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New Light on the Origins of Bulgaria's Catholics and Muslims

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In the First Bulgarian Empire during the reign of Tsar Peter (927–69) there arose a Christian heretical sect named after its leader, the priest Bogomil. Its chief element of heterodoxy was a complete rejection of the visible, material world, which was perceived as the creation and domain of reviled Satan, opponent of God. The everyday manifestation of this dualist view was severe self-abnegation on the part of Bogomil's followers. A form of monastic asceticism was introduced into secular life. These 'greatest puritans of the Middle Ages' condemned those aspects of man's behaviour that brought him into close contact with matter and flesh, Satan's means of gaining one's soul, especially marriage, the eating of meat, and the drinking of wine.¹ Adherents were divided into two groups, representing differing degrees of asceticism: the ordinary and the 'perfected', who lived in complete continence. But among the 'ordinary' Bogomils, 'if it happens to them by chance to see a child they turn away, spit, and cover their faces . . . They call them little mammons, little devils.'² Clearly had they all achieved the ranks of the 'perfected' they would have become extinct within one generation. Instead, despite frequent anathemas from the official Orthodox Church, they survived until Bulgaria fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1396, when all trace of them was lost.

The origins of Bogomilism can be traced to two earlier dualist sects, which had spread to the Balkans from the Middle East via the Byzantine Empire: Paulicianism and Massalianism. Both shared with Bogomilism a rejection of the material world and a concomitant austere asceticism. Enclaves of followers from both groups continued to thrive long after the appearance of Bogomilism, but the few available sources are far from precise in distinguishing among them, lumping them into the general category of Manichaean heresy. With the coming of the Turks at the end of the fourteenth century all Byzantine and medieval Bulgarian sources abruptly ceased. For further data one must look to the West.

The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries decimated the ranks of the Roman Catholic Church in Western Europe. Whole nations abandoned the church. As the turmoil subsided the Vatican launched an effort to replenish its depleted ranks. In 1622 the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith was established. From 1682 on the Catholic West, led by Austria, slowly forced the Ottoman Empire out of the Balkans. In the 1699 peace Treaty of Karlowitz Austria and Venice wrested from Turkey sizeable portions in the northern and coastal western regions of the Balkan peninsula respectively. Another clause of the Treaty granted freedom of religious practice to all Christians in the remaining portions of the Ottoman Empire, thus ending a 300-year Greek Orthodox monopoly.³ The Sacred

Congregation then set its sights to the East. As the Ottoman Empire receded in power and territory, Franciscan and Passionist missionaries, supported by the Sacred Congregation, moved in, first to care for established Ragusan [Croatian] trading colonies, then to proselytise wherever possible. Much the same process is again taking place in Russia and Eastern Europe now that the Soviet Empire has collapsed.

Already in the sixteenth century Catholic dignitaries travelling in Bulgarian territory began to report groups of Christians living in 27 villages around and between Plovdiv in the south and Nikopol in the north who called themselves 'Paulini'. The Orthodox considered them apostate and excommunicated. The Paulini felt themselves to be true Christians and when they came in contact with an 'apostolic visitor', Bishop Pietro Cedolini, in 1580 some of them requested affiliation with the Vatican. Thereafter, and especially during the second half of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries, there was intense Catholic missionary effort among these latter-day Paulicians.

The Bulgarian Paulicians are not direct descendants of the earlier and primarily Armenian Paulicians of pre-Bogomil times. They are rather the surviving residue amalgam of earlier Paulician, Massalian, Bogomil and other Balkan heretical Christian sects. But in a sense they are the last surviving 'Bogomils'. It is for this reason that one may turn to their beliefs, religious practices and customs as a possible repository of dualist elements which may have entered into the mainstream of Bulgarian folklore and folk life. Fortunately many of the Catholic missionary reports and letters sent back to Rome have been preserved and they serve as a valuable corpus of data on the Paulicians' belief structures: rejection of the cross as the instrument of Christ's death; rejection of icons; baptism by fire (candle) instead of water; no liturgy; no sacraments; no altars; the observance of fasts; and the performance of sacrificial feasts. The Paulini saw reflected in the name of their sect a special relationship to the apostle Paul.⁴

Close inspection of several of these missionary letters reveals an interesting symbiotic relationship between the missionaries and their Paulini flocks. On 25 February 1828 Father Matteo Baldini wrote the following report in S. Maria de Pugliano, Italy. It is given here in translation from the original Italian:

