of Damascus in his work “Briefly on Heresies”. See St. JOHN OF DAMASK., 2014, p. 259 (66) (Translated by A. Atanasov). They “indulged in extreme debauchery with the women who were common” (PHOTIUS, patriarch, 2017, p. 132-133). In imperial legislative discussion, Manichaeism was often associated with the Persian Empire as a political enemy and was also associated with repugnant characteristics of the barbaric “national character” of the Persians. This connection was often applied to Persia in Christian polemics. See SHUKUROV, R. 2024, p. 28.
3. STOYANOV, Y., 2000, p.3.
4. Besides Gnosticism, monarchism (3rd century) can also be mentioned. As an early anti-trinitarian heresy, monarchism arose in the East (in Antioch) and was based on Aristotelian theology. The rationalistic nature of this elitist teaching completely ignores the principles of faith. For more on Monarchianism, see: KOEV, T., 2011.)
5. Despite all its complexities and contradictions – according to Yuri Stoyanov, the evidence for early Bogomilism shows that rather than being a natural evolution from Paulicianism or the elusive Massalianism, Bogomilism emerged in the tenth century as a separate and local dualistic movement with independent teachings and goals” (STOYANOV, Y., 2000., p.162).
6. Ibid., p. 158.
7. PRESBYTER COZMA, 2017. (The edition is based on the text from the 15th century, published by Prof. M.G. Popruzhenko – “Presbyter Cozma”, Sofia, 1936

- comparative translation by Ts. Minkov, 1934 and by Dr. V. S. Kiselkov, 1942. Sermon against the Bogomils.
8. IVANOV, Y., 2007, p.24. Yuri Stoyanov writes that the dualism of the Bogomils may be subversive, and an example of this is the *Dialogus de daemonum operatione*. The treatise specifies that this doctrine stems from the development of Mani's teaching on the two principles, to which the heretics added a third, and thus arrived at their system in which they included a Father living in the supramundane world, a younger Son reigning over the heavenly kingdom, and an older Son ruling the visible world. (STOYANOV, Y., 2000, pp. 241 – 246).
 9. The traces left by the Bogomils in the religious pictorial tradition are mainly drawings, graffiti on stone, tombstones with signs, and stone crosses. The present presentation examines both the verbal imagery of the Bogomils and some of the artifacts that have reached us.
 10. Aaron Hug draws attention to a similarity he observed in studying the progressive development of prophetic visions - they are always associated with the elevation of the mind to the higher realms of the Divine, and reaching the ultimate level of spiritual exaltation, the prophet manages to see the image of God. More about God's vision in the prophetic tradition: HUGHES, A. 2004, pp. 43 – 44.
 11. MARIA ARABADZHIEVA, 2013. From: The Secret Book of the Bogomils or Interrogatio Ioannis, in: Sources for the Bogomils, ed. AB, pp. 39 – 40.
 12. STOYANOV, Y., 2000, p.171.
 13. Cf. St. GREGORY OF NAZIAN, 1994, p.37.
 14. PRESBYTER COZMA 2017, p. 30. In Presbyter Cozma's "Discourse against the Bogomils" according to Yuri Stoyanov there are references to the "fables" of the heretics in general or to a specific 'fable'. Further debate surrounds the alleged analogies or similarities between Bogomil teachings and some elements in Slavic and Greek folklore and Slavic popular cosmogonies. In: STOYANOV, Y., 2016, p. 161. See also KUNEV, S., 2018, p. 484.
 15. This refers to the publication of Anton Glogov's (Anton Donchev) – "The Bogomil Doctrine", which was first published in 1935. GLOGOV, A., 2017.
 16. The cited authors with research are in the article by KARADZHOVA, D. 2021.
 17. LOVRENOVIĆ, D., (online) 2016 In his study of the Bogomil stechkas from Bosnia, Rudolf Kutzli assumes that the earliest of them date back to the time of the Fourth Crusade, 1202 when the first extermination of the Bogomil communities by the Latins was carried out. KUTZLI, R., 1977, [КВИЏИ, Р., 2023].
 18. ANGELOV, D. "Bogomilism – Bulgarian and European Dimensions", an introductory study in: GECHIEVA, K., 2007, p. 28.
 19. What distinguishes the images from these medieval monuments according to D. Karadzhova is their abstractness and mystical aura. The stechkas have a semantic connection not only with the ideas of the Bogomils but also with even more ancient traditions: KARADZOVA, D., 2021.
 20. Ibid.
 21. Ibid.
 22. KUTZLI, R., 2023, p. 32.

23. Ibid, p.41.
24. IVANOV, Y., 2007.
25. KUTZLI, R., 2023, p. 45.
26. Before being renamed to the Greek Halkidona (Χαλκηδόνα, Χαλκηδών), the village bore the Bulgarian name Ilidzhievo (Yaljadzik or Γιαλατζίκ in Turkish).

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