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MANICHAISM,
A RELIGION INSPIRED
BY JESUS, BUDDHA
AND ZARATHUSTRA

Even in recent times, the alleged connection between Manichaeans and Cathars persists to exist. For instance, Charles Schmidt (1812-1895) still states in his book *Histoire et Doctrines des Cathares* (1848) that the Italian Cathars originate from the Manichaeans.

Only from the fifties of the previous century onwards, researchers have provided evidence that Manichaeism is not related to Catharism. One of the first was the Italian church historian Raffaello Morghen, who states in his 1951 book *Medioevo cristiano* that there is no proof that Catharism originated from Manichaeism: the Manichaean dualism was cosmological and metaphysical, whereas eleventh and twelfth century dualism was anthropological and ethical.

Even today, there are numerous groups, mostly in the esoteric *milieu*, who steadfastly proclaim that the Cathars are derived from the Manichaeans...

Meanwhile, recent scientific research has clearly proven that the alleged relation can be dispelled forever, and that the connections have emerged throughout time due to erroneous interpretations and/or deliberate manipulations, which can be situated, above all, in the context of the Roman Catholic Church.

A rectification...

MANICHAISM AND THE SASANIAN EMPIRE

Too often, and completely unjustified, the adjective “Manichaean” is used to refer to an action or philosophy without any nuance, dualistic or even simplistic. Hereby it is completely denied that Manichaeism was a proper religion in its own right, which originated in Persia (present-day Iran) in the third century of the Common Era. At the time of its founder, Mani, this religion spread significantly, both to the west and to the east of Iran. Soon, Manichaeism competed with Zoroastrianism, Buddhism and Christianity, three religions that fiercely contested the teachings of Mani since the fourth

century. Later, during the Middle Ages, the Roman Church put Manichaeism on the long list of Christian heresies. However, due to the discovery of various Manichean texts, and also archaeological findings, from North-Africa to China, present-day historians can construct a better and objective image of this religion and its great past.

The Sasanian Empire occupied an immense territory in the third century, supplemented with vassal states, which also acknowledged the suzerainty of the powerful king of kings. Despite of the armed conflicts with the neighbouring countries there was cultural, artistic and religious exchange. The Empire, situated on the crossroads of major commercial trade routes, here and there intersected with the important Silk Road, was permeated with various influences.

Certain monarchs, like Shabuhr I, benefited the exchanges and encouraged the translation of Greek, Latin and Indian literary works. When it comes to religion, the Sasanian dynasty succeeded in the expansion of the ancient Persian religion, Zoroastrianism.

Zoroastrianism or Mazdaism is a religion which originates from Persia. Today Zoroastrians are a small majority in Iran (Persia) and also in Azerbaijan, India and the Kurd areas in Iraq and Pakistan. It is estimated that there are 2.6 million Zoroastrians globally. The founder of Zoroastrianism is the mythical prophet Zarathustra or Zoroaster, who lived around the tenth century BC in the east of what we now know as Iran or Afghanistan. His teachings are compiled in the holy book of Zoroastrianism, the Avesta. These teachings are characterised by a strong dualism between good and evil. Humanity is stuck between two opposite powers: Ahura Mazda (Enlightening Wisdom) and Angra Mainyu (Destructive Spirit), and must choose the good side during the eternal struggle between the two. This ethical choice is summarised in the three pillars: good words, good deeds and good thoughts.

In Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, before Islam emerged, Zoroastrianism was more widespread than today. At that time, the inhabitants of major parts of south-west Asia followed the teachings of Zoroaster. Zoroastrianism was the state religion of the Medes and later in the Persian Empire.

Cyrus the Great decided to make Zoroastrianism the state religion of the Persian Empire after his campaigns in the areas of the Medes. This continued, with interruptions, until the spread of Islam in the seventh century. The Zoroastrians, who did not convert to Islam, were called *gabar*. The Gabar—a degeneration of the Arabian *kāfir*, meaning “unbeliever”—were considered second-class citizens. Even though they bought some tolerance by paying tax, they were not allowed to ride horses or carry

weapons and they were obliged to wear mandatory clothes. They also spread in the east coast of Africa.

