

2018

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### Recommended Citation

Angelovska-Panova, Maja (2018) "Medieval Heresy and Protestantism," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 38 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol38/iss1/6>

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# MEDIEVAL HERESIS AND PROTESTANTISM

By Maja Angelovska-Panova

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## Abstract

In addition to the current social and political circumstances, the appearance of heresies and reform movements during the Middle Ages. was largely determined by the educational tendencies and movement of humanism, which concentrated on the matter of the human being. This article offers a digressive analysis that examines the appearance, essence, and significance of Bogomilism, Catharism, Waldensians and their implications for later reform movements—more specifically Protestantism. It should be emphasized that in this context, such ideas, characteristic of medieval heresies, impacted Protestantism, as seen in the works of John Wycliffe (1328-1384) and Jan Hus (1369-1415). In fact, they were qualified to be Protestants even before the appearance of Protestantism as a movement, and Martin Luther (1483-1546), the bearer of the Reformation for his time, was well-informed of their works. Luther was also familiar with the movement of the Waldensians, which certainly had its own impact on the further development and establishment of Protestantism, even though it followed a period of mutual cooperation between the two communities.

The appearance of heresies and reformist movements in the wider chronological continuity of the Middle Ages, in addition to the current social and political circumstances, was largely determined by both the educational tendencies and the movement of humanism, which focused on the attention the human being. The purpose of this paper is to present a digressive analysis to trace the appearance, essence and significance of Bogomilism, Catharism, and the

movement of the Waldenses and their implications for later reformist movements, more specifically Protestantism<sup>1</sup>.

The appearance of Bogomilism is territorially connected with the southwestern Macedonia area, and spiritually, its source should be investigated in the conditions created by the activities of St. Clement and Naum of Ohrid. Of course, in this context, we are not speaking of a direct connection between the activities of St. Clement of Ohrid and the later Bogomil teaching, but rather of the indirect influence, which is one of the preconditions for its occurrence.<sup>2</sup> As a person with a comprehensive education, St. Clement had knowledge of the appearance of the Apocrypha, which contained unofficial and non-canonical literary contents. He used some of it in his preaching and for his most praiseworthy words, but without any pretensions to expose its heresy. In fact, St. Clement's fundamental idea was to include as many students as possible in the education process of the Slavic language, resulting in 3,500 students who had attended the Ohrid Literary School. There is no doubt that most of them continued their activity as zealous ministrants of Orthodoxy, but there probably were others who, by expanding their theological views and insights, sought to find a new and alternative spiritual expression. This speaks in favor of the fact that education within the framework of the Ohrid Literary School was not only reduced to the passive perception of Christian dogmas, but indirectly influenced the possibility of creating a critical point of view in their exegesis.<sup>3</sup> Literacy in this particular case was the foundation for developing an alternative contemplating process in the theological sense, which surely had a remarkable influence for the occurrence of Bogomilism, which soon spread from

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<sup>1</sup>The first who addressed the question of the influence of Bogomilism on Protestantism was American Methodist historian Linus Brockett. See: L.P. Brockett, *The Bogomils of Bulgaria and Bosnia (The Early Protestants of the East: An Attempt to Restore Some Lost Leaves of Protestant History)*. (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society 1879). More recently Georgi Vasilev is actively working on this issue. See: G. Vasilev, "Bogomilism-An Important Precursor of the Reformation" <http://www.utoronto.ca/tsq>.

<sup>2</sup>M. Angelovska-Panova, *Bogomilism in the Spiritual Culture of Macedonia*. (Skopje: Institute of Old Slavic Culture -Az-Buki 2004), 69.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 69-70.

Macedonia to the neighboring Balkan countries, and in its modified form in the countries of Western Europe. Of course, Catharism, the movement of the Waldenses, and Lollardism, despite the influence of Bogomilism, represented authentic movements that were in conformity with the social and political circumstances in Western Europe, as well as with the mentality of the people from the West.

