

Friends of God in Bosnia
Extract from E. H. Broadbent's *The Pilgrim Church*:

The Bogomils

It was... in Bosnia that their [The Bogomils's] greatest development took place. In the twelfth century they were already very numerous there, and spread into Spalato¹ and Dalmatia. Here they came into conflict with the Roman Catholic Church. The title of the rulers of Bosnia was Ban, the most eminent of these being Kulin Ban. In 1180 this ruler was addressed by the pope as a faithful adherent of the Church, but by 1199 it was acknowledged that he and his wife and family and ten thousand Bosnians had joined the Bogomil or Patarrene heresy, otherwise churches of believers in Bosnia. Minoslav, Prince of the Herzegovina, took the same stand as did also the Roman Catholic Bishop of Bosnia. The country ceased to be Catholic and enjoyed a time of prosperity that has remained proverbial ever since.



There were no priests, or rather the priesthood of all believers was acknowledged. The churches were guided by elders who were chosen by lot, several in each church, an overseer (called grandfather), and ministering brethren called leaders and elders. Meetings could be held in any house and the regular meeting places were quite plain, no bells, no altar, only a table, on which might be a white cloth and a copy of the Gospels. A part of the earnings of the brethren was set aside for the relief of sick believers and of the poor and for the support of those who travelled to preach the Gospel among the unconverted.

Pope innocent III, with the help of the King of Hungary, brought such pressure to bear on Kulin Ban that, at a meeting (1203) between the pope's envoys and the Ban, accompanied by the magnates of Bosnia, at Bjelopolje, "the white plain", where Kulin held his court, the Bosnian leaders agreed to submit to the Roman Church, promised never again to relapse into heresy, but to erect an altar and cross in each of their places of worship, and to have priests who should read the Mass and listen to confession, and administer the sacrament twice a year. They agreed to observe fasts and holy days, that the laity should cease to undertake spiritual functions, and that those who minister in spiritual matters should be the clergy only, who would be distinguished from the laity by wearing cowls and being called brothers, and that when these elected a prior they would apply to the pope from confirmation. Heretics were never again to be tolerated in Bosnia. Though, under pressure of the threat of war, the Ban and rulers of the country made such an agreement, the people entirely refused to accept it or to be bound by it in any way.

Brethren in Bosnia had intercourse with their fellow believers in Italy, in the south of France, in Bohemia, on the Rhine, and in other parts, reaching even to Flanders and England. When the Pope declared a crusade against the Albigenses, and Provence was being wasted, fugitives found refuge in Bosnia. Bosnian and Provençal elders consulted together on matters of doctrine. Rumours were current that the spiritual movements in Italy, France and Bohemia were all connected with a "heretical Pope" in Bosnia. This was only imaginary, as no such person existed, but it showed that a strong influence went out from Bosnia. An Italian inquisitor, Reniero Sacconi, living in the reign of Kulin, who having been himself a "heretic", knew more about them than most, calls them the church of the *Cathari*, or pure-living a term used from before the time of the Emperor Constantine, and says they extended from the Black Sea to the Atlantic.

¹ Split



The peace which Kuln Ban purchased by yielding to Rome was not of long duration, for he could not compel his people to observe its terms. On his death (1216) the Pope appointed a Roman Catholic Ban, and sent a mission to convert the Bosnians. The churches of the country, however, increased the more and spread into Croatia, Dalmatia, Istria, Carniola and Slavonia. Some six years later the Pope, despairing of converting the Bosnians by any other than forcible methods, and encouraged by the success of his crusade in Provence, ordered the King of Hungary to invade Bosnia. The Bosnians deposed their Roman Catholic Ban and elected a Bogomil, Ninoslav. For years the war went on with varying fortune. Ninoslav yielded to circumstances and became a Roman Catholic, but no change in their rulers affected the faith and confession of the great bulk of the people. The country was devastated, but whenever the invading armies withdrew, the churches were found still existing, and the industry of the people quickly restored prosperity. Fortresses were erected throughout the country “for the protection of the Roman Catholic Church and religion”; the Pope gave the land to Hungary, which long ruled it, but its people still holding to their faith, he at length called a crusade of “all the Christian world” against it; the Inquisition was established (1291), and Dominican and Franciscan brothers competed in applying its terrors to the devoted churches.