In the tenth century, intensification of the prosecution of non-Muslims occurred and many were forced to emigrate to India, where to this very day the Parsi keep their beliefs. The founders of the Parsi-communities in India left the Persian Gulf in the year 917. Parsi often wear white clothes during prayer and a string around their waists.

In the course of time, this religion underwent major changes. It was originally monotheistic, but later the ancient deities of the Persians increasingly started to play a role, such as the angel of Amshaspand. The energy of the creator is being spread in sunlight and fire, according to Zoroastrianism. That is the reason why Zoroastrian buildings are called fire temples. Zoroastrians regard fire as the symbol of Ahura Mazda, but they neither honour nor worship it, which is why the predicate *fire worshippers* is incorrect.

Zoroastrians believe in life after death; you have to improve your spirit in this life or in the next, before you encounter Ahura Mazda, the Enlightening Wisdom.

However, the Sasanian Empire also included Jews and Christians, mostly in the western provinces, while Buddhism arose in the east in the Kushan Empire. It is in this diversity of religions that Manichaeism manifested itself as a new religion.

Its founder, Mani, could always count on the benevolence and support of king Shabuhr I, who allowed him to preach throughout the Empire. However, the politics of the religious tolerance lasted only until Bahram II acceded the throne.

Influenced by Kirdir, the leader of the Zoroastrian religion, Bahram II commanded to arrest Mani, who died in prison. From that moment onwards, Zoroastrianism becomes an intolerant and dictatorial religious movement, which prosecutes Manichaeans, Christians, Jews and Buddhists.

Despite of the prosecutions, Manichaeism nevertheless succeeds to maintain itself within the borders of the Sasanian Empire. The adherents of the religion even succeed to develop strongly based missionary missions, which led to the further spread of the teachings from North Africa to China.

MANI (216-276), FOUNDER OF A NEW RELIGION

Mani, born in 216 in Mesopotamia, founded a new religion, which was named Manichaeism after him. Various Greek, Coptic, Persian and Chinese texts prove that Mani has lived, and that he is no imaginary figure.

According to the *Cologne Mani-Codex*¹ and the *Chinese Compendium*², Mani was born within a Northern-Babylonian rural community in 527 of the Seleucid moon year, which is 216 according to the Christian calendar.

Some sources even give his date of birth: the eighth of *nissan*, which corresponds to 14 April, but this date is historically uncertain and it seems that it is selected to compose the Manichaean calendar.

Mani was the only son of Patticius and Maryam. His father was a pagan worshipper of the god Nabu and around the time of the birth of Mani he converted to Elkasaism, a Judaeo-Christian Baptist community, for which baptism and the ritual purification of the hands was significant.

When Mani was four years old he was taken away from his mother and his father adopted him in a male community of *mughthasila* (meaning “those who purify” in Arabic) who lived in accordance to the teachings of Elkasai. The doctrine of Elkasaism is based on respect for the Jewish laws, but it rejects the blood sacrifice (which is fundamental within Hebrew religion) and replace it with purification of the water and thaumaturgical³ virtues. The *mughtasilites* were rigorously bound to an alimentary code that is based on ethnic criteria: only food from domestic, Jewish and male sources on the condition that the food was baptised was allowed; forbidden was food from external, Greek and female sources.

According to the *Cologne Mani-Codex*, the life of Mani changed drastically when he turned twelve, when he had his first visions and when he encountered various religious works within his community, such as *Diatesseron* by Tatianus⁴, the epistles of Paul, the various writings on the

¹ The Cologne Mani-Codex is a small document of parchment (4,5 x 3,5 cm) which is being preserved at the University of Cologne, and which originates from Upper-Egypt. The text is in Greek and was being edited between the fourth and sixth century. The work presents the conflicts of the juvenile Mani, and is based on his own testimonies, interpreted by his disciples. It is therefore a fundamental document for understanding the spiritual revolution of Mani until he founds his new religion.

