Encyclopædia Iranica

GNOSTICISM
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Published: December 15, 2001
Last Updated: June 3, 2013

GNOSTICISM

GNOSTICISM in Persia.

i. in the pre-islamic iranian world

Definition. The current academic term gnosticism (mainly in English) or gnosis (< Gk. *gnōsis* “cognition, knowledge”) goes back to the early Christian period (cf. 1. Tim. 6.20) and has a heresiological background. Its representatives were called Gnostics (Gk. *gnōstikos* “initiates”), that is, people who believed in specific “insights” and ways of behavior that deviated from the official church and its teachings and who disseminated their beliefs through their own writings. Existing sources point to the claim of true “insight” about the situation of man and his delivery from the material world, which is often compared with darkness. The self-definitions of these people are varied: “Race, children, or descendants of Seth,” “children of light,” “children of the nuptial chamber,” “the elect,” “the holy ones,” “the perfect ones,” “strangers [in this world],” “possessors of spirit [pneumatologists],” “the kingless or unchangeable race,” or simply “church” (Rudolph, 1994, pp. 205 ff.). The designations used in heresiological literature refer primarily to the individual founders of schools (Simonians, Valentinians, Basilidians, Marcionites) or to

prominent theoretical points (Archontics, Barbelo-Gnostics, Ophites or Naassenes “snake worshipers,” Sethians). It was only through more recent historical research that the concept of gnosis or gnosticism has been introduced and used as a metalinguistic term for the world view shared by these groups. The term is indeed also (and often wrongly) employed for related matters in religious and intellectual history.

The crucial points of Gnosticism are a very pronounced dualism between light and darkness, good and evil, spirit and body (or matter), a dualism that mainly serves to explain evil and imperfection in this world by tracing it back to an accident that was not intended by the true transcendental God; faith in salvation after death, an idea that, at the creation of man (Adam), had reached the material world as a divine spark of light (called “spirit” or “soul”), precisely through the knowledge about these processes, but also through the help of redeemers (Christ, Seth, etc.); the destruction of the earthly world (cosmos) at the end of time, and hence the restoration of the original oneness of the world of light.

A common characteristic of Gnostic thought is the idea of an initial downward movement (emanation) through the self-reflection of God, which leads not only to the world of light (pleroma), but also, because of the unfortunate, incorrect behavior of lowly forces, to the emergence of the visible world, including the stars and planets. For Gnosticism, salvation thus primarily consists primarily in liberation from the body and the world, an aim that is not only served by “cognition,” which, strictly speaking, belongs to the entire realm of Gnostic mythology or theology (as set down in the texts), but also by ascetic behavior and certain rituals about which we have little information. The communities consist mainly of strict representatives of the doctrine, the “possessors of spirit” (Gk. *pneumatikoi*), and the simple believers, that is “those of the soul” (*psychikoi*), who are often identified with the church Christians, as opposed to the “earthly ones” (Gk. *choikoi*), that is the heathens (Rudolph, 1994, pp. 208 f.; idem, 1996, pp. 80 ff, 90).

From a historical viewpoint, Gnosticism is a product of the ancient eastern Mediterranean world, and was presumably formed within the context of early Judaism and Christianity. Its beginnings date from the 1st century C.E., and its widest dissemination in the Roman Empire took place in the 2nd and 3rd centuries C.E. With the emergence of Christianity as the state church in the West (3rd century), there also began the forcible elimination of Gnosticism. The latter, however, left behind its effects on the elaboration of the strict

episcopal structure and on certain aspects of Christian doctrine (ascetic and anti-mundane attitudes) and continued to accompany the church like a shadow in various ways, including Manicheism and medieval dualistic movements (e.g., Cathars; cf. Rudolph, 1994, pp. 367 ff.; idem, 1996, pp. 298 ff.).

Approaches to the problem: Gnosticism in Iran. The area in which early gnosticism first emerged and spread was, according to the predominantly Greek and Coptic sources, the eastern and western Mediterranean. Already at the outset of modern research about gnosticism, the latter's strict dualism was explained by referring to "Oriental philosophy," which implied Iran and Zoroastrianism respectively, or to Buddhism (cf. Rudolph, 1975, pp. ix ff.). In the course of further work and with the discovery of new sources, additional theories were developed on the subject, among them the particularly influential ones of the German philologist Richard Reitzenstein (1861-1931). From the Manichean Turfan texts preserved in Iranian dialects, he worked out an "Iranian mystery of redemption" (1921), which he assumed to form the basis of Gnostic soteriology, that is, the idea of a "redeemed redeemer." Although this idea has meanwhile proven groundless, since the texts he used were definitely of Manichean origin and differed from the Irano-Zoroastrian imagination, other scholars insisted on the strong influence of Iranian ideas. Among them were the Swedish historian of religion Geo Widengren (1952, 1965) and the Italian Iranist Gherardo Gnoli (1970), who mentions an "Iranian gnosis."

