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The Bosnian Bogomils or “Krstjani”

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The story of the Bosnian bogomils, called “krstjani” (“christians”), has been oversimplified by those who see the period from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century as a glorious time in which the dualist church and state worked together and prospered. In fact, the krstjani efforts to replicate early Christianity and follow an apostolic path were often obstructed by churchmen and politicians in Rome and Hungary who mounted crusades against them, such as the crusades of 1235-39, when Bosnia was devastated and thousands were either burned at the stake or led away into captivity.¹

In spite of the historical facts, there are those who believe that there never was a significant dualist movement in Bosnia, including the historian John Fine.² His position has been accepted by many colleagues, including Ivan Lovrenovi?.³ The University of Michigan scholar uses social anthropology to explain that the Bosnian peasant would have been uninterested or unable to understand dualism. He also pays little attention to the European dualist movement, which leads him to make unfortunate doctrinal assumptions– for example, that Gost Radin’s mention of the “Trinity” in his will meant that he was not a true “krstjanin”.

We know from historical documents that there were signs of heresy in Bosnia’s neighborhood as early as the end of the twelfth century. The Archdeacon Thomas, in his *Historia Salonitana* (“Chronicle of Split”) relates that a Church Synod in 1185 condemned all “heretics and their supporters” and banned their small monastic houses called “brotherhoods” (*fraternitates*).⁴

Thomas also describes how the Split Archbishop Bernard, in 1200 AD, pursued the brothers Mateus and Aristodius (*Rastudije*) for preaching their “godless heresy” in his city. He had their property confiscated, and “binding them in the bonds of anathema”, drove them out. Thomas says that many others who had fallen prey to the brothers’ teaching were excommunicated, thus suggesting that their heresy was really a movement. He tells how the brothers eventually abjured their heresy and Bernard restored their property.⁵

The archdeacon relates that *Rastudije* was a talented gold smith and painter. He often traveled to Bosnia and was educated in Slavonic writing as well as in Latin. Evidently, he didn’t abandon his heretical teaching while in Bosnia, for in the St. Petersburg library there is a fragment of a Bosnian Gospel in which “Lord *Rastudije*’s” name appears at the head of a column of presumably ordained bishops (*djedovi*) of the Bosnian sect.⁶ As Jean Duvernoy suggests, *Rastudije* was probably the founder of a new lineage of Bosnian *krstjani*.⁷

Since Rastudije's name was preceded by a column of 16 predecessors, it is obvious that heresy preceded him in Bosnia. The question arises: from what direction did it come— Dalmatia or Serbia ? A look at a Serbian document may cast some light on the subject. In the *Žitije Svetoga Simeuna* (the "Life" of Stefan Nemanja, 1166-1196) by his son Stefan, we read that when heresy arose in his land, Nemanja called a Church Synod. While the council was still in session, it was suddenly interrupted by a distraught young woman who threw herself at the Despot's feet and cried that she had, unknowingly, married a nobleman who belonged to a group that worshipped Satan.

Her appearance galvanized the meeting, as Nemanja called for a trial and mobilized his army. He cut out the tongue of the heretics' teacher, burned others at the stake, and drove the remainder out of the country, burning their books and confiscating their possessions.⁸

No mention is made of the exact nature of the heresy, except that they were "Arians" and had "split the Trinity". Of course, "Arians" was just a label, as Arianism had died out centuries before. I agree with Aleksandar Solovjev that their true name—bogomili, meaning "dear to God"— was taboo and that Nemanja may have banned its use.⁹ As to where the fugitives went, the majority of historians favors Hum (Hercegovina) and Bosnia. The refugees easily melded with the Bosnians since they spoke the same language. This would have taken place between 1172 and 1180, according to Solovjev's calculations.¹⁰

Dualism, then, got its start in Bosnia some twenty or twenty five years earlier than is commonly believed. Putting its roots down secretly, the heresy would have taken a generation to mature, perhaps around 1200 AD, when Archbishop Bernard was expelling heretics from Split and Trogir. Rastudije's knowledge of Slavonic, as well as of Latin, made him a natural link between the coastal heretics—whose language was a form of Latin—and the Bosnian *krstjani*.

News of the heresy reached Pope Innocent III in 1199. The Serbian Duke of Zeta, Vukan, sent the recently-crowned Pope a letter, telling him of heresy in Bosnia. Vukan claimed that Kulin, the ban or ruler of Bosnia, was a heretic, as was his wife and sister. He claimed that Kulin had welcomed the heretics whom Bernard had banished, treating them as Catholics and addressing them as "Christians par excellence". According to Vukan, the ban had led 10,000 of his subjects astray.¹¹

The mention of "Christians" drew the attention of the Pope, who sent a letter (November 11, 1200) to Kulin's suzerain, the Hungarian King Emmerich, warning him that "no small number of Patarenes" had gone from Split and Trogir to Ban Kulin where they were warmly welcomed. Innocent's tone was a mixture of anguish and ire.¹²

He told Emmerich: "Go and ascertain the truth of these reports and if Kulin is unwilling to recant, drive him from your lands and confiscate his property."¹³ We should note that—harsh as he sounds—the Pope was concerned with the truth. In the case of Bosnia, Innocent and his successors sought second and even third opinions. He did not trust local informants and set up his own system of legates and investigators who reported directly to him.

