



Manicheism Albert Stöckl

The dualistic theory which we observe to be a part of all the Gnostic systems in greater or less degree, reached its extreme development in Manicheism. This doctrine is nothing more than the Parsee system in Christian garb. According to the most trustworthy accounts, Manes, the founder of the system, was a member of a family distinguished amongst the Magi, and was well versed in the lore of the Persians. He became a Christian, but his false opinions soon brought about his excommunication from the Church. In the year A.D. 238, he began to teach publicly. He lived at the court of the Persian king, Sapor. In consequence of a quarrel with the Magi he was obliged to fly from the court, and ultimately (about A.D. 277) he was executed. We are indebted chiefly to the controversial writings of Saint Augustine for our knowledge of the Manichean theories. Manicheism, like Gnosticism, was the creation of an exuberant fancy rather than of speculative thought, and its attitude towards Christianity was almost identical with that of the Gnostics. We may, therefore, content ourselves with a brief sketch of its leading outlines. In the one system, as in the other, the appeal to hidden or esoteric doctrine is a prominent characteristic.

The Manicheans, in answering the question: What is the origin of evil? assume the existence of two eternal principles ethically opposed to each other — a principle essentially good, and a principle essentially evil. The good principle is the God of Light, who dwells in the region of pure light, surrounded by an infinite number of the Spirits of Light. The evil principle is the Prince of Darkness, who is surrounded by the Spirits of Darkness, and dwells in darkness, *i.e.*, in the region of chaotic Matter. The Spirits of Darkness live in a state of perpetual conflict; but at length they come to have knowledge of the Kingdom of Light, whereupon they conclude a peace among themselves, and agree to attack the Kingdom of Light, and to destroy it.

To defend himself against this attack the God of Light causes a force to emanate from Himself, which He opposes to the onset of the Powers of Darkness. This force is primeval man, the parent of the Living. This being enters into the struggle, but is unable long to maintain it; whereupon God causes a new force, the Spirit of Life, to emanate from Himself, which comes to the aid of primeval man. This Spirit of Life rescues primeval man from the grasp of the Powers of Darkness. But in the conflict primeval man had been deprived by these Powers of many of the rays of light which belonged to his being. These rays remain behind in chaotic matter, and thus become the World-soul. This World-soul is Christ, the Son of primeval man.

This does not, however, bring the strange drama to a close. The Spirit of Life which delivered man becomes, in its turn, the author of a new world. It gathers whatever of light is left in matter, or at least whatever has not been lost in chaotic matter, and this it concentrates in the sun and moon; the demons it fixes in the firmament as stars. We must, therefore make a distinction between the suffering Jesus — the light which matter has absorbed, and the Jesus whose throne is in the sun and moon. The latter seeks to deliver the former from his subjection to matter. For this purpose he causes the forces of light in the sun to assume the forms of beautiful maidens, to excite in this way the desires of the Powers of Darkness, and thus to produce a condition of disorder which shall permit the imprisoned light to escape. The flesh, or animal nature, is

produced by the female demons that are fixed in the firmament.

Man, too, is the offspring of the demons. The Prince of Darkness, observing that the World-soul might soon be set free, persuaded his companions to resign their light to him, and then begot Adam, and subsequently Eve, that Adam's sensual passion might be excited, and the process of generation continued. In this way he sought to individualise more and more this World-soul or light, and by imprisoning it thus repeatedly to weaken its power to rise.

We must distinguish in man two souls — the soul which animates the body, and the soul of Light, which is a part of the universal World-soul. The animal soul is derived from the principle of evil, and is, therefore, evil by nature; the soul of light on the other hand, coming from the principle of goodness, is good of its nature. These two souls are perpetually in conflict; the antagonism which divides the world is renewed in man. The evil soul manifests itself in concupiscence, and concupiscence is, therefore, essentially evil. Every wicked deed is the outcome of this concupiscence; the soul of light commits no sin, nothing but good can proceed from it; its share in sin is not active volition, but merely weakness yielding to concupiscence. But, for this weakness, strictly speaking, it is not responsible, for man is at all times under the control of cosmical forces; there can be no question of the freedom of will in his regard.

In the Old Covenant the Prince of Darkness was supreme; the Old Testament is wholly his work. The God of goodness would not, however, leave the World-soul in everlasting captivity, He sent Christ, His Son, into the world to set it free. Christ came into the world a man in appearance only; He instructed human souls as to their true nature, and taught them the way of deliverance. To reveal to them the deeper meaning of His doctrines He sent them the spirit of life, which appeared in Manes.

The members of the Manichean sect were divided into three classes. On the lowest class was imposed merely the *signaculum oris*, that is to say, they were forbidden to partake of flesh, eggs, milk or fish; they were also forbidden the use of wine, and, more stringently still, of profane language. On the second class was imposed the *signaculum manuum*, i.e., they could not possess property, were not permitted to labour, and were bound to give themselves exclusively to contemplation. They were forbidden to destroy plants or animals. On the highest class, that is to say, on the class of the elect, was imposed the *signaculum sinus*, i.e., they were forbidden to marry, or indulge in sexual intercourse. Despite this unnatural rigour, the grossest excesses were committed by the Manicheans, excesses to which they were encouraged by their belief that nothing could deprive the elect of their sanctification.

The souls of the elect return, immediately after the death of the body, into the kingdom of light; other souls, according to their moral character in this life, pass after death into various bodies, until they are at length purified. The world is finally consumed by fire. The souls which, by reason of their profound corruption, are incapable of purification, are condemned to eternal fire.

Albert Stöckl. *Handbook of the History of Philosophy. (Part 1: Pre-Scholastic Philosophy)*. Trans. T.A. Finlay. Dublin: M.H. Gill and Son, 1887.

© SophiaOmni, 2011. The specific electronic form of this text is copyright. Permission is granted to print out copies for educational purposes and for personal use only. No permission is granted for commercial use.