The emergence of Catharism as an alternative dualistic movement in the two main strongholds in Northern Italy and Southern France was in principle due to the diversity of intellectual ideas in Western Europe. It was a period of creation, through the establishment of Bologna University and the University of Paris as leading educational institutions with outstanding reputations. It was also a period of the evident rise of troubadour poetry, which serves as a great example for how a cultural phenomenon was being disseminated across Europe, more precisely, in the regions where heretical movements were most prominent. In fact, many troubadours shared the ideas of the Cathars. As an illustration, Pierre de Corbian in his work "Prayer to the Virgin" advocates the docetistic nature of Jesus, an attitude which is characteristic of the dualists with which they challenge his material nature, identifying him with the Word (Logos).<sup>4</sup>

In that sense, the implications for the appearance of heresy were obvious. Namely, starting from the twelfth century, people began to concentrate on their choice in the spiritual sense, because they already made their choice with the other aspects of their lives.<sup>5</sup>

Such a situation of diversity led to the genius curiosity idea of encouraging students to challenge the studies, and not just to consume the educational process.<sup>6</sup> Near the beginning of

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<sup>4</sup>G Vasilev. *Български богомилски и апокрифни представи в английската средновековна култура*. (София 2001), 176.

<sup>5</sup>A. Roach, *The Devil's World. Heresy and Society 1100-1300*. (Pearson Longman 2005), 34.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

1120, a significant contribution to the affirmation of critical thought was given by the outstanding professor, philosopher and theologian Peter Abelard (1079-1142), who being a supreme authority, in spite of his misunderstandings with some of his colleagues, taught at the University of Paris on several occasions. In his work, *Sic and Non*, he was categorical in his view that Church Fathers "must be read not by seeking faith, but by freedom of reasoning."<sup>7</sup> Abelard was quite sensitive in relation to the existing traditional scholastic and dogmatic understanding of things; on the contrary, in his works in the field of dialectics, he significantly influenced the authenticity of medieval thought and medieval Aristotelianism. The focus of his attention was also on issues related to ethics and morality, which he largely attributed to the conscience of people and the need for free and rational interpretation.

In 1121, in the French town of Soissons, Abelard's teaching was accused of heresy, which was in fact an attempt for his discreditation and academic humiliation, primarily because of his clearly expressed tendency for the heterodox interpretation of the Holy Trinity.<sup>8</sup>

However, despite the turbulent periods in Abelard's career and the conservative environment in his social setting at the time, it is significant to note that many of his students, opposed taboos and contributed to the circulation of his ideas in folk literature. Moreover, there is a basis to presume that some of them had realized their religious choice precisely through Catharism; its existential impulse took place between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, dispersing among all layers of Western European society.

When it comes to the Protestant Reformation, whose beginnings are associated with the publication of 95 Theses of Martin Luther in 1517 in Wittenberg, there is no doubt that its appearance was largely due to the development of humanism; generally speaking, the activities

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<sup>7</sup>P. Abelard, *Sic et Non*. Ed. B. Boyer and R. McKeon.( University of Chicago 1976), 101.

<sup>8</sup> Roach, *The Devil's World*, 52-53.

of its protagonists focused on the fierce criticism of the forms and dogmas of medieval Christianity.

To illustrate, the Dutch humanist, Erasmus of Rotterdam, despite distancing himself from some aspects of Lutheranism, was categorical in his view that Christianity consumed during the Middle Ages, largely deviated from authentic Christianity preached by Jesus Christ as well as from the principles established in the Early Christian period.

In fact, both the humanists, and later the Protestants, insisted above all on the original meaning of the words from the Bible, putting the exegesis of the church authorities in the background. Priority was given to translations into various languages in order to make the Scriptures available to a wider audience of readers, and into consumers of Christianity. Indeed, in conditions where education was fairly selective, accessible to a narrower social layer, the humanists and protagonists of reformation advocated the implementation of these principles on a wider social level and among the wider social layers.

Regardless of the educational determinism of the heresies and the later reformist movements, in this concrete case, through Protestantism, the commonality for these alternative movements was the contestation of some of the attributes of official Christianity. In this context, it should be pointed out that such ideas, characteristic of the Bogomil-Cathars point of view in Protestantism, were implemented through the works of John Wycliffe (1328-1384) and Jan Hus (1369-1415). In fact, they were qualified to be Protestants even before the appearance of Protestantism as a movement, and Martin Luther (1483-1546), the bearer of the Reformation for his time, was well-versed in their works.