Meanwhile, the constant pressure of Islam was becoming an increasing danger for Europe, and Hungary was in the

forefront of the fight; yet this did not awake the Catholic countries to see the folly of destroying a barrier between them and their most dangerous foe...

Bosnia experienced a period of political revival during the reign of Tvrtko, the first Ban to take the title of King. He and Kulin are the two most prominent Bosnian rulers. Tvrtko tolerated the Bogomils, large numbers of whom served in his armies, and he greatly extended his kingdom. Towards the end of his reign the battle of Kossovo (1389) extended the Turkish rule over Serbia and made the Mahammedan menace to Europe more serious than ever. Even this did not suffice to stop persecution, and the Pope again encouraged the King of Hungary, promising him aid against the Turks and the "Bosnian Manichaeans and Arians."² King Sigismund of Hungary was successful in destroying the Bosnian army under the successors of Tvrtko, and causing 126 Bosnian magnates, whom he had captured, to be beheaded and thrown from the rocks of Dobjo into the River Bosnia (1408).

Then the Bosnians, driven to desperation, turned to the Turks for protection... Soon afterwards the Turks and Bogomil Bosnians, for the first time united, inflicted a heavy defeat on Hungary at the Battle of Usora, a few miles from Doboj (1415).

The struggle between Christendom and Islam swayed to and fro on its long battle-front. But whenever the Papal party prevailed, persecution in Bosnia began afresh, so that (1450) some 40,000 Bogomils, with their leaders, crossed the frontier with Herzegovina, where the Prince Stefan Vuktchitch³ protected them. The capture of Constantinople in 1453⁴ by Mohammed II,⁵ which led to the speedy subjugation of Greece, Albania and Serbia under the hands of the Turks, did not cause the negotiations and intrigues for the conversion of the Bosnian Bogomils to cease. Sometimes their rulers were won over to Rome, but the people never. Therefore as the end drew near, we find Bosnian kings appealing to the Pope for help against the Turks, which was only given on condition of fresh persecution of the Bogomils, till at last (1463) when the Turks, who had been driven back for a time, advanced again on Bosnia, the people refused their king any aid, and preferring the Turk to the Inquisition, made no resistance to the invader, with the result that within a week the Sultan took possession of seventy towns and fortresses, in a country naturally strong for defence, and



Bosnia passed permanently into Moslem hands, to stagnate for four centuries under a deadening system destructive of life and progress.

These "*Friends of God*" in Bosnia have left but little literature behind them, so that there remains much to be discovered of their doctrine and practices, which must have varied in different circles and at different periods. But it is evident that they made a vigorous protest against the prevailing evils in Christendom, and endeavoured with the utmost energy to hold fast to the teaching and

² These were two earlier heresies, to the tenets of which we have no reason to believe the Bogomils subscribed.

³ Stjepan Vukčić.

⁴ See Lesson for May 28th and 29th.

⁵ Sultan Mehmet II 'the Conqueror' (1451-1481).

example of the primitive churches, as portrayed in the Scriptures. Their relations with older churches in Armenia and Asia minor, with the Albigenses in France, Waldenses and others in Italy, and Hussites in Bohemia, show that there was a common ground of faith and practice which united them all....

Scattered over the country, within the confines of the old Kingdom of Bosnia, but nowhere else, are numerous stone monuments, often of great size – Bogomil tombstones. Sometimes one stone stands alone, sometimes they are in groups... they are remarkable for the absence of crosses or any symbols associated either with Christianity or Mohammedanism. Where, as occasionally, such symbols are found, it is evident that they have been added at a later date.