Kulin's reaction to the threat from Rome was both courageous and astute, setting a pattern for future Bosnian-Papal relations. First, he wrote the Pope that he didn't regard the new immigrants as heretics, but as Catholics, and he was sending a few of them to Rome for examination. He also invited the Pope to send a representative to Bosnia to investigate.¹⁴

Unconvinced by Kulin's Bosnians, however, Innocent sent his legate John de Casamaris and Archdeacon Marin of Dubrovnik to Bosnia to interrogate Ban Kulin, his wife, and subjects about "everything relating to faith and life", and if they found anything that "smelled of this heretical depravity—or if they resisted true teaching—they should correct the situation." He referred them to a "Constitution" he had prepared regarding heresy.¹⁵

Innocent was well aware that he might be dealing with dualist heresy in Bosnia. He wrote to Bernard of Split (November 21, 1202) that "a multitude of people in Bosnia are suspected of the damnable heresy of the Cathars."¹⁶

John de Casamaris and Marin may have stayed one full winter in Bosnia, from the end of November until early April. Since their job was to ascertain the truth about the heresy, the legate went about the country with Marin, stopping at the various *krstjani hiže*, or lodges—the *conventicula* mentioned in the Split edict of 1185—interrogating the abbots, monks and nuns regarding their beliefs and practices.

John probably had a list of Patarene or Cathar errors to guide him. Marin was his interpreter, since the Bosnians knew no Latin. If there were Slavonic documents available, Marin translated them. Not only did Casamaris listen to his informants' answers, but where they were in error, he would have taught them correct doctrine, in line with Innocent's directive. John must have convinced himself that he had fulfilled Innocent's command to correct the *krstjani*, because the "Confessio" (Abjuration) signed at Bilino Polje by seven priors of the *krstjani* church on April 8, 1203, makes no mention of errors.¹⁷ As Kniewald says, John's mission was "not to punish but to persuade."¹⁸

The same document was brought to Budapest, April 30 by Casamaris and Kulin and two abbots, where it was examined by the Hungarian King and the high clergy. Kulin's son Stefan, during a later meeting, agreed that if the Bosnians violated the agreement, they would pay a heavy fine of 1,000 marks.¹⁹ On the surface, the "Confessio" concerned church organization and practices. The monks renounced their schism with Rome and agreed to accept Rome as the mother church. They promised to erect chapels with altars and crucifixes, where they would have priests who would say Mass and dispense Holy Communion at least seven times a year on the main feast days.

The priests would also hear confession and give penances. The monks promised to chant the hours, night and day, and to read the Old Testament as well as the New. They would follow the Church's schedule of fasts, as well as their own regimen. They also agreed to stop calling themselves *krstjani*—which had been their exclusive privilege—lest they cause pain to other Christians. They would wear special, uncolored robes, closed and reaching the ankles. In addition they were to have graveyards next to the church, where they would bury their brethren and any visitors who happened to die there.

Women members of the order were to have special quarters away from the men and to eat separately; nor could they be seen talking alone with a monk, lest they cause scandal. The abbots also agreed not to offer lodging to manicheans or other heretics. Finally, upon the death of the head of their order (*magister*), the abbots, after consultation with their fellow monks, would submit their choice to the Pope for his approval. As for the Bosnian Catholic diocese itself, John advised Innocent that they needed to break the hold of the Slavonic bishop who had ruled the Bosnian church up to then, and to appoint three or four Latin bishops, since Bosnia was a large country ("ten days' walk").²⁰

I agree with Kniewald and others that it is necessary to read between the lines to understand the full import of this carefully crafted document. First, it was not written merely to end the schism between the monks and Rome, for in such a case it would have been written more simply. For example, the opening statement in which the seven abbots acknowledge “the one eternal God, creator of all things and redeemer of mankind” is an unusual opening for such a document, according to Kniewald, a Catholic theologian. It stresses the oneness of God and his incarnation (Jesus), thus rejecting in one stroke both dualism and docetism.

The promise to build chapels with altars and crucifixes negated the bogomil/krstjani idea that churches were centres of idolatry and that the crucifix was a hateful symbol. The promise to read the Old Testament rejected dualist belief that it was the book of Satan. In accepting priests, who would say Mass on Sundays and holy days, the monks agreed to follow Catholic practice.

The “Confessio” also addresses the question of the sacraments. We have seen that the monks pledged to partake of the sacrament of Holy Communion at least seven times a year. This was a big step, because taking communion was a public display of belief, although the tenth-century Bulgarian, Cosmas the Presbyter, does mention bogomil heretics who faked taking the sacrament, spitting out the wafer later on.

