

THE RELIGION OF THE MANICHEES

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Manichaeism, now extinct, was a formidable rival to Christianity in the fourth and fifth centuries, and was a religion professed in parts of Central Asia for a thousand years. Our authorities for the study of it are the newly discovered fragments of Manichee literature from Turfan, in Chinese Turkestan, and the polemical writings of Mohammedans and Christians, including the *Refutations* by S. Ephraim, lately deciphered by C. W. Mitchell.

Manichaeism is dualistic, in that the two principles of Light and Dark are regarded as self-existent and eternal, but they ought to remain separate: this world of sense originated from a disastrous mixture of the two. It is, in fact, a Smudge. The goodness of God, the Lord of the realm of Light, is shown not in improving the world but in devising means for getting rid of it altogether, for evil consists in the mixture of Light and Dark.

Neither the fantastic mythology of Mani, nor the ascetic organization of the Manichees, appears to be derived from anything east of Babylonia. Nor is it pessimistic in the sense of a belief in the ultimate triumph of evil; unregulated desire will always continue to exist, but it will be confined to its own appropriate sphere.

No champion of Manichaeism appeared at the Chicago Congress of Religions, nor has one been seen at any similar gathering, for the Manichees are extinct. It was on Sunday, March 20, 242 A.D., that Mani first proclaimed his new religion, and for about a thousand years men and women professing his doctrines were to be found, mostly in Central Asia, in the countries to the northeast of Persia and west of Thibet. But now they have utterly disappeared. For centuries they were persecuted and proscribed, by Christians, by Zoroastrians, and by Mohammedans alike, and they seem finally to have been swept out of existence in the calamities which marked the age of Zenghis Khan and of the Mongol dominion.

The century that saw the conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity and the final formulation of the Creeds was marked also by a serious struggle between Christianity and Manichaeism for mastery both in the East and in the West. The religion of Mani was a missionary religion and its devoted

emissaries were to be found all over the Roman Empire within a century of its first publication. And when we remember that during the fourth century the most influential of all Latin Christians, one of the greatest formative influences upon medieval thought, Augustine, was for some nine years himself a Manichee convert,¹ we shall realize that the danger from Manichaeism was serious and that what the heathen writer, Alexander of Lycopolis, called the "New Christianity" had once a chance of becoming the creed of the West.

Various oriental documents, chiefly Syriac and Arabic, which throw considerable light on the Manichee religion, have been published during the last fifty years, but undoubtedly the most sensational discoveries are those connected with the name of Turfan, a district in Chinese Turkestan, northeast of Kashgar, not far from the Siberian frontier. It is a desolate part of the world, which seems to be lapsing into sandy desert after having been fertile in former ages. Various religions had been professed there a thousand years ago, including the Christianity brought by Nestorian missionaries as well as the religion of Mani, but in the end Buddhism seems to have gained the upper hand, and great quantities of Christian and Manichaean writings found their way into the libraries of Buddhist monasteries in the region. Now they are all deserted, the population has dispersed to better watered lands, and European explorers have entered into possession of great numbers of scraps of written material found buried among the ruins. There are fragments in Syriac, fragments in Sogdian (a sort of Middle-Persian dialect), fragments in various Tatar languages, and fragments in Thibetan and Chinese. Some are Christian, many are Buddhist, and quite a large number belong to the Manichee literature. The expeditions which collected them took place between 1902 and 1909, and the results are even now hardly all published. Unfortunately the publications that have seen the light are to be looked for

¹ From 373-382 A.D.

in four different places, and the student who wishes to see the original texts for himself has to find them in the *Journal Asiatique*,¹ the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*,² the *Sitzungsberichte* and *Abhandlungen* of the Berlin Academy³ and of the Petrograd Academy of Sciences.⁴

