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MANI

216 - 276

The third-century prophet Mani was the founder of Manichaeism, a religion which, though extinct today, at its height had a very large number of followers. Originating in the Middle East, Manichaeism spread as far west as the Atlantic Ocean and as far east as the Pacific. It endured for well over a thousand years.

The religion that Mani created was an interesting synthesis of ideas from earlier religions. Mani recognized Zoroaster, Buddha, and Jesus as true prophets, but claimed to have received a later and more complete revelation than any of them.

Though Buddhist and Christian elements are present in Mani's religion, the doctrine that seems most striking (at least to Westerners) derives from Zoroastrian dualism. Mani taught that the world is not ruled by a single deity, but is rather the site of a continuous struggle between two forces. One of these is the evil principle, which Mani identified with darkness and matter; the other is the good principle, which he identified with light and spirit. Superficially this sounds somewhat like the Christian no-

tions of God and the Devil; however, in Manichaeism the good and evil principles are considered to be basically equal in power. As a consequence of this belief, the philosophical paradox of the existence of evil, which has so troubled Christian and Jewish philosophers, presents no problem at all in Manichaean philosophy.

There is no space here to describe the details of Manichaean theology. However, it must be mentioned that as a consequence of their identification of man's soul with the good principle and his body with the evil principle, Manichaeans believed that all sexual relations—even for the purpose of procreation—should be avoided. There were also prohibitions against the eating of meat and the drinking of wine.

At first sight, it might seem impossible for such a doctrine to gain and retain a large following. However, the full set of prohibitions was not applicable to the ordinary member of the Manichaean Church, but only to a small number called "the Elect." Ordinary members, "the Hearers," were permitted to have wives (or mistresses), to raise families, to eat meat, to drink wine, and so on. There were various religious rites that the Hearers were bound to observe, and they were obliged to support the Elect, but the moral code imposed upon them was not unreasonably difficult. (There are, of course, other religions where celibacy is required of priests or monks, but not of the mass of followers.) The souls of the Elect went straight to paradise after death; for the Hearers the route to paradise was somewhat longer. However, some Manichaean sects, such as the Cathari, believed that Hearers could achieve paradise as readily as the Elect, and in addition, were accorded considerable license while alive.

Mani was born in 216, in Mesopotamia, which at that time was part of the Persian Empire under the Arsacid or Parthian dynasty. Mani himself was of Persian ancestry and was related to the Arsacid rulers. Most Persians subscribed to some form of Zoroastrianism, but Mani was brought up in a small religious sect that was strongly influenced by Christian doctrine. He had

religious visions when he was twelve, and he began to preach his new religion when he was twenty-four. Not very successful at first in his native land, he traveled to northwest India, where he succeeded in converting a local ruler.

In 242, he returned to Persia, where he gained an audience with King Shapur I. Although Shapur did not become a convert, he was well impressed with Mani and permitted him to teach his new religion throughout the Persian Empire. (This later Persian Empire is sometimes called the Sassanid Empire, after a new dynasty established about 226.) For the next thirty years or so, under Shapur I and Hormizd I, Mani preached without hindrance and gained large numbers of followers. During this period, missions were also sent to foreign countries. However, Mani's success aroused the antagonism of the priests of the Zoroastrian religion, which became the state religion of Persia during the Sassanid dynasty. About 276, after a new king, Bahram I, ascended the throne, Mani was arrested and imprisoned. After a cruel twenty-six-day ordeal, he died.

During his lifetime, Mani wrote several books: one in Persian, the others in Syriac (a Semitic language closely related to the Aramaic of Jesus' time). These became the canonical books of the Manichaeism religion. After the religion became extinct, the Manichaeism scriptures were lost; however, some have been rediscovered during the twentieth century.