As for the forgiveness of sins, the dualists believed that serious or “mortal” sins (all sins were “mortal”) could be forgiven only through spiritual baptism (the Consolamentum), while Catholics believe that forgiveness can be gained at any time by sincere confession and penance. For this reason, the Bilino Polje document stresses the need to have priests to hear confessions and give penances.

There is one crucial sacrament not referred to in the “Confessio”, even though it most clearly separates the krstjanin from the Catholic believer. It is Baptism. If you are not baptized, the Church teaches, you are not a Christian. Strictly speaking, you aren’t a heretic, but a pagan. If you are unbaptized you will go to hell, unless you have led a life free of mortal sin, in which case you will go to a place popularly called “limbo”. The sacrament of baptism, then, posed the stiffest theological obstacle between the two churches, except for dualism itself.

Since the krstjani believed that Satan created all matter, including water, and that John the Baptist was his emissary, what were they to do if Casamaris and Marin asked them to undergo the Church’s baptismal ritual, rejecting Satan and all his works? It is not difficult to imagine the obstacle that could pose—psychologically—to the conversion of dualists, who regarded Satan as the creator of the earth and of man.

There are at least two possible explanations for why the sacrament of baptism was not mentioned by Casamaris in the “Confessio”. First of all, the monks could have been baptized with water in the days before the heresy took firm hold in Bosnia. Next, they could have lied to John about being baptized, since lying was permissible to dualists when the survival of their church was threatened. In any event, John had to be under the impression that the monks had all been baptized, or he would have made a strong statement about its necessity in the “Confessio”, just as he did about the Eucharist.

In subsequent centuries, during the Papal crusade to reconvert the Bosnians, baptism with water was a sensitive point for those of the Bosnian nobility who remained krstjani. While the Bosnian kings did agree to be baptized, the nobility often resisted, at least until the fifteenth century,

because their strength lay in their alliance with the krstjani leadership and their followers. The kings, too, recognized the importance of these ties. We know of instances where a converted and therefore baptized king, such as Stefan Thomas (1443-1461), who was obligated upon pain of excommunication to have no relations with heretics, refused to break entirely with their leadership, because, he said, he needed their support against outside enemies.²¹

Duke Hrvoje Vukcic (died 1416), a man of great culture, was pursued by the papal legate Thomas of Hvar for years, but could not bring himself to be baptized, even though he wrote to the Hungarian Queen Barbara that he was afraid he would die a pagan.²² Political realities played a role in all this, as well as perhaps the traditional krstjani view of the universe and their hopes in the promise of the Consolamentum.

After the “Confessio” was approved by King Emmerich, John de Casamaris, in a letter to Innocent, refers to “the former Patarenes.”²³ Obviously, he thought that he had converted the krstjani, but he was wrong. In my opinion, they were merely waiting for him to go. Partly due to Rome’s complacency (caused by Casamaris’s feelings of success) and the Pope’s failure to appoint Latin bishops, as John had suggested, the heretical movement grew stronger over the next few decades, uniting with remnants of the old native Catholic church. Together they formed a national, heretical church which survived crusades and threats of crusades until the mid-fifteenth century, when it gradually vanished in the face of the Ottoman takeover.

In conclusion, I would like to suggest that when a holocaust takes place, such as the antikrstjani crusades in Bosnia from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, we really have a double tragedy: first, in the holocaust itself, with all its attendant atrocities, and second, in the oblivion which gradually envelops its memory. When today’s historians deny the Bosnian dualist past they contribute to this oblivion, thus depriving the krstjani of the recognition they are due for their faith and their suffering.

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Notes

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4. Thomas Archidiaconus. *Historia salonitanorum pontificum*, ed. F. Ra?ki, *Monumenta slavorum meridionalium*, t. XVI, 1894, p. 33. ?
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6. Franjo Sanjek, *op cit*, pp. 98-101. ?
7. Jean Duvernoy, *L’Histoire des Cathares : Le Catharisme*, Toulouse, 1979, p. 72. ?
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10. Ibid, p.19. ?
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 12. T. Smiciklas, ed. Codex Diplomaticus Regni Croatiae, Dalmatiae et Slavoniae, Zagreb, 1904-1934, II, p. 351. ?
 13. Ibid. ?
 14. Registra Vaticana, 5, f 55v. F. Sanjek, p. 47. ?
 15. T. Smiciklas, op cit, 311-14. ?
 16. Registra Vaticana, 5, f 55v. F. Sanjek, p. 46. ?
 17. Ibid, ep. 141, f 103v. T. Smiciklas, op cit, III, 24-25. ?
 18. Dragutin Kniewald, « Vjerodostojnost latinskih izvora o bosanskim krstjanima », Rad (JAZU), 270, 1949, p. 11. ?
 19. J. Fine, op cit, 120. ?
 20. T. Smiciklas, op cit, III, p. 36. ?
 21. Sima Ćirković, Istorija srednjovekovne bosanske države, p. 287. ?
 22. J. Fine, op cit, p.195. ?
 23. T. Smiciklas, op cit, III, p. 36. ?

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