In summer all women went about in chemises that were open around the neck like those of the men, so that when they bent over in their work they revealed their breasts entirely. At the waist in front they wore an apron called a 'prestilkya' and another at the back called a 'pishtimal' made of a light fabric which, when the wind blew, seemed not to be there at all. They flapped like two flags and revealed indecent things. In order to remedy this the missionaries endured much, but God himself took up their defence, punishing those leaders of the people who opposed them. Opposition came not so much from the women as from the men, starting with Trunchevitsa, which was the first village in which the women heeded the priest by making themselves a summer dress called a 'sukman'. A certain Nedelko, a ring-leader and person of influence, kept the missionary at bay by taking the matter to the governor for judgment. In order to back Nedelko, he levied a substantial fine on the priest. But in spite of this the Turk said that it would be better if the women were to go about better clad and the women were pleased with this decision. Whoever did not yet have a 'sukman' made one for herself and they still go about in this type of dress. The above-mentioned Nedelko shook with rage and, since there was nothing he could do, he made

fun of the new fashion. Less than a month later a police chief was billeted at his house as the most fitting place. A cushion was given to the police chief to sit on, but since it was uncomfortable, he checked to see what was inside and found some cartridges, something strictly forbidden at that time because of the Greek uprising. With no human understanding he tied Nedelko up and took him to the pasha of Nikopol, who commanded that his head be chopped off.⁵

On the surface there appears to be reflected in this account a conflict between the lasciviousness and licentiousness of the Paulicians and the virtuousness of the priest. On the cultural plane, however, nudity is clearly signalling different reactions. For the professionally celibate Italian Catholic priest there is an automatic and menacing linkage between accidental nudity and sexual arousal. For the Paulicians there is not. Nedelko's assertive opposition to a new style in women's dress is not motivated by a threat to voyeurism but by resistance to imposed cultural change. The Paulician women's folk costume is attested to be centuries old.

Why, then, were the Paulicians attracted to the Catholic Church and its culturally alien priests, when they were surrounded by Orthodox Bulgarians of a familiar culture to whom they could presumably assimilate in the religious sphere with great ease? Could it be their dualist heritage of self-abnegation and strict discipline? For further clarification let us consider another text.

In 1759 Monsignor Nicolo Pugliesi noted the following – in Latin – in the diocesan records of Nikopol, Bulgaria:

Particularly stubborn in all their ways are the women, and especially the old ones, who take it upon themselves to present a rule in the form of a law of faith however bad the custom of theirs which they call a law. These wicked ladies keep the married and unmarried girls from going to mass and to church, because they say that it is a bad thing for young boys and unmarried virgins to go to church, when, however, they do not hesitate to encourage them to dance with pagans [Muslims] and heretics [Orthodox] in the middle of the square, in the streets, and at the crossroads. They permit them to converse with people of whatever background and religion, saying it is appropriate for youths and even necessary and useful to act impetuously.⁶

Again the priest's puritanism emerges. Boys and girls past puberty must not be left to their own devices. The mating instinct is too strong and must be controlled by outside authority. Of course the xenophobic overtones are prompted by the fear of losing ecclesiastical authority. But what is of most interest is the older women's prohibition against church attendance on the part of the young girls. This could well be an echo of earlier Bogomil/Paulician practices. In the *Sinodik* of Tsar Boris (1211) the following anathema against the Bogomils is promulgated: 'Cursed be those who have an aversion to the church, to the hymns, and to the house of God, and who simply recite "Our Father", singing it on the corners of the streets.'⁷ A later source of unclear provenance dating from the sixteenth or seventeenth century describes a Bogomil burial service (there were no regular Sunday services):

Bringing dead bodies into the churches is forbidden, because it is held that a dead body belongs to the Force of Destruction. Dead bodies are taken from their homes and carried right to the place designated for burial. Attendance by priests on a dead person is strictly forbidden. The dead are carried and buried only in the presence of one of the elders, *since it is forbidden for*

*women, relatives of the dead and minors to be present at a burial.*⁸

Now a second excerpt from Father Baldini's report:

These girls were followers of Father Giovachino. They went about in such fervour that when two of them died in my arms I considered them to be saints for their denials and penitence, because they always slept on the bare earth, they never drank wine, but only water, they ate only bread and dedicated every spare moment to the church. In order to spare them new hazards, especially those of marriage, God took them back to paradise – such is my hope.⁹

The lay asceticism evidenced by these Paulician girls, but not found among their Orthodox and Muslim neighbours, is of the most extreme sort, similar to that formerly practised by the 'perfected' of the ancient Bogomils. As mentioned earlier the Bogomils were divided into two groups: the rank and file 'believers' and the 'perfected', from whom their religious leaders were chosen. The 'believers' were those who accepted the Bogomil creed and received baptism by fire. They could marry, serve the tsar and homeland, and go to war. Their life's task was to oppose evil in order to receive sanctification at life's end through repentance. The 'perfected' led a strict ascetic life. They forsook family life, did not serve the state, did not go to war and never attended gatherings of non-Bogomils. They were obliged to maintain strict fasts and spend all their waking hours teaching and preaching.¹⁰ There is no question in my mind that these two Paulician girls, in totally denying their sexuality and their physical needs, were following the path of the long-gone 'perfected' Bogomils. Now not all – in fact few – of the Paulicians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were this severe in their asceticism, but they all maintained strict asceticism as an ideal goal. In the zealous, celibate, puritanical Italian Catholic missionaries they sensed a personification of their ascetic ideals, a corps of latter-day 'perfected' Bogomil leaders. They chose to join the church of these missionaries for these very reasons and likewise rejected the culturally closer Orthodox Church, because the village Orthodox priest was more integrated into his flock, with a family of his own and no severe regime of self-abnegation. The Orthodox faithful for their part could not be enticed to join the Catholic Church; they perceived it as meddling in comparison to their own church, which did not intrude into their private lives.