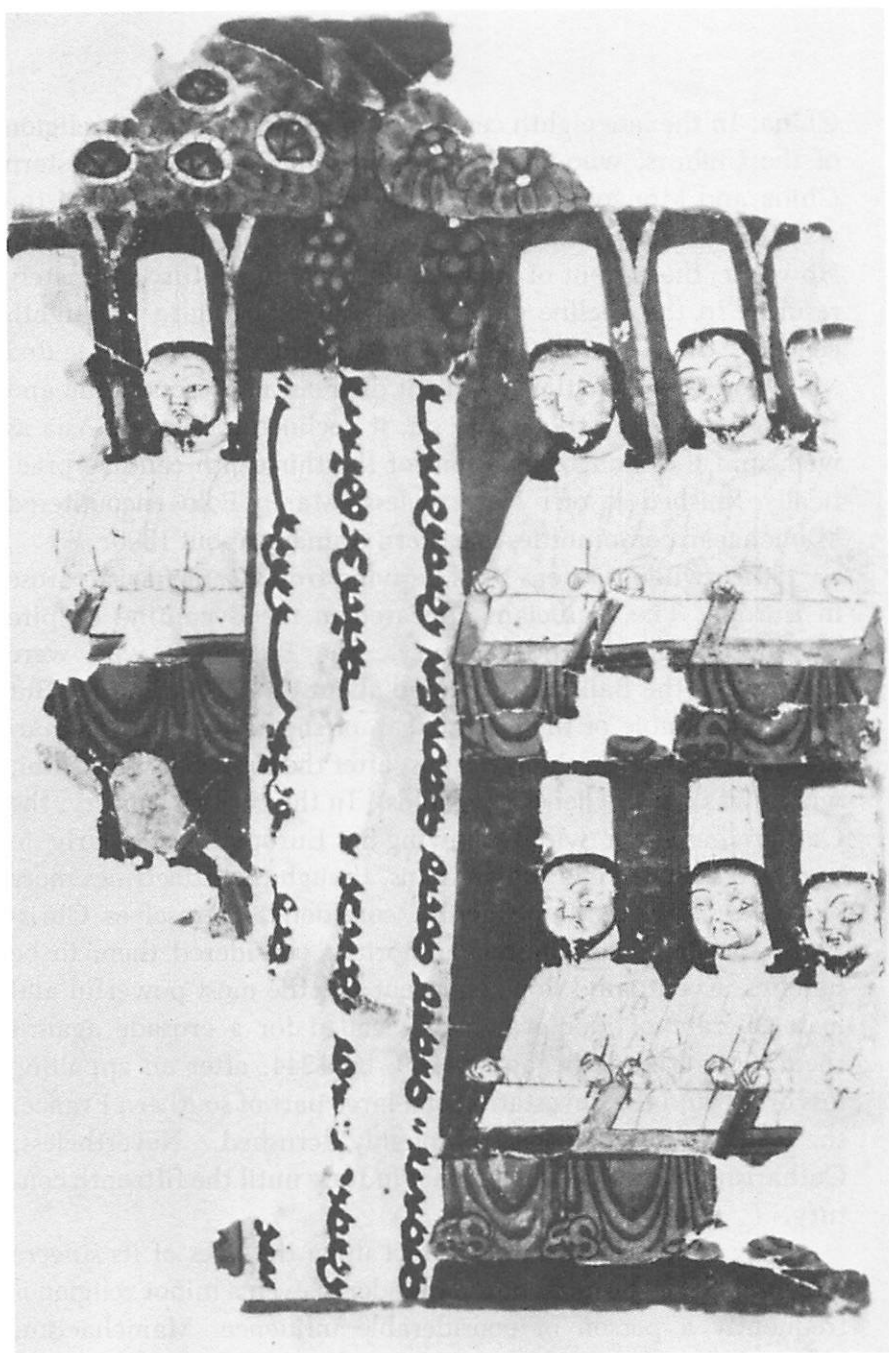
From the beginning, Manichaeism was a vigorously proselytizing religion. During the prophet's own lifetime his religion gained adherents from India to Europe. After he died, it continued to grow, eventually spreading as far west as Spain and as far east as China. In the West, it reached its height during the fourth century, at which time it was a serious rival to Christianity. (St. Augustine was an adherent of Manichaeism for nine years.) But after Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire, Manichaeism was severely persecuted, and by about 600, it was largely eliminated from the West.

It was still strong, however, in Mesopotamia and Iran. From there it spread into Central Asia, Turkestan, and western

China. In the late eighth century, it became the official religion of the Uighurs, who controlled a substantial region in western China and Mongolia. It also spread into China proper, all the way to the coast, and from there to the island of Taiwan. However, the advent of Islam in the seventh century ultimately resulted in the decline of Manichaeism. Starting in the eighth century, the Abbasid Caliphs in Baghdad severely persecuted Manichaeism, and after a while it died out in Mesopotamia and Iran. From the ninth century on, it declined in Central Asia as well, and the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century practically finished it off. Nevertheless, Marco Polo encountered Manichaean communities in eastern China in about 1300.

Meanwhile, various sects deriving from Manichaeism arose in Europe. The Paulicians appeared in the Byzantine Empire starting in the seventh century. The Bogomils, who were strongest in the Balkans, appeared about the tenth century. But the most notable of these European offshoots were the Cathari (better known as the Albigensians, after the French town of Albi, which was one of their strongholds). In the twelfth century, the Cathari gained a wide following in Europe, particularly in southern France. The Albigensians, though their doctrines more closely resembled Manichaeism, considered themselves Christians; the orthodox Church authorities considered them to be heretics. Eventually, Pope Innocent III, the most powerful and least tolerant of medieval popes, called for a crusade against them. The crusade began in 1209; by 1244, after an appalling loss of life and the devastation of a large part of southern France, the Albigensians were thoroughly crushed. Nevertheless, Catharism did not become extinct in Italy until the fifteenth century.

Any religion has a large effect upon the lives of its sincere adherents. For this reason, the founder of even a minor religion is frequently a person of considerable influence. Manichaeism, although it is now extinct, was for a time a major religion, and Mani was therefore a very influential person. (An unfortunate, but not negligible consequence of Mani's teachings was that



*A miniature, probably of the 8th or 9th century, depicting two rows of Manichaean priests in ritual costume.*

other established religions launched numerous persecutions to crush Manichaeism.)

Mani's personal role in the creation of the new religion was overwhelming. He founded it, devised its theology, and prescribed its moral code. It is true that many of his ideas derived from earlier thinkers, but it was Mani who combined these separate strands of thought into a distinctive new system. He also made many converts to Manichaeism by his preaching, created its ecclesiastical organization, and wrote its holy scriptures. Rarely has an important mass movement been so strikingly the creation of a single founder. It is obvious that the religion he founded would never have come into existence without him, and in this respect, Mani, like many religious leaders, seems to be far more important than most scientists and inventors.

Mani, therefore, clearly belongs somewhere on this list: the question is where? Obviously, he should be ranked far below the founders of the three principal world religions (Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism), whose followers over the course of time have numbered in the billions. On the other hand, even though Zoroastrianism and Jainism still survive today while Manichaeism has disappeared, it appears that Manichaeism, which at its height had far more adherents than either of those two religions, had a larger overall impact on the world than they did. It is for that reason that Mani has been ranked higher than either Zoroaster or Mahavira.