

MOUNT ATHOS AND THE BOGOMIL-HESYCHASTIC CONTROVERSY¹

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Abstract: ANGELOVSKA-PANOVA, Maja. *Mount Athos and the Bogomil-Hesychastic Controversy*. Since 10th Century Mount Athos continuously represented a center of Orthodoxy that impacted not only on a Byzantine religious life, but also on politics, society and arts. In 14th century the practice of Hesychia was dominant. It was a kind of monasticism, mainly concentrated on the intensive contemplation that usually resulted with hypostatic union with God. At the same time under the influence of some heterodox propaganda, the Massalian as well as Bogomil tendencies penetrated, claiming to experience the essence of God, but also rejecting the sacraments of the official Christianity in respect of its institutional meaning. The controversy intensified when Barlaam of Calabria criticized Hesychasm as heretical, leading to a series of theological debates. Ultimately, Palamas' teachings were upheld by the Palamite Councils (1341 – 1351), affirming Hesychasm as Orthodox doctrine, while the Bogomils were condemned. This conflict shaped Byzantine spirituality and solidified Hesychasm's influence in Orthodox monasticism, particularly on Mount Athos.

Keywords: *Mount Athos, Bogomilism, Hesychasm, monasticism, asceticism*

The beginnings of monastic life on Mount Athos, according to the Byzantine historian Joseph Genesisius, who lived and worked in the mid-10th century, can be traced back to the 9th century, specifically to the Church Council held in Constantinople in 843. Among those present at the Council were monks from Mount Athos, and the Council's purpose was to abolish iconoclasm and restore iconophilism (Angelopoulos 1997, 28; Atanasov 2007, 6).

However, when discussing the establishment of a standardized form of monastic life, the contribution of St. Athanasius of Athos, originally from Trebizond, must be acknowledged. In search of a radical spiritual endeavor and deeper contemplation, he arrived on Mount Athos in 957. Soon after, with the support of the reigning Byzantine Emperor Nikephoros Phokas (963 – 969), he began constructing the Great Lavra, located in the southeastern part of the peninsula.

The first monastic constitution or typikon is chronologically linked to the early years of the reign of Byzantine Emperor John Tzimiskes (969 – 976), specifically between 970 and 972. The typikon, written on goatskin, contained 28 rules that governed the lives of monks within the monastic communities. It was signed by 58 individuals, including 42 abbots (Monah Sava Hilandarec 1989, 30-31). This document, now preserved in the archive of the Protaton in Karyes, serves as a foundational model for later typika, which underwent modifications and additions based on the evolving needs of the monks and their superiors.

The 10th century was marked by a significant rise in the number of Athonite monasteries. This period saw the establishment of the Great Lavra (961), Georgian Iviron Monastery (979/980),

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the Greek Vatopedi Monastery (before 985), and the Zograf Monastery (traditionally believed to have been founded in 919 by Macedonian monks - brothers Moses, Aaron, and John Selima, who are associated with Ohrid). Other notable monasteries were founded later, including the Serbian Hilandar Monastery (1198).

In the early phase of monastic development on Mount Athos, the cenobitic type (Talbot 2009, 262; Angelovska-Panova 2010, 38)² of monasticism prevailed, based on a centralized communal lifestyle in the form of brotherhoods. However, starting from the 14th century, with the rise of Hesychasm, the anchoritic or hermitic form of monastic life became increasingly prominent. This type of monasticism emphasized complete isolation and constant contemplation.

Apart from these two main types of monasticism, Mount Athos was also home to 12 sketes (small monastic communities), which were administratively governed by one of the Athonite monasteries (Atanasov 2007, 7). In this context, it is interesting to note that the primacy of cenobitic monasticism was also characteristic of medieval Macedonia. Chronologically, the main proponents of this type of monasticism were the brothers Cyril and Methodius, followed by their disciples Clement and Naum of Ohrid. From the late 11th and early 12th centuries, anchoritic monasticism also gained prominence in Macedonia, with desert-dwelling monks such as John of Rila, Joachim of Osogovo, Prohor of Pčinja, and Gavril of Lesnovo, who are identified in literature as spiritual brothers.

This represents a reversed chronological order, especially when compared to the development of monastic life in Egypt, Asia Minor, Palestine, and Syria, where eremitism first emerged and was later followed by the dominance of cenobitic monasticism with the creation of the Typikon of Pachomius (290 – 345) (Angelovska-Panova 2014, 117-118).