The great importance of the documents from Turfan is that they exhibit Manichaeism as a living religion, not as a controversial system. There are fragments of hymnbooks, of forms for the confession of sins, of prayers, as well as of regular treatises. But alas, it is a confused débris, a collection of tattered scraps, and unless we knew something of the subject from other sources, it would add but little to our knowledge. As I have said, there is every reason to believe that more discoveries will be made in this region; it is possible even that some day a more or less complete copy of one of Mani's works may be unearthed. Meanwhile an admirable account of the finds in their relation to what we otherwise know of the Manichee literature is to be found in Professor Prosper Alfaric's admirable volumes called *Les Écritures Manichéennes*, which form a quite indispensable guide to the student.⁵

Apart from these Turfan fragments our knowledge of the Manichee religion is derived from accounts and refutations written by opponents. These are all composed with prejudice, and some of them without adequate information, being based upon other refutations, not upon a study of Manichee documents themselves. Moreover, till about sixty years ago, the sources were almost exclusively Greek or Latin. Mani lived in Babylonia, where the native language was Syriac and

¹ E. Chavannes and P. Pelliot, *Journ. Asiatique* for 1911, pp. 499-621; for 1913, pp. 99-104, 105-16, 378-83.

² A. Von le Coq and Sir Aurel Stein, *JRAS* for 1911, pp. 277-314.

³ F. W. K. Müller, *Sitz.*, 1904, pp. 348-52; *Abhandl.*, 1904 and 1913; A. Von le Coq, *Sitz.*, 1908, pp. 398-414; *ibid.*, 1909, pp. 1212-18; *Abhandl.*, 1912.

⁴ C. Salemann, *Mémoires*, 1904 and 1908; *Bulletin*, 1907, pp. 175-84, 531-58; 1912, pp. 1-50.

⁵ Prosper Alfaric, *Les Écritures Manichéennes*, I, 129-38; II, 126-36. Paris, 1918.

the government was Persian. Most of his writings were composed in Syriac, one at least was composed in Persian,¹ and this helped to give his ideas a barbarous and exotic turn to the Greeks and Romans, and so to us. During the nineteenth century this was to a certain extent corrected by the publication of Mohammedan accounts, of which the most important is the *Fihrist* of An-Nadīm, edited by G. Flügel in 1862. Previously to this our chief sources had been some polemical treatises by Augustine, valuable because he himself had been a Manichee for so long, and the work called the *Acts of Archelaus*. This last professes to give the story of a public disputation between Mani himself and a Christian bishop called Archelaus, held somewhere in Mesopotamia about the year 280, in which of course Mani is decisively worsted. The story is clearly a fiction, composed in Greek; it does not appear to be even based on Syriac documents, nor does Archelaus seem to be a historical personage, being quite unknown to native Syriac literary tradition. But the work is early; it was used by Cyril of Jerusalem in 347, and the author (said to be one Hegemonius, of whom nothing else is known) was clearly well acquainted with the outlines of the Manichaean system. He hit upon the ingenious expedient of making a converted Manichee explain at some length the tenets of Mani, in order that the bishop, Archelaus, might more effectively attack the heresiarch. This section of the work was for long the most systematic description of Manichaeism known, and Epiphanius quoted it verbatim in his *Panarion*—a fortunate circumstance, as only a Latin translation of the *Acts of Archelaus* survives.

The present century has added to our knowledge two works of Christian controversy against the Manichees, which are particularly noteworthy from being written in Syriac. It is likely enough that the dialect used by Mani, who came from Lower Babylonia, may have differed from what we call classical Syriac, which is the dialect of Edessa in Northern

¹ The *Shāpūraḱān*, dedicated to the Sasanian king, Shapur.

Syria. We do know that the Manichees had a special sort of alphabet, which differs from that in which ancient Syriac MSS are written about as much as gothic type differs from roman. But though the dialects may have differed, both were forms of Aramaic; the difference was certainly not more than that of the speech of England from that of Scotland. These Syriac works therefore are especially valuable, for when they quote Manichaean works we have the actual terms used by the Manichees themselves.