In this context, it is interesting to mention that Luther was also familiar with the movement of the Waldenses,<sup>9</sup> which certainly had its own impact on the further development and establishment of Protestantism, as well as on the period of mutual cooperation that followed between the two communities. With the Catholic Church persecuting the Waldenses, many of them moved to Provence, where, for safety reasons, Protestant settlers also resided. Permanent conflicts with the authorities of the Catholic Church and its fierce repercussions contributed to a significant percentage of Waldenses to cross to the Protestants' side, largely resulting in their disappearance from the historical scene as it blended with Protestantism. However, let us look at those aspects for which there is evidence that indicates the connection between medieval heresies and Protestantism.

Protestants advocated the universalism of the clergy and simple worship that centered on sermons and contemplation,<sup>10</sup> insisting on interaction with God without intermediaries. Such an idea in a much more radical form was characteristic of the Bogomils and the Cathars. Namely, they were categorical in their attitude against the priesthood, as carriers of the church service and the Church in general, pointing to their vicious life and decadence as a privileged layer who enjoyed all the benefits of the feudal social system. Bogomils performed the rituals and prayers for the salvation of the soul on their own, supporting the ascetical way of life and encouraging the idea that the relationship with God can be established only through constant prayers.<sup>11</sup> In favor of this idea, Cosmas the Presbyter, a high ecclesiastical dignitary who despite being in the

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<sup>9</sup>The movement of the Waldenses is related to the period around 1170, when the wealthy merchant Valdo / Valdes of Lyon, in order to conceive the benefits of the *vita apostolica*, divided his wealth to the poor and began to preach the Bible originally. He considered it necessary to translate the Scriptures into a native language, and for this purpose he started the translation of the gospels into the Provençal language. Historian Gabriel Audissus concluded that their preaching in public places was one of the reasons that the Catholic Church proclaimed them heretics and took over measures for their suppression.

<sup>10</sup>Dragan Todorović, "Протестантизам на Балкану и у Србији." *Социолошки преглед*, vol. XLV (2011), N.3, 267-268.

<sup>11</sup> Ангеловска-Панова, *Богомилството во духовната култура на Македонија*, 52.

position of an apologist of Christianity, alluded subtly to the problem with priests, stating: "Oh, shepherds of God's sheep, you who take milk and wool from the flock, and do not care about the sheep! What answer will we give before God's judgment, what report we will give to the great shepherd of the shepherds, who said through the mouth of the prophet: If you do not draw the one who falls into sin, I will seek the blood in your hands, said the Lord."<sup>12</sup>

The influence of the Bogomils and the Cathars was also felt in the Protestants' determination to perform their services in public places, without pretensions for those services to be performed exclusively in church buildings. Namely, the Protestants believed that the liturgical service was not sanctified by the place of preaching, but by the presence of Christ among believers. In that sense, the message contained in the *Gospel according to Matthew* (18:20) was imperative for them like it was for the Bogomils and Cathars, "For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them." This idea was accepted by the Cathars in the literal sense and for those reasons when they did not stay in their communes, they traveled in pairs in order to disperse the teaching and mobilize as many followers as possible.<sup>13</sup>

The Bogomils, on the other hand, were deeply convinced that the church, in an institutional sense, had nothing in common with the true Christian ecclesia precisely because of the fact that it deviated from the principles established by the Gospel texts. Referencing the beliefs of the Bogomils, specifically the attitude of disputing the church, Euthymios Zigabenos, a senior ecclesiastical dignitary hailing from the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, noted in his work, *Panoplia Dogmatica*: "In all the sacred temples live devils, who have divided them according to their rank and power. After all, Satan from ancient times chose for himself the most

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<sup>12</sup>В. Антиќ, *Низ страниците на јужнословенските книжевности*. (Скопје, 1977), 183.