Regardless of their primary spiritual and religious function, the monasteries of Mount Athos also served as significant scriptorial centers, housing extensive libraries and collections of ancient manuscripts. During his visit to Mount Athos between 1844 and 1845, the Russian Slavist and traveler Viktor Grigorovich noted that Athonite libraries contained approximately 13,000 printed books, 2,800 Greek manuscripts, and 455 Slavic manuscripts. In the following period, this literary wealth continued to expand (Panov 1999, 109-110).

Until Mount Athos was granted autonomous territorial status within the Greek state in 1924, it had, for most of its long history, belonged to the Byzantine and Ottoman Empires.

The period between the 13th and 14th centuries was particularly dynamic politically, as Mount Athos experienced frequent changes in rulers. From 1204 to 1222, it was under the jurisdiction of the Kingdom of Thessalonica, later falling under the rule of the Despotate of Epirus and the Latin Empire. It then came under the control of the Bulgarian Tsar Ivan Asen II and, for a few decades (1345 – 1371), was part of the Serbian medieval state (Atanasov 2007, 8).

The 14th century is of particular interest, as it was a period of crisis affecting several key aspects of Byzantine society: political instability, divisions within the church, and growing dissatisfaction among the people, fueled by the moral and ethical decadence of both state and ecclesiastical authorities. These challenges inevitably impacted Mount Athos, a stronghold of Orthodoxy. A key issue in this discussion is the significance of Hesychasm, the spread of Bogomil-Massilian

² Life in the cenobitic manner implied constant improvement and organization of communal work, regardless of whether it involved manual labor or social work. The challenge of this type of monasticism is associated with the fact that, theoretically, it represents a replacement of biological families with spiritual ones. It is no coincidence that monks referred to each other as brothers, while their superiors – who were responsible for introducing them to the catechesis of Christian theology and managing the community in a practical sense – were seen as spiritual guides. See: (Talbot 2009, 262; Angelovska-Panova 2010, 38).

tendencies, and the interaction between these two spiritual movements of different religious origins.

Etymologically, the term Hesychasm is derived from the Greek word “ἥσυχία» (Latin: *silentium*), meaning “peace,” “quiet,” “silence,” or “serenity.” In patristic vocabulary, it refers to “prayerful silence” or “stillness.” Defined as a *terminus technicus*, Hesychasm implies an ascetic practice aimed at achieving spiritual harmony and hypostatic union with God.

The emergence of Hesychasm and its practices on Mount Athos is largely attributed to Gregory of Sinai, who prepared several prayer manuals for Athonite monks. These manuals serve as evidence of the spread of Hesychasm on the Holy Mountain. In one of his treatises, *On Stillness and the Two Methods of Prayer*, Gregory provides detailed instructions on Hesychastic prayer techniques.

Special emphasis was placed on breathing techniques during the recitation of the Jesus Prayer. Breath control involved sitting with the chin resting on the chest while directing the eyes toward the center of the abdomen, specifically the navel. Additionally, monks preferred dimly lit environments to maintain focus on the prayer and avoid distractions (Strezova 2014, 16).

Gregory of Sinai introduced a tripartite system of spiritual effort, culminating in the realization of the Divine Logos, which represents the ultimate goal of contemplation – attaining union with God (*theosis*)³ (Balfour 1981, 647-651).

In this sense, Hesychasm, as a synonym for spiritual peace and silence, is far more than mere tranquility in a monk’s physical surroundings. The practice of *hesychia* did not imply passivity; on the contrary, it represented a continuous struggle for spiritual existence, requiring immense psycho-physical discipline. Consequently, Mount Athos provided an exceptional environment for the revival of the mystical monastic traditions of Egypt, Cappadocia, Sinai, and Palestine – crystallized in Hesychasm and championed by Gregory Palamas (1296 – 1395). As an already established Byzantine theologian, Gregory Palamas elevated Hesychastic principles to their highest theological and philosophical level.

A distinctive feature of Hesychasm from the 14th century onward, as suggested by Marius Dorobantu, is “*the preference for the Jesus Prayer as a standard practice designed to facilitate spiritual transformation and the articulation of the experience of contemplating divine light within the bold theology of divine uncreated energies.*” In this sense, Hesychasm can be more broadly defined as “*a spiritual system, essentially contemplative in orientation, which regards human perfection as consisting in union with God by means of prayer or perpetual prayerfulness*” (Adnès 1968, 384; Dorobantu 2022, 5).