² The Chinese Compendium originates from the caves with thousand Buddhas, near Dunhuang, where it was found in the early twentieth century. It was edited at the court of the Tangdynastie in China. It is an exceptional document, which is partly preserved at the British Library in London, and partly at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, written by a Manichaean bishop who was initiated in the Buddhist terminology and describes the life of Mani, and the doctrines and rules of Manichaeism.

³ Thaumaturgical is derived from the Greek thaumatourgos, meaning “performer of miracles”.

⁴ Tatianus (ca. 120-173) was born among a pagan family in Syria and converted to Catholicism in Rome. He is the author of a *Diatessaron*, a compilation of four Gospels in one document. It was written in Greek and it was soon translated to Syrian. It was used as one Gospel within the Syrian church during the course of three centuries. It is also called “the equilibrium of the Gospels”.

revelations and the acts of the different apostles like Peter, John, Paul, Andrew and Thomas.

When he turned 24 his life changes and he dissociates himself more and more from the religious community of the *mughtasilites* and he is seen, that is, according to the Manichaean literature, as the long-awaited Paraclete⁵—mediator and Holy Spirit—heralded by Jesus in the Gospel of John (14,26). At the time of the enthronement of the Sasanian king Shabuhr I, Mani is being received as the new prophet, whereby a symbiosis takes place between two worlds: prophetic and politic.

Mani then regards himself as part of the continuing cycle of the prophets. He does not see himself as the last and final figure of this cycle, but he pretends to be both the heir of Zoroaster for Persia, the Buddha for India and China and Jesus for the west. In other words, he proclaims to be the universal prophet.

By appropriating the title of Paraclete, he soon antagonised the Christians, first of all Augustine, and later Christian saints.

From 240 onwards Mani and his disciples begin missionary work and he engages mainly with the Iranian (Persian) world. His many travels lead him to numerous cities, such as Seleukeia-Ctesiphon in Mesopotamia between the Tigris and Euphrates and also Ganzak in Bactria. Next, he travels to Bharat in India, following the path of the apostle Thomas, whose acts he knows. He is fairly successful in Christian communities in India and in Deb he founds a Manichaean community.

There is even a rumour about the conversion of the Buddhist king of Turan and his family members. However, in all probability, this is exaggerated Manichaeist propaganda.

With his return to Persia, he dedicates his *Shabuhrgan* (Book of Shabuhr) to king Shabuhr I, written in *pehlevi* or Old Persian, in which he explains his religious principles and also to receive the goodwill of the king. With the help of Peroz, a brother of the king, Mani and his followers receive a safeguard and also personal support from Shabuhr I in 253.

Since then, Mani is able to send out his disciples to the four major regions of the world as it was known then: to Palmyra and Egypt, to North-East and probably also to Arabia and the Arabian Peninsula. From 264 to 270 Mani goes to North-West to full his duty as universal prophet.

After the death of Shabuhr I, Manichaeism was widespread in Iran. The only thing lacking was the political decision to recognise Manichaeism as the official state religion. That decision never happened. The enthronement of Hormizd I in 272-273, and, subsequently, of his brother Varham I in late

⁵ Paraklêtos in Greek: “he who is called for help, to defend”, a name often used for Christ or the Holy Spirit, as protector or mediator.

273, led to the ending of Mani's mission in Babylonia and Khuzestan. He returned to Ctesiphon by the route of Kholassar where the viceroy Bat converted to his religion after all.

The conversion was not received well by Varham I who arrested Mani and brought him to his residence. He was not only confronted with the king himself, but also with his counsellor Kirdir, leader of the Zoroastrian religion and in fact the actual ruler. He considered Mani to be a rioter and he wished to reintroduce the Mazdaic law and orthodoxy in the region. Mani was taken captive and died shortly thereafter due to exhaustion in prison around 276 or 277.

Mani's successor was Sis of Kaskar, and also a strongly integrated religion with a well established hierarchy. The successors proceed his work, whereby they altered some aspects of the religion and picture their master as a martyr.

