



## BEAUSOBRE, ISAAC DE

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**BEAUSOBRE, ISAAC DE** (1659-1738), pioneer of modern studies of Manicheism. Beausobre was a Frenchman from a family who had been Protestants (Huguenots) for several generations. Born at Niort in Poitou on March 8, 1659, he received a basic but incomplete education and, despite his parents' wish that he should go in for a legal career, he chose to study theology at the Saumur academy. In 1683 he became a pastor at Châtillon-sur-Indre. When his church was forcibly closed after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, he continued to hold services in secret but soon was compelled to flee, according to one story after he had indignantly smashed the seal which had been placed on the church door. He went to Holland, and through the good offices of the House of Orange he obtained a position in 1686 as court preacher at Dessau in Germany. In 1694 he became a pastor at Berlin, ministering to the city's large French community. He soon rose to be one of its leading figures, serving not only as pastor but also as a preacher to the royal privy council, director of the Maison Française (a hospice), inspector of the Collège François and of all the French churches in Berlin, and member of the High Council of the French community in Prussia. He performed his duties as pastor of the important Friedrich Werder church right up to his death at Berlin on June 5, 1738. By all accounts he was an engaging personality, a fine preacher, and an efficient administrator. As a liberal theologian and early exponent of enlightened views, he did not escape criticism from within his own community, but on several occasions when distinguished appointments in other countries were offered to him, both the community and the king of Prussia spoke out against his departure.



Not only among the Huguenots of Berlin but also in much wider circles, de Beausobre won renown as a brilliant scholar and as a master of the art of writing French. King Frederick II spoke of him as “la meilleure plume de Berlin.” He wrote essays on problems of Protestant doctrine and Reformation history, published a collection of sermons, and contributed to an annotated French translation of the New Testament. He was a contributor to the *Bibliothèque Germanique* (the learned journal of the French exiles) and for a time its editor.

In addition to the Reformation, Manicheism attracted de Beausobre’s attention because of his interest in theology and his personal life-experience. His *Histoire critique de Manichée et du Manichéisme* was published in two volumes, vol. 1 in 1734, vol. 2 posthumously in 1739. His aim was to obtain and provide a clear picture of this potent heresy of late ancient times from which the pre-Reformation heresies of medieval times were said by their Catholic adversaries to be descended. A planned third volume was to be a history of the Paulicians, Bogomils, Albigenses, Waldenses, and Bohemian Brethren (vol. 2, p. 6 n. 1). As he himself had expected, the published parts of the work were dismissed by conservative critics as an unwarrantable defamation of the fathers of the early church and commendation of the arch-heretic Mani. More positive but not dissimilar is H. S. Nyberg’s judgement that de Beausobre saw Manicheism as “a sort of pre-Protestant protestantism.” It must be emphasized, however, that de Beausobre shared the view of the heresy-hunters of earlier generations that Manicheism was a false doctrine. At the same time he aimed to present an account of the subject which would be free from prejudice and from slanders prompted by “ecclesiastical politics.”

It is certainly true that de Beausobre’s understanding and judgment are not always adequate, particularly when he portrays Manichean ritual as similar to Protestant worship (vol. 2, pp. 701ff.). His well-meant efforts to explore unfamiliar ground sometimes resulted in distorted views of basic features of the Manichean system, such as the doctrine of *salvator salvandus* (vol. 2, p. 554).

In so far as de Beausobre intended to write Christian *amende honorable*, his book looked to the past just as much as did the medieval anti-Manichean polemics; but in so far as he based his account on systematic and critical study of primary sources and did not let any constraints inhibit his exposure of “the false arguments of the authorities” (*le Sophisme de l’Autorité*, vol. 1, p. xxii), his work was the first great step forward on the path to modern study of



Manicheism. A particularly important, indeed epoch-making, advance was his demonstration that the *Acta Archelai*, which had until then been the main source of European information about Manicheism, are a 4th-century fabrication virtually devoid of value as historical evidence (vol. 1, pp. 5ff.). Since de Beausobre's time a great deal more information about Manicheism has come to light thanks to fortunate discoveries of documents, including one which made it possible, two centuries after his death, to confirm the truth of his theory of the dependence of Mani's *Book of the Giants* on the Jewish apocryphal Enoch literature (vol. 1, p. 429; cf. W. B. Henning, *BSOAS* 11, 1943, p. 52). If allowance is made for the great difficulties which de Beausobre had to face with the source-material at his disposal, his work certainly deserves Henning's commendation of it as "one of the best books ever written on Manicheism."

Frequently de Beausobre found occasion to write excursuses on ancient Zoroastrianism and its literature, which are interspersed throughout the two volumes. He attached great importance to Zoroastrianism because he supposed it to be the principal source of Mani's doctrine (vol. 1, p. 179). In this field he made critical use of what he had learned from ancient Greek and Latin authors and of the information on Arabic and late Zoroastrian Iranian writings given in d'Herbelot's *Bibliothèque Orientale* and Thomas Hyde's *Historia religionis veterum Persarum*.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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A full list of early writings about de Beausobre is given in the *Realencyklopädie für protestantische Theologie and Kirche*, vol. 2, ed. A. Hauck, Leipzig, 1897, pp. 499-500.

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Help and advice was given by Frau M. Welge, Academic Assistant to the Consistory of the French Church (Hugenottenkirche) in Berlin.