Many of the missionaries' letters deal with marriage. The following excerpt is from a letter written by the priest Fr Mattia Rasdilovic of Bulgaria to his bishop on 28 February 1806:

Your well remembered predecessor placed restrictions on our ability to grant marriage dispensations in prohibited cases. . . so that, when such a case occurred, all missionaries of the diocese had to respond in like manner. He also prohibited us from performing marriages when a Catholic [Paulician] man wanted to marry a schismatic [Orthodox] woman, saying that the whole diocese should not be put at risk for the sake of one or two instances.

Now in the village of Luzhani, Peter (nicknamed Puto) Ganyov, having arranged to wed a schismatic [Orthodox] and fearing that those on his side would not wish to cause trouble for the Catholics (since in fact in recent times their priests have been put in jail and fined) was married by the Muslim clergyman, hoping later to be secretly married by the priest to the woman who has agreed to live with him and conform to the Catholic faith, but for the time being retaining whispered ties with the schismatics [Orthodox].

Then in the village of Trunchovitsa, Luko, a three-times widower, who can hardly be said to have lived with his deceased wives in a good Christian manner, requested permission to get married for a fourth time, to a relative of the third degree. Turned down by me and threatening to become a Turk [Muslim] he appeals to Father Fortunato, and returning home, he lies to the woman, assuring her that he will obtain the dispensation if she will agree to accept him. And thus he arranges the wedding and comes for the dispensation. Rejected [by the priest], he threatens to take her by force by becoming a Turk [Muslim] and forcing her to disregard the priests who have capriciously refused to grant him permission.¹¹

The interrelationship of Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Islam among the Paulicians with regard to marriage and divorce is very complex, but it does shed light on two important aspects of Bulgarian history during the Turkish occupation, namely conversion to Islam and crypto-Christianity. We have already considered why the Paulicians preferred assimilation to Catholicism and were opposed to Orthodoxy, but why did numbers of them accept Islam? In a work on Balkan crypto-Christianity Stavro Skendi relates that

following the conquest of Bulgaria, the noblemen – those who remained, for the majority were either killed or fled into exile – were the first to embrace Islam, in order to retain their property and position. Some of the people followed the nobility, while others became Muslims under duress. Conversion took place among the religious sects of the Bogomils and Paulicians, who, long regarded as heretical by church and state and persecuted, had become alienated from the majority of the Bulgarians and were susceptible to the religion of the conqueror. The Pomaks – as the Islamicised Bogomils are generally called... espoused Islam, some immediately after the conquest, others later.¹²

Other sources on Islamicisation among Bosnian Bogomils confirm that many of those Bogomils secretly retained their earlier beliefs though publicly and officially professing to be Muslims.

Conversions from Christianity to Islam among Bulgarians during the Turkish occupation have been attributed, as we see from Skendi's analysis, to the use of force, a desire to retain property and a desire to retain position. Other reasons for conversion include: the liturgical simplicity of Islam, specifically the absence of a cross and icons; conviction; and especially taxation, since the Ottoman authorities required Christians to pay double taxes in times of meagre resources. There are two additional considerations, closely linked, which affected the Paulicians particularly: marriage and divorce. The social conditions under which Paulician women lived during Ottoman times were appalling. Their work burdens were greater than the men's and their mortality rates were much higher. These circumstances resulted in a smaller pool of marriageable women. Though it was acceptable for unmarried or widowed men to live alone, it was neither acceptable nor economically feasible for women to do so. If an unmarried girl were to elope, the Turkish authorities would force her to marry, since they would not allow her to return to and disgrace her parents. It frequently happened that husbands had to seek work away from home and were absent for years without word. The concept of legally presumed death did not exist, nor would the Catholic Church grant divorces or annulments for desertion; but the Muslim clergy would readily offer a divorce. They would also marry divorced people, something the

Catholic clergy would not do. Catholic missionaries noted that many Paulician young men and widowers preferred to live without wives rather than abandon their faith, though they were tempted with Orthodox and Turkish wives by their neighbours of the other two faiths, thus asserting old-style Bogomil asceticism. Nevertheless, given the dearth of Paulician girls eligible for matrimony in the eyes of the Catholic Church, the attitude of the Catholic Church toward marriage and divorce and the Turkish authorities' non-acceptance of common law marriages – of course civil marriages did not exist – the only solution for many was Muslim divorce and marriage. As in the cases of Puto and Luko above, a Muslim marriage of convenience led to crypto-Christianity. Here, then, we have a powerful incentive for Bulgarian Christians to convert to Islam during the Ottoman period, while still remaining crypto-Christians.

Notes and References

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- ⁶ *ibid.*, p. 82.
- ⁷ Sharenkoff, p. 83.
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