THE MANICHAEAN RELIGION

Mani believed that he was a prophet and that his ideas were in accordance with the Zoroastrian belief that the universe is engaged in an ongoing battle between the powers of good and the powers of evil. The Zoroastrians saw their good god Ahura Mazda as a stronger principle than the power of evil (Angra Mainyu, darkness, matter), which rules the world, and states that salvation of evil (the triumph of good, enlightenment, spirituality) is only available through profound knowledge of both dualities and by the targeted battle against evil of a select group of chosen ones.

Mani regarded eating meat as the first major sin of Adam and Eve, who he called Gehmurd and Murdiyanag, and he believed that humanity's salvation was only available by rejecting meat, wine, blasphemy, sexuality and work, which all harm light elements.

Mani's adherents were divided into two groups, a division which resulted in a fixed pattern for later dualist sects. The first group were the *Electi*, or the Chosen Ones. The *Electi* were ascetics and they dedicated their lives to salvation, with other words, to the separation of the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness by living pure as an ascetic and by fasting on Sundays and Mondays. They mainly ate fruits and solely drank fruit juices, because they believed that fruit contained many light particles, which is contrary to regular water which was only matter to them. It was forbidden for the *Electi* to eat or grow plants, to cut down trees or to kill animals and, like Buddhist monks, they had to withhold fully from sex and marriage.⁶

⁶ The rejection of meat, sex and marriage is an indication for the belief in the transmigration of souls. The Manichaeans adopted this doctrine from Buddhism. Regarding the influence of Buddhism on Manichaeism, I refer to a study by Richard Holtz, "Religions of the Silk

The second group was called the *Auditores* or Audience. They followed the teachings of Mani but they also did what was forbidden for *Electi*; they prepared the food, were married and procreated. They also prepared the food and beverages for the *Electi*, they led a normal life, even ate meat, but it was compulsory to fast on Sundays. Just like the *Electi*, they fasted a full month before the most important celebration of the year, the Bema festival, that was celebrated to commemorate the death of Mani.

Within some Manichaeian communities there was also a third group who were not obligated to perform religious practices, but who only had to believe in the religion. Due to their propaganda, they ensured that Manichaeism became a popular religion.

When an *Elect* died, his soul immediately went to the Kingdom of Light, whereas the soul of an *Auditor* undergoes several transmigrations before it reaches its ultimate goal, the incarnation as an *Elect*.

The Manichaeian viewpoint when it comes to the Fall determines their views on the complete Old Testament, which they reject as the work of the evil principle. They regard the human body as a prison and a burden to the soul of humanity, and they did not accept the view that Christ had voluntarily chosen to lock up his divine soul in a similar human shape. They also stated that Christ only had an apparent body and was seemingly born. This docetic view of the incarnation completely undermines the reality of his life, death, resurrection and ascension and, at the same time, attacks the roots of historic Christianity. That is the reason why some Manichaeians made a division between the worldly or historic Christ, who was considered an evil human being who belonged to matter, and the spiritual Christ, who was a divine redeemer.

Manichaeism adopted three Christian/Gnostic Apocrypha, namely the Gospel of Thomas, the Teachings of Addas and the Sheppard of Hermas. Soon the legend developed that Thomas, Addas and Hermas were the first three major apostles of the religious system of Mani. Addas assumingly spread Manichaeism in the Orient, Thomas in Syria and Hermas in Egypt.

Mani considered himself as the last prophet and the last heir of a sequence of men who were guided by God, like Seth, Noah, Abraham, Shem, Enoch, Zoroaster, Hermes, Plato, Buddha and Jesus.

In 297, about twenty years after Mani's death, the Roman emperor Diocletian declared war on the Zoroastrian Persians. During that time, Manichaeism had penetrated the Roman Empire. As there were also Zoroastrian elements within Manichaeism, Diocletian also persecuted them.

He considered this religion as a “pernicious snake” which poisoned the Roman people with the customs and laws of the Persians.