The two works are the account of Manichaean cosmogony by Theodore bar Khoni (or Khonai) expounded by Franz Cumont in 1908,¹ and the two volumes of S. Ephraim's *Prose Refutations of Mani, Marcion and Bardaisan*, published by C. W. Mitchell in 1912 and 1921.² Ephraim's work is very prolix and contains fewer direct quotations from his adversaries than we should have liked, but his date and country make it a document of the first importance. He died at Edessa in 373, so that his *Refutations*, written in the language that Mani also wrote in, date from less than a century after Mani was killed. Theodore bar Khoni lived five hundred years later (he became a bishop in 893), but his "scholia" are valuable because he makes considerable extracts from one of the chief Manichaean sacred books, a work concerned with the origin of Adam and Eve, and known to Augustine as the *Epistula Fundamenti*.

Every religion for purposes of study may be considered in two ways. It has a mythology and a philosophy. Thus in

¹ Franz Cumont, *Recherches sur le Manichéisme: Pt. I, La Cosmogonie Manichéenne*. Brussels, 1908. Part II, containing an extract from Severus of Antioch, edited by M. A. Kugener and F. Cumont, 1912, is also important, but it has to do with a document originally Greek, not a Syriac original.

² C. W. Mitchell was a young Canadian scholar, who, after taking a brilliant degree at Cambridge, England, had settled down in London, partly in order to be near the British Museum, where the MS of S. Ephraim's *Refutations* (a palimpsest most difficult to decipher) is preserved. He went out to the war as a chaplain and was killed at the Front, near Arras, on May 3, 1917, leaving the second volume of his work unfinished. It was completed by Professor A. A. Bevan and the present writer and came out last year.

orthodox Christianity the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden may be classed as mythology; on the other hand the story is understood to teach that man was made by God and made good, but that the first man disobeyed and that this disobedience is the cause of pain and evil in human life. This doctrine is a philosophy, which might have been founded on a different story; the story may be historically true or false, the doctrine may give a true account of life or a false account. My point is, that the story and the doctrine, the mythology and the philosophy, are separable in thought.

It is, I think, necessary to make this distinction in the case of a strange and foreign religion, especially one that is separated from us by long centuries, for otherwise we become so distracted by mere externals that we fail to be impressed by what is really of permanent interest. Especially is this the case with the Manichee religion: its mythology is so unfamiliar and bizarre, so utterly out of touch with modern ideas about the external world and cosmic history, that we may easily miss the philosophy which this mythology was supposed to set forth, and thereby make its appeal to so many generations of men incomprehensible.

Of course this separation of the mythology and the philosophy of a religion is merely a division made for convenience, to help to keep our own minds clear. The word mythology has with us Christians an unfavorable connotation: it suggests false tales. The old-fashioned Christian would object to the distinction drawn between the story of Adam and the doctrine of human weakness and depravity, for in his mind the two hang together. And it is certainly true that we cannot understand the Christian philosophy about sin and evil without having learned how this philosophy grew up in connection with the story in Genesis. We must therefore make ourselves acquainted with the Manichee mythology, if we are to understand the terms in which the Manichee philosophy was expressed. It is only when we have done this that we can

restate their ideas on human nature and destiny in our own terms.

The Manichees, then, began by teaching about the *two principles*, or *roots*, and the *three moments*, that is to say, the *past*, the *present*, and the *future*. The two principles are the Light and the Dark. The Light is essentially Good, orderly, reasonable, kindly. The Dark is Evil, disorderly, passionate, harmful. Or rather it would be more accurate to say that Evil arises by a mixture of the Dark with the Light, and that when such a mixture has taken place, progress toward a better state of things, redemption, salvation, deliverance, is only to be obtained by straining out the Light from the Dark. As for the three moments, in the past the Dark and the Light were separate, but the Dark somehow conceived a passion for the Light, its opposite, and made an assault upon it, whereby a portion of the Light became mixed with the Dark, was in fact swallowed by it. As a result of this mixture of Light with Dark this present tangible world came into being, not being wholly of the Light or of the Dark, but being essentially mixed and therefore evil, i.e., incongruous. In the present the Intelligence, which is an essential attribute of the Light, has contrived a mechanism, whereby the Light is being gradually refined from the Dark and the Dark confined by a wall or prison, so that never again can it overpass its boundary. In the future when this refining process is completed, all the Parts of the Light now imprisoned in men and animals and plants will have been refined away; what is left will be burnt out, so far as it is destructible, and the remainder, being wholly of the Dark, will join the original powers of darkness in their eternal prison.