Parallel to Hesychasm, the 14th century also witnessed the resurgence of Bogomilism, which became particularly pronounced during the reign of Stefan Dušan (1331 – 1355), when most of Macedonia was incorporated into the Serbian state. Following his successful conquests, Stefan Dušan aspired to seize Constantinople itself, aiming to replace Byzantium’s political, spiritual, and cultural dominance. In this sense, the Macedonian ecclesiastical and cultural tradition provided a solid foundation for realizing these ambitions (Velev 1996, 17-18).

It is no coincidence that Stefan Dušan proclaimed himself emperor in Skopje on April 1, 1346, in the presence of the Serbian Patriarch, the Archbishop of Ohrid, and the Patriarch of Trnovo (Velev 1996, 18). To consolidate his rule and strengthen the feudal social structures – equating the newly conquered territories with a powerful empire modeled on Byzantium – Stefan Dušan promoted the famous *Zakonik* (Law Code) at the Council held in Skopje in May 1349. This Code represented a synthesis of Byzantine legal traditions and customary law, including provisions

³ It comes about a transformative process whose aim is likeness to or union with God. More about the meaning of the term see: Goran 2019, 8.

for punishing, branding, and exiling “heretics who live among Christians” (Zakonik cara Stefana Dushana 1975, 184).

The intensified activity of the Bogomils in the first half of the 14th century is also evidenced by an anathema from the *Kratovo Prayer Book*, preserved in a manuscript copy from 1526. This anathema condemns “those who associate with, eat, or drink with Armenians, Paulicians, Patarenes, and Bogomils” (Dragojlovich – Antich 1978, 99).

One of the most significant sources on the 14th century – and, in that regard, on the existence of Massilian-Bogomil tendencies on Mount Athos – is *The Life of Theodosius of Trnovo*, written by the Patriarch of Constantinople, Callistus. This work was likely composed in the final months of Callistus’s life, most probably during the winter of 1363 – 1364 (Rigo – Scarpa 2018, 481). At that time, Mount Athos was under Serbian control, as confirmed by historical records mentioning several Serbian *protoi* and referencing not only Hilandar but also other monasteries, including the Great Lavra (Rigo 2004, 14).

Regarding the reliability and broader context of Bogomilism, *The Life of Theodosius of Trnovo* can be compared to *The Sermon of Presbyter Cosmas* (Angelovska-Panova 2022, 307).

According to *The Life of Theodosius of Tarnovo*, Callistus describes a certain Irina, a nun from Thessaloniki: “Living in Thessaloniki, she passed as if living in purity, but secretly and clandestinely, she was a perpetrator of all kinds of impurities and wickedness. When the monks discovered what kind of woman she was, many of them began to meet where she lived. She, being completely impure, mastered the entire Messalian heresy, which she secretly taught to all those who visited her in their godlessness. As the heresy became widespread, many monks were affected by the delusion, and when they went in separate groups to Mount Athos, they insulted the monasteries there with poverty and begging” (Kiselkov 1926, 14; Hamilton – Hamilton – Stoyanov 1998, 283).

The penetration of Bogomilism into Mount Athos from Thessaloniki is entirely plausible, especially given that the city served as the primary communication link between the monastic community and the outside world. The dispersion of Bogomilism from its core in Macedonia through Thessaloniki, as Dimitri Obolensky once stated, “was undoubtedly facilitated by the natural route of the Vardar River, the main artery connecting Macedonia with Byzantium” (Obolensky 1948, 255).

Besides the nun Irina, *The Life of Theodosius of Trnovo* also mentions Lazar and a certain Cyril, nicknamed Bosota. Accusations of moral corruption were a common feature of hagiographic literature when describing heretics. Thus, Lazar was accused of madness, while Cyril was said to have manifested his heretical beliefs by “blaspheming the holy icons... trampling on the sanctuary and the cross of life... [and] teaching men and women to renounce their lawful marriage” (Hamilton – Hamilton – Stoyanov 1998, 283).