Because Zoroastrians were considered fire worshippers who refused to cremate or bury their deceased, because they believed that fire and earth were too sacred to get into contact with dead bodies,⁷ Diocletian proclaimed a law which stated that all leaders and propagandists of Manichaeism should be put to death at the stake, together with their holy books.⁸

After Mani’s death in 276, various disciples spread the religion widely. Traces of Manichaeism can be found in the Middle-East (Egypt, Gaza, Syria, Antioch, Palmyra) as far as Babylonia and Mesopotamia (Ctesiphon), through Khuzestan (Gandishapur and Bharat), to Bactria, Sogdia (Samarkand, Zamb and Merv), India (Deb, Tourfan, Sangim, Qotcho) and China (Lo Yang, Chang’an and Quanzhou).

The most significant and interesting Manichaeist documents and archaeological findings, who are used by present-day scholars to reconstruct the religion and its spread, come from the site of Kellis or Ismant el-Kharab at the oasis of Dakhlah in Egypt and of the site Qotcho in India. Many manuscripts were found in so-called caves of the thousand Buddhas, near Xinjiang in China.

PROSECUTION OF MANICHAISM

From the edict of the Roman emperor Diocletian onwards, promulgated in 302 in Alexandria, the Roman state regarded Manichaeans as Persian spies. Besides, the Roman Church was against Manichaeism and regarded it as a Christian heresy.

What were the most important reasons to consider the teachings of Mani as heresy? The Roman Church believed that the two principles, good and evil, light and darkness, equal and infinite, the creation of the universe and humanity, to be the result of a battle between the two principles as a war without compassion, the rejection of the hate against the Old Testament, mainly against the book Genesis and against the God who revealed himself through this book, the reconsideration of the figure of Christ within a cosmic pattern and the refusal to admit his human nature, were all reasons to fight against the Manichaean teachings.

In 443, Pope Leo I the Great proclaimed that Manichaeism was a Satanist doctrine “*whereby Satan has erected a mighty fortress within the frenzied worldview of the Manichaeans, in which he could give orders and rule with*

⁷ The Zoroastrians laid their deceased in the open air on a *ziggurat* where they fell prey to birds of prey. Only when all bones were free of flesh, the bones were collected and buried.

⁸ S. N. C. Lieu, “*Manicheism in the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China*” (Manchester, 1985.)

his indecent brutality". The acumen of his words reflect the situation with which the pope in Rome was confronted: the city was being overwhelmed with Manichaeans who endangered the Christian community at large with their propaganda.

The first anti-Manichaean testimony is from 280 and is a letter which is being attributed to Theonas, bishop of Alexandria, and directed to his adepts to arm oneself against the Manichaean danger. Theonas accuses the Manichaeans of idolatry and sun worship, a charge that lives on until Saint Augustine, who, as an ex-Manichaean, is firmly against this religion.

The Manichaean problem was not only current in Egypt, but the reactions against it were also fierce in Palestine, for instance, in 302 by Eusebius of Caesarea in his monumental *Historia Ecclesiastica*.⁹ In his *Acts of Archelaus*, written in 345, Hegemonius describes Manichaeism as a heresy, and he labels Mani as the worst heretic ever known, a barbarian and the biggest enemy of Christianity.

AUGUSTINE AS THE MOST IMPORTANT OPPONENT OF MANICHAISM

The life and works of Saint Augustine (354-430), the most influential Church Father of the West, were strongly related to Manichaeism. Between the age of 19 and 28 years old, probably even older, Augustine was an adherent of Manichaeism. However, in 387 he is being baptised in Milan and enters into conflict with his former fellow believers and his own past. We can even assume that his philosophy and theology would differ tremendously without his profound knowledge of the religion of Light.

The schism between Augustine and Manichaeism emerged when he started his study "*On the Morals of the Catholic Church and on the Morals of the Manicheans*" in 387, and ended in 404 with the publication of his work "*Concerning the Nature of Good*".

As an adherent of the religion, the young Augustine knew much about Manichaeism. This can be concluded from his works which he wrote after his conversion to Catholicism, and mainly from his magisterial cycle of thirty-three books, the *Contra-Faustus*.