The two principles of Light and Dark are thus alone primitive; the ultimate cause not only of that which we see around us, but even of the hierarchy of Light, has been the attack made by the Dark upon the region of Light. Evil began by Darkness desiring the Light; it conceived a passion

for Good and made an assault upon it, it "felt, touched, ate, sucked, tasted, and swallowed it"; it "passionately desired the Light and ate it, and sucked it in and swallowed it, and imprisoned it and mixed it in its limbs."¹ Mani naturally could not explain, any more than could his predecessor, Bardaisan, who had a somewhat similar theory of the beginning of things, how this first disturbance of the eternal order took place, but he seems somewhere to have expressed it, that it was as if the Dark from a far distance smelt and perceived that there was "something pleasant" beyond his region. So Ephraim tells us,² but he misses the point when he merely seizes on it to ask how the Light was far distant from the Dark when the two regions lay side by side; Mani's point is that the beginning of Evil is unregulated desire. It was the beginning of Evil, and at the same time it was the beginning of this world of ours.

According to Mani, the ultimate Supreme Good Being, whom he called "the Father of Greatness" had existed from eternity in his five realms or manifestations of Intelligence, Reason, Thought, Imagination, and Intention. With him is associated a kind of Queen of Heaven, called "the Mother of the Living,"³ but Mani appears to be careful to avoid using any phrase which would imply anything in the realms of Light analogous to sexual generation. The Manichees were strict ascetics, and they regarded the destruction and the production of that which has life as equal crimes. The Father of Greatness does not beget a son, but he calls and the Primal Man is there. This Primal Man (not Adam, but a heavenly being) had not existed from eternity; he is evoked for the purpose of repelling the attack of the Dark upon the realm of Light.

The first combat between Light and Dark ended in the victory of the latter. The Dark struck the Primal Man sense-

¹ So Ephraim, quoting Mani (*Mitchell*, I, xliv and lxxxv).

² *Mitchell*, I, lx.

³ Or "the Mother of Life."

less and swallowed his bright panoply, consisting of the pure elements of Light, Fire, Wind, and Water. Thus Light was mixed with Dark, and so the substance of this world came into being. But this unaccustomed and unnatural nourishment was represented by the Manichees as weakening the vehemence of the Powers of Darkness, so that their victory did not last long. The Primal Man recovered from his swoon; he called for help to the Father of Greatness, who took pity on him and aided him with fresh Light Powers: "the Friend of the Lights," "the Great Ban," and "the Living Spirit."

Even in a general account of Manichaeism, such as this is, it is necessary to bring in the names of this heavenly hierarchy in order to give the general impression of the world in which the Manichaean imagination moved. In a sense it is animistic. The universe to Mani was not only a philosophical dualism; rather, it was a great drama played by a crowd of supernatural actors, angelic and demonic, and we do not get the right impression of it, if we reduce it to its main principles only.

The Primal Man, now reinforced, "hunted the sons of the Dark and flayed them, and made this Sky from their skins, and out of their excrement he compacted the Earth, and of their bones he forged and raised and piled up the Mountains,¹ and he did all this in order to strain out from them by rain and dew the Parts of the Light that had been mingled in them. Thus our world was constructed, composed of an amalgam that never ought to have mixed. Theodore bar Khoni² tells us that it is held in place by five heavenly Powers, evoked for the purpose by the Father of Greatness from his own intellectual essence. They are also named in Greek and Latin sources, with barbarous high-sounding titles, like so many of the beings conjured up by Mani. There were the Splenditenens (in Greek, Phengokatochos), the Rex Honoris, the Adamas Heros, the Gloriosus Rex, and the Atlas Maximus (in Greek, Ōmophoros).

¹ *Mitchell*, I, xxxiii.

² *Cumont*, p. 22.