<sup>13</sup>M. Barber, *The Cathars. Dualist Heretics in Languedoc in the High Middle Ages*. (Pearson Education Limited 2000), 75.



famous temple in Jerusalem, versus the Most High who did not live in temples created by hands, but had the heaven as his habitation.”<sup>14</sup>

What integrates medieval heresies from the East and West and Protestantism, among other things, relates to the interpretation of the syntagm by the Apostle Paul, who in the *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (1 Cor. 3: 16-17) states: "Don't you know that you are the temple of God, and the Spirit of God lives in you? If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him; for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are."<sup>15</sup> The rejection of the cult of icons was also part of the theologism of medieval heresies and Protestantism.<sup>16</sup>

Referring to Moses' Laws, Protestants typically find it inappropriate to make images for worship. Support for such a view is found in the third book of Moses (26: 1), which states: "You shall not make for yourselves idols, nor shall you setup for yourselves an image or a sacred pillar, nor shall you place a figured stone in your land to bow down to it; for I am the LORD your God."

The rejection of the cult of the icons was characteristic of the Bogomils, who accepted this dogmatic determination under the influence of Paulicaism<sup>17</sup> and Iconoclasm.<sup>18</sup> The Bogomils

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<sup>14</sup>*Euthymii Zigabeni, Adversus bogomilos*. Ed. J.P. Migne PG, t.130, coll 1321 C.

<sup>15</sup>In the translation of the Bible by Dr. Dushan Konstantinov this part reads: "Don't you know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God lives in you? If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are.

<sup>16</sup>Тодоровић, *Протестантизам на Балкану и у Србији*, 268.

<sup>17</sup>The historiography is dominated by the opinion that the Paulicianism took place at the end of the 7th century in the Byzantine province of Armenia. According to the original data, Constantine Silvan was the first to preach the new heresy, referring to the Gospel texts, especially to the epistles of the Apostle Paul. The Paulicians were categorical in their attitude against communion, baptism, the cult of the cross, and icons. See: Д. Ангелов, *Влияния на чужди ереси върху богомилството*. Известия на Семинаритъ при историко-филологическия факултетъ на Университета Свети Климентъ Охридски-София. (София 1942), 171.

<sup>18</sup>Iconoclasm is a complex social and religious phenomenon, which persists on the historical scene in the period from 8<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, which profiling took place in two stages of development. More specifically, this is a period of turmoil in which thoughts regarding the personal perception of the divine were stirred, but at the same time the limits of the legitimate sacred representation in the Byzantine world were defined. The very term iconoclasm points to the fact that the theological discourse of the movement concerned the disputing regarding the icons, because of the insistence on the divine nature of Jesus, which made it unacceptable to be represented as a human. Such convictions represented a real relapse from early Christian heretical concepts, followed through Arianism, Manichaeism, Monophysitism, and the still present Paulicaism . See: P. Karlin-Hayter, *Iconoclasm. The Oxford*

supported the exegesis of this attitude with the words of the Apostle Paul, who according to which, believers should not bow down to "gold and silver" created by human hands. In this connection, Euthymios Zigabenos and the Patriarch of Constantinople Germanus pointed out that the Bogomils did not respect the icons, calling them "idols of polytheists" painted with "demons."<sup>19</sup>

The relics of the saints have no meaning for Protestants, especially given that there is no support in the Bible for such a determination. Regarding this issue, the Bogomils took it much further. Euthymius of Acmonius, a Byzantine monk from the the mid-eleventh century, states, in reference to Bogomil sacraments: "The ungodly claim that there was no saint and no one should be called that, because only God was holy." Such a conceptual view of them had some rational determination; by popularizing the sanctity of their relics among believers, many of the churches and monasteries where a saint's grave was placed gained the opportunity to earn money.

Protestants, as successors to the European Reformation, have a rather complex attitude to the question of the cult and respect of the Mother of God, which they regarded as a form of idolatry. They held that Christians should pray only to God, personified in the image of Jesus Christ. When it comes to the Mother of God within Protestantism, it should be emphasized that the principle of Sola Scriptura is a prevailing one. Cullivier, the professor of New Testament at the Protestant University of Montpellier, notes that each gospel has its own interpretation of the Virgin Mary as a historical figure.<sup>20</sup> In that sense, it should be noted that Protestants do not deny her virginity, but regard it as a human being, distancing themselves from traditional ecumenical

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*History of Byzantium*, ed. C. Mango. (Oxford 2002), 157; М. Ангеловска-Панова, *Преодните форми на иконоборството*. Зборник од меѓународната научна конференција „Транзициите низ историјата“. (Скопје 2008), 63-68.