An expert concerning Augustine studies, the Swiss Benedictine Basil Studer, also thinks that Augustine was a Manichaean for only nine months, a claim that is also put forward by other researchers. They make a distinction between the young *auditor* Augustine who was being tempted by Manichaeism but did not know what it meant, and the older Augustine who

⁹ Eusebius (approx. 260-339) was a theologian who became a Church Father. He was also bishop of Caesarea and Palestine.

has shown his immense knowledge on Manichaeism when he became a Catholic priest, and subsequently a bishop.

However, this way of perceiving the facts does not correspond with reality and the attentive writings of the famous *Confessiones* will result in the development of a different view. In book V of *Confessiones*, Augustine states that, as an audience, he started to doubt the Manichaean claims considering the movement of the planets (such as the eclipses of the sun and moon). In this regard, he compared his own knowledge with the attributed sayings of Mani, without therewith discovering rational arguments. In book V he further states that this blocked his zeal for studying the writings of Mani.

Before he became *auditor* of Manichaeism, Augustine did not know much about this religion, but the Christocentric devotion appealed to him. He states this explicitly in his *Confessiones*: “*I ended up between men who preached their faith, based on a mix of cosmological and metaphysical ideas with regard to our Lord Jesus Christ and the Paraclete...*”.

The close relationship between Catholic Christianity and Manichaeist Christianity can be illustrated with a dispute between Augustine and Fortunatus in 392. The Manichaeist priest gives the following *profession* to Augustine, which closely resembles a Christian orthodox faith: “*This is what we confess: that God is incorruptible, shines, inaccessible, unknown and immune to suffering, and that He lives in an eternal intrinsic Light and that in His realm no demons, nor Satan, nor darkness reigns. We also confess that he sent a Saviour who is equal to him*”. During more than ten years, Augustine was very familiar with this community of “true Christians”.

The Manichaeist past profoundly influenced Augustine, even after his conversion to Roman Catholicism. In the years after his conversion, Augustine repeatedly tried to write down his own interpretation of the book *Genesis*, the texts concerning Creation in particular, to disprove the Manichaeist theories on that subject. In certain texts, it seems as Augustine was inspired by fragments from the *Gospel Harmony (Diatessaron)* by Tatianus, which he read in his youth. Following the example of the Manichaeans he emphasised the fact that Christ was a healer, with other words, that he was a physician. He also underlined that Christ was a master of Knowledge (for Manichaeans the divine and redeeming *gnosis*¹⁰) and also the Divine Wisdom and Enlightener.

¹⁰ Gnosis means “knowledge”. For Gnostics, salvation could not be achieved through faith, but through an intellectual understanding. Gnosis is solely possible for those who are able to understand and it is characterised by a certain esotericism.

For Augustine, this was the most important reason to get involved with this religious community, which is related to the gnostic movement. The “sincere piety” of Augustine and his devotion for Christ are clearly a legacy of Manichaeism, which, at the same time, has profoundly influenced western civilisation.

At last, it is an established fact that the Roman Catholic Church was well informed on Manichaeism due to the works of Augustine, which led to the designation of heresy and its prosecution. That is the reason why later medieval religious dualists (Cathars, Waldensians, Bogomils, Paulicians, etc...) were put under the same umbrella as Manichaeism, although their Christology should be interpreted differently.

As we have seen, Manichaeism was first and foremost a religion inspired by the oriental, which reached its zenith in ancient Persia, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Babylonia, and even India and China with roots in Persian Zoroastrianism and also a symbiosis with Buddhism.

A connection or a continuation of Manichaeism in later western religious dissident movements cannot be proven.

Michel GYBELS

MANICHAEISM, A RELIGION INSPIRED BY JESUS, BUDDHA AND
ZARATHUSTRA

- s u m m a r y -

When examining Catharism and related medieval heresies, we oftentimes encounter the claim that these religious dissidents are connected with ancient Manichaeism and that the Cathars and their coreligionists were adherents of Mani.

This claim was predominantly put forward in the polemist writings of the opponents of Catharism and related movements, such as Durand of Huesca in his *Liber contra manicheos* (1223) and numerous inquisitors, including Bernard Gui, who fully dedicates the first chapter of his *Practica inquisitionis heretice pravitatis* (1323) to “*the errors of the Manichaeans of this age*”.