Of these it was the function of the Splenditenens to hold the world suspended like a chandelier, while the Atlas bears it on his shoulders. This last figure was no doubt borrowed by Mani from the common stock of ancient mythological nations, but the Splenditenens seems to be his own invention.¹

The Sons of the Dark (or the Archons, as they also are called) being thus chained up, a certain amount of the absorbed Light was refined out of them, and from it were made the Sun and Moon and the Stars. But much yet remained in the Archons, and so a new personage was evoked, the Messenger, called also the Virgin of Light, who "manifests her beauty to the Archons, so that they long to run after her."² As a result plants and animals were produced on the Earth by the Archons, who at last, fearing that they would lose all the Light they had absorbed, joined together to form a new being, Adam, made in the image of God, i.e., in the image of the Divine Primal Man. Once again their design fails, for Jesus the Brilliant (*zīwānā*)—his precise relationship to the Father of Greatness and the Primal Man is not explained—comes to Adam as he lies inert upon the ground. Adam looks at himself and recognizes what he is, i.e., that he is a being at least partly made of the Light. "Jesus made him stand up and gave him to eat of the Tree of Life. Then Adam looked and wept, he lifted up his voice like a roaring lion, he tore his hair, he beat his breast, and said 'Woe, woe, to the creator of my body, to him who has bound my soul to it, and to the rebels who have enslaved me!'"³

So much for the past. In the present, according to Mani, a great mechanism has been contrived for refining out of the world what is left of the Parts of the Light that had been

¹ Mani called the Atlas *Sabbālā*, "the Supporter." The Splenditenens is called *Šāfith-Zīwā* by Theodore. I venture to think this meant "Tong of Brilliance."

² *Mitchell*, I, lxi.

³ *Cumont*, pp. 46 f. *Cumont* himself (p. 49) regards this striking passage, which he quotes from Theodore bar Khoni, as the actual peroration of the *Epistula Fundamenti*, one of Mani's most widely read works.

absorbed; the arrangement of this mechanism was in fact the salvation brought by Jesus, when he came on earth and those that saw him supposed erroneously that he was really a man.¹ By this mechanism or arrangement the Light that is separated out is conveyed to the Moon, whereby it waxes for fifteen days, and then when full discharges its load of Light for another fifteen days into the Sun.

Mani seems to have taken over the notion, originally Stoic, that the spirits of the just live on in the Milky Way. Their name for it was the Pillar of Glory (*Estōn Shubhā*).² It is also called in the *Acts of Archelaus* the Perfect Man, alluding to Eph. 4:13; the redeemed souls are collected in the Pillar of Glory until all the particles of the absorbed Light have been refined out of the substance of the Archons and the Primal Man is perfect again.

The most potent agents in refining out the Light are, of course, the fully initiated disciples of Mani, the Zaddīks, as they were called, i.e., the righteous.³ The Manichee community, like the Buddhists, consisted of monks and laymen, in Manichee phraseology the Righteous and the Hearers. The righteous Zaddīks were the only true Manichees, just as the monks are the only true Buddhists. But as I gather from the documents the number of the Zaddīks was small, and the highest initiates of all, whom Ephraim calls *Ḳephalpāls*,⁴ seem to have been a mere handful. Certainly they were able to give all their time to their mysterious work, for there was very little else that it was permitted to a fully initiated Manichee to do. They might neither take life nor produce it, whether animal or vegetable, so that agriculture and cooking were as much taboo as murder and adultery. A Zaddīk could only eat what had been prepared for him by his disciple; to eat that was not sin, for it would go bad if the Zaddīk did not consume

¹ So *Acta Archelai* viii.

² The original Syriac term occurs in *Mitchell*, Vol. II, p. 208, l.37.

³ In Arabic, *Zindīk*.