<sup>19</sup>Euthymius Zigabenus, *De haeresi Bogomilorum narration*. Ed. G.Ficker, *Die Phundagiagiten*. (Leipzig, 1908), 97; Germani patriarchae constantinopolitani epistula. Ed. G.Ficker, *Die Phundagiagiten*. (Leipzig, 1908), 122.

<sup>20</sup>E. Cuvillier, *Maria chi seiveramente? I differentivoltidellamadre di Gesù nel Nuovo Testamento, Claudiana*, (Torino, 2002), 9-10.

Mariology. They are categorical in their view that Jesus Christ is at the center of the Christian religion, he is actually the beginning and the end, and hence the Virgin Mary cannot and must not overshadow Jesus in his role as the savior of all people.<sup>21</sup>

The Bogomils and the Cathars also challenged the sanctity of the Virgin Mary by treating her as an ordinary woman. In fact, the attribute of the holy with which the character of the Mother of God was mainly connected, within the Bogomil religious platform, lost its meaning. The nihilistic attitude towards the Mother of God was, among other things, determined by the conviction in the docetistic nature of Jesus Christ. In accordance with this version, detailed by Euthymios Zigabenos, "he (i.e. Jesus) descended from heaven and entered through the right ear of the Mother of God and received a body, apparently material and similar to the human body, and in fact it was immaterial and again emanated from there from where it came, without the Virgin to feel his entry and exit."<sup>22</sup>

The integral study of heresies and Protestantism also points to common peculiarities regarding their organization. Namely, Protestants typically form small religious communities, according to the pattern of the early Christian communities, and insist on the original Christianity as a model for true Christianity,<sup>23</sup> which as a principle largely corresponds to Bogomilism and Catharism, which were greatly influenced by the original Apostolic Christianity. The organizational life of the Bogomils came to the fore particularly in the second half of the twelfth century, when, according to data from Latin sources, several church-heretical municipalities existed, through which their activities largely contributed to the dispersion of this teaching in the neighboring Balkan countries, as well as in the countries of Western Europe. *The Acts of the*

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<sup>21</sup> I. Macut, "Doprinos protestantske teologije buduće ekumenskoj mariologiji". *Služba Božja* 55 (2015), No.1 :79.

<sup>22</sup> M. Barber, *The Cathars*, 26; M. Ангеловска-Панова, *Богомилството во духовната култура на Македонија*, 157.

<sup>23</sup> P. Цапановска, *Протестантизмот во Македонија и современото малцинско христијанско верско структурирање*. ТМ, год. XXVII, бр.3. (Ниш 2003), 441.

*Albion Council* held in San Felix de Karaman in 1167, highlight the Romanian, Dragovit, Melingian, Bulgarian and Dalmatian churches that "were separated and divided and do not contradict to each other, so that there is peace among them." In this context, it should be noted that intensive cooperation existed between the church-heretical municipalities in the East and West, especially in regards to literary activity, so that a large part of the Bogomil literary works were translated into Latin for the needs of Western heretics. There is no doubt that the Reformation, in a significant part, reproduced the norms of alternative religious orientations, through Bogomilism in the East, and also through Catharism and the movement of the Waldens in the West.

What is common to apostasic teachings, also known as heresies, is the fact that they appeared in a certain period of time, and then evolved and disappeared from the historical scene. The remnants of these have been implemented in some aspects of Protestantism, which, despite the challenges and fierce confrontations with the Catholic Church, survived and promoted itself as an official religious orientation. Certainly, some of the determinations within Protestantism were redefined and subject to a different exegesis, which is quite understandable if one takes into account that all religious concepts during their existentialism had been facing the issue of the process of determining the theological-dogmatic system of beliefs and ritual practice.