A priest named Stefan, a follower of Cyril and Bosota, is also mentioned in the context of heretical activities. After the Council of Trnovo, held in 1360 and led by Theodosius: “Lazar, realizing his mistake, repented until the end of his life. The impious Bosota and his like-minded Stefan remained hardened. For this reason, seeing their false wisdom, the Emperor ordered their faces to be branded with hot iron and permanently exiled them from his lands” (Hamilton – Hamilton – Stoyanov 1998, 285).

The Life of Theodosius of Trnovo also recounts another case of heresy: “From Constantinople to Tarnovo came a monk named Theodoret, supposedly to heal [the people]. However, as soon as he began his work, he started sowing the weeds of lawlessness. The weed was the blasphemy of the dishonorable Akindynos and Barlaam. Not only that: he deceived the people with magic and charm. He did all this not only among the simple folk but even more so among prominent and well-known individuals. In the beginning, he created so much evil that most of the city leaned towards the abyss.

He taught them to bow before an oak tree to receive healing from it, and because of this, many sacrificed sheep and lambs there, believing in the deception" (Petkov 2008, 296).

Similar information appears in the works of Gregory Akindynos (c. 1300 – 1349), a Macedonian Slav from Prilep who received his philosophical and theological education in Thessaloniki under the leading scholars of the time: Thomas Megister, Bernard Barlaam, and Gregory Palamas, whom he would later accuse of heresy. In a letter from 1345, Akindynos accused Palamas of visiting, along with his friend Isidore, the nun Irina – one of the most notorious heretics in Thessaloniki (Loos 1974, 330-331; Dragojlovich 1980, 21).

The accusation against Irina for preaching Messalian heresy stems from the fact that, in the 14th century, sources often conflated Messalianism and Bogomilism. By this time, authentic Messalianism – originally a 4th-century heretical movement from Asia Minor – had largely disappeared. What remained were traces of its influence, which found indirect expression in Bogomilism (Angelovska-Panova 2004, 103).

There is a strong basis to assume that Irina was one of the "perfect" Bogomils, particularly since Bogomil ideology promoted gender equality and the possibility for women to cultivate their intellectual potential and preach – a practice that was never institutionalized within Orthodox or Catholic Christianity (Angelovska-Panova 2004, 103).

The information from *The Life of Theodosius of Trnovo* largely aligns with the account of the Byzantine historian Nikephoros Gregoras. Gregoras states: *"Now let me begin by expounding on the Messalians and the Bogomils, who at that time were settled near Mount Athos. Indeed, I think that Mount Athos is worthy of wonder, for it is ... endowed with a moderate climate and adorned with abundant and diverse vegetation, and thus, so to speak, it easily creates a pleasant feeling among visitors and immediately delivers satisfaction and delight"* (Greek sources about Bulgarian history 1983, 183).

At the outset, Gregoras highlights the natural splendor of Mount Athos, noting that its environment offers "great opportunities for the monks who live there, leading a peaceful life, to send winged prayers to God, as the mountain provides great possibilities for those who wish to taste heavenly life on earth" (Greek sources about Bulgarian history 1983, 184). This elaborate description of Mount Athos is likely tendentious, serving a specific rhetorical or political purpose within the theological and political climate of the time (Pavlovič 2015, 310).

Of particular relevance to our topic is Gregoras's mention of: *"the icon painters Moses, Isaac, David, and Job, as well as all those whose language, thoughts, and deeds are completely corrupt, but who, in a dishonest manner, attempted to diminish the hidden folly and impiety of their own souls by associating themselves with the names of distinguished and virtuous men..."* (Greek sources about Bulgarian history 1983, 183).

Despite condemning them as heretics, Gregoras acknowledges that: *"they could not endlessly deceive the pure and sincere eyes of the God-loving men who lived there only for God."* He further states that "once they were exposed, some were subjected to the punishments they deserved, while others were banished... There were even those who secretly fled and headed for the cities of Thessaloniki and Beroea" (Greek sources about Bulgarian history 1983, 184).

In Chapter 29, when discussing the power struggle over the patriarchal throne between Kallistos and Philotheos Kokkinos, Gregoras mentions: *"Niphon, whom the monks there called by the nickname Scorpion, and who was recently accused of the Massalian and Bogomil heresy, though still secretly and without witnesses."* Notably, Gregoras accuses Kallistos of associating with Niphon and asserts that *"both shared the same beliefs,"* though he does not specify what those beliefs were (Greek sources about Bulgarian history, 1983, 192).