⁴ *Mitchell*, II, xcvi f.

it! It is interesting to notice that women also were permitted to become fully initiate Manichees.¹

It should be mentioned that there is practically nothing to connect the origins of the religion of Mani with Buddhism. The organization of the Marcionite church, owing to their rejection of "holy" matrimony, was similar to that of the Manichees, and something like it seems to have prevailed even among orthodox churchmen in the Euphrates Valley before the Roman Empire became Christian. In general, the lives of the Manichæan devotees must have been spent in a manner not unlike that of other Christian ascetics in the East; "their works are like our works, as their fast is like our fast," as Ephraim confesses. No doubt they spent much of their time in transcribing and ornamenting their sacred writings, as may be gathered from Augustine and from the remains of very handsome manuscripts recovered from Central Asia. In this they were followers of Mani himself, who "painted in colours on a scroll the likenesses of the wickednesses which he created out of his mind."²

As to the future, the Manichees, like the Christians, looked forward to a victorious end of the present state of things. When all the Parts of the Light have been refined out of the base material, Evil, which is the result of the mixture of Light and Dark, will have disappeared. The Earth of Light, in which God dwells and which is itself divine, will be complete and inviolate, and the Powers of the Dark will be confined within their own domain, round which Bān, the heavenly builder, has now built a wall and fence, to be the Grave of the Dark forever, so that never again will it invade the realms of Light and produce another Smudge, such as our present world is, according to the Manichæan view.

¹ *Mitchell*, I, xciii. In the *Life of Porphyry*, bishop of Gaza, written by his contemporary, Mark the Deacon, there is a lifelike account of a Manichee woman missionary, named Julia, who came to Gaza soon after 400 A. D.

² *Mitchell*, I, xciii.

The world, a Smudge; that is the essence of the philosophy which we are considering. It is not that God's good world has been smudged, as the Christians say, whether by the envy of the devil or the weakness of man. The Manichee philosophy is more radical than this; it declares that the world we live in is itself a smudge, the result of a regrettable accident, like the spilling of an ink-pot, and that God's good kindness has been shown not in making the world, but in contriving means for erasing the blot without damaging the original fabric. I venture to think that this uncompromising idea has still a certain appeal, and that it gives the Manichee religion a curious fascination, notwithstanding its fantastic barbarian mythology. There must indeed have been something vital in the preaching of Mani. The missionary impulse, so well maintained for two hundred years, the notable steadfastness in danger and persecution which characterizes the Manichees, prove that their theology, unscientific and bizarre as it is, was yet to them in some respects a satisfaction of their needs, a way of salvation from the perplexities of this painful world. And Mani, too, must have counted for something. If history has any lesson to teach us about new religions, it is that they arise when a system or view of the world, which is not too far away from popular aspiration, is combined with a forceful and attractive personality.

To us Manichaeism is so encumbered with its mythology that we can easily miss those features in it which constitute its real strength. The religion of Mani did explain the presence of Evil in the world we live in, and it did combine practical pessimism with ultimate optimism—perhaps the most favorable atmosphere for the religious sentiment. It is true that the Manichees regarded this tangible world as the result of a regrettable accident, so that no true improvement is possible until it is altogether abolished. As regards this world they were frankly pessimistic; it was bad to begin with and it would go from bad to worse. But they believed that the

Light was really greater and stronger than the Dark, that in the end all that was good in their essence would be collected together in the domain of Light, a realm altogether swayed by Intelligence, Reason, Mind, Good Imagination, and Good Intention; and though at the same time there would always exist another region, dark and dominated by unregulated Desire, it would only be peopled by beings for whom such a region was appropriate, and they would be separated off forever from invading the region of Light.

Such was the religion of the Manichees, a religion that with all the fervor of new convictions challenged Christianity at the very moment of its triumph over paganism. The challenger did not make good its claim, and indeed, whatever faults we may see in fourth- and fifth-century Christianity, we may be thankful that it did not do so. But I venture to think that the Manichæan philosophy is by no means contemptible; it has a permanent claim to our respect. In the future, when more documents have been recovered and deciphered from the deserts of Turfan, we are likely to have our acquaintance with the Manichee literature considerably extended. It will add to the interest of these documents if we have some sympathetic understanding of the ideas which animate them, ideas which sustained so many generations of pious souls in endeavoring, so far as they knew how, to choose light rather than darkness.