Gregoras also strongly criticizes Palamas, claiming that he: *"honors only empty names"* and associates him with: *"such images and shadows as are spoken of by followers of the Platonic school..."*

and their later adherents – the Bogomils, Manicheans, and Massalians” (Greek sources about Bulgarian history 1983, 192).

In general, historical sources do not engage in theological or dogmatic discussions concerning Bogomilism. Instead, they primarily document the presence of Massalian-Bogomil tendencies spread by specific figures.

This raises an important dilemma: how and for what purpose did Bogomils establish a presence on Mount Athos? Moreover, to what extent can interactions between Hesychasts and Bogomils be identified, given that Hesychasm is a mystical branch of Orthodoxy, whereas Bogomilism is a dualistic doctrine – or, more popularly, a heresy?

Although Bogomilism existed on Mount Athos for only three years, the duration is secondary to the significance of its penetration into the very heart of Orthodox monasticism.

One plausible explanation is that monks were influenced by the outside world, particularly during their travels to Thessaloniki and its surrounding regions for practical necessities, such as procuring supplies for personal use and for the monastic community. An illustrative case is the aforementioned nun Irina, whose preaching contributed – albeit without engaging in deep theological discussions – to the spread of heretical tendencies among monks.

Another plausible assumption is that, in the political climate of the early Ottoman conquests in the Balkans, a significant number of monks sought refuge on Mount Athos. Among them were likely adherents of Bogomilism who adopted a monastic guise as a means of self-protection – particularly since their beliefs and activities had long subjected them to persecution. It is no coincidence that Nikephoros Gregoras himself highlights Mount Athos’s natural advantages, describing it as a place that “*abounds in nature’s qualities*,” which undoubtedly provided a sense of security and a semblance of normalcy (Greek sources about Bulgarian history, 1983, 183).

From a methodological standpoint, one theoretical and practical observation is the contemplative asceticism that both movements shared.

The prayer practices of the Hesychasts exhibit striking similarities to the spiritual exercises of the Massalians and Bogomils, who viewed prayer as an existential means of attaining a sinless life (Angelovska-Panova 2004, 104). Both traditions believed that through prayerful asceticism, they could perceive divine light and, in doing so, achieve immortality and eternal life even before the universal resurrection. This is corroborated by the writings of Euthymios Zigabenos, a high-ranking church official during the reign of Alexios I Komnenos (1081 – 1118), who noted that the Bogomils “*did not die, but as if in sleep, they shed their earthly and bodily covering and clothed themselves in the immortal and divine garment of Christ*” (Euthymios Zigabenos 1865, coll.1317; Dragojlovich 1980, 25).

For Hesychasts, as for the Bogomils, death was understood as a “mysterious” separation of soul and body, in which the body lost its vital force while the soul continued to exist as an incorporeal being. The notion of the soul’s immortality among both groups had more philosophical and anthropological significance than purely religious implications. This belief formed the foundation of their broader philosophy of salvation.

In this context, the presence of Massalian-Bogomil tendencies likely influenced certain branches of Hesychasm (Strezova 2014, 234)⁴ that leaned toward a conditionally heretical understanding of ecstasy, omphalopsychism, prayerful asceticism, and divine energy as the ultimate form of hypostatic union with God.

⁴ The rationalist-Hesychast disputes began in the 1340s at the initiative of the Calabrian monk Barlaam, who published a polemical treatise against the Athonite Hesychasts, accusing them of the Messalian heresy. Gregory Palamas stood in defense of the Hesychasts. Palamite theology is based on the distinction between the essence and energies of the uncreated God.

At the same time, the Bogomils, having developed a recognizable religious-ideological platform, adopted a strategy of self-defense by emphasizing the philosophical dimensions of their teachings. By aligning themselves with the Byzantine intellectual elite and engaging in the exegesis of theological and metaphysical questions, they sought to legitimize their beliefs. Hesychasm, as a mystical movement within Orthodox monasticism, provided a convenient and relatively safe channel for the transmission of Bogomil ideas (Angelovska-Panova 2019, 91).

Given this mutual interaction, both Bogomilism and that branch of Hesychasm that intersected with heretical elements functioned not merely as spiritual movements but also as expressions of intellectual thought. This undoubtedly contributed to the religious and philosophical diversity of Mount Athos until Hesychasm ultimately became fully integrated into Orthodox monasticism.

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