The contribution of Iranian-Zoroastrian factors to the evolution of Gnostic theories cannot be entirely denied, as is shown by dualistic ideas (spirit and body, light and darkness), the identity of divine and human spiritual forces or virtues, the idea of the soul's journey to the beyond and that of the end of the world, and the last judgment (cf. Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* III, pp. 460-65). The prevailing opinion today is that traditions of this kind were not directly derived from the Iranian-Zoroastrian realm, but were already accepted and passed on by Judaism in the pre-Christian centuries (Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* III pp. 361-460). Hans Jonas assumed in his pioneering work that the main types in Gnostic cosmology include a "Syrio-Egyptian" and an "Iranian" one (I, pp. 256 f.). While the former stands for the bulk of traditional Gnostic literature, the Iranian type is represented by the "Manichaean redemption drama" (Jonas, I, pp. 284-320). The latter assumes two independent principles, light and darkness, or good and evil, while the former believes in complicated movements of divine emanation and fall, out of which there develops the

counter-principle that initiates the world process. For Jonas, a mixture of both cosmological speculations is represented by the Mandaean cosmogony (I, pp. 262-83). On the whole, this typology is still valid today, even if the description "Syrian-Egyptian" can no longer be applied; but we may rather speak of an "emanationist" type, whereby it must be pointed out that ideas of emanation are not foreign to the Iranian type. Admitting this typological analysis for the present, and taking into account the available sources about the existence of a distinct gnosis outside the Christian-Gnostic communities coming from the Roman Empire (e.g., Edessa, q.v.), we arrive at the conclusion that there can only be a question of gnosticism or gnosis in pre-Islamic Iran through Manicheism, Mandaeism, and perhaps some features of the teachings of Mazdak.

Mani and gnosis. Mani, the founder of Manicheism, was born near Ctesiphon (q.v.), the capital of the Persian Empire, in 216 C.E., but he grew up in a Jewish-Christian Baptist community (Elkasaites; Ar. Moḡtasela), where he became familiar with Christian-Jewish as well as Gnostic literature. But in his first work (*Šābuhragān*), dedicated in 241-42 to the Sasanian king Šāpur I, he shows great knowledge of the Irano-Zoroastrian and especially the Zurvanite tradition (Rudolph, 1996, pp. 655-56; Sundermann, 1997, pp. 643-60). Throughout his life, he never crossed the borders to the Roman Empire, but only preached in the East (Media, Kušān, India, Turān); his disciples, however, founded communities in the west. He died in prison in 276 C.E. during the reign of Bahrām I (Widengren, 1961, tr., pp. 37-42; Ort, pp. 221-24).

His religion spread mainly within the Persian Empire up to Central Asia, but also towards the west (Palestine, Egypt, North Africa), where it was considered as the "Persian religion." Apart from the Coptic texts, the parts of the literature preserved in Iranian dialects (Middle Persian, Parthian, Sogdian) are the most important original sources. Although the Iranian sources are to a great extent translations from the Islamic period, the Iranian-Zoroastrian heritage has been preserved both in them and in the western sources. Already the naming of the religion as "the doctrine of the two roots (*bun*, *buništ*) and the three periods" distinctly shows this. What is meant are the principles of light and darkness and the periods of the cosmological processes: mixture (*gumēzišn*, q.v.), creation (*bundahišn*), and separation (*wizārišn*; Sundermann, 1997, p. 355) Even if this division does not entirely correspond with the Zoroastrian model, the "three-part" evolution of the world follows the Zoroastrian tradition. The same is true of the fundamentally dualistic idea which views the

two opposite natures of good and evil not as twins, as in Zurvanism and its interpretation of *Yasna* 30.3, but as independent beings fighting for the human being, for his "self" (*griw*, *manuhmed*, *ruwān*). The properly Gnostic character is shown in the fact that the two principles are each time equated with spirit and matter, so that good and evil, light and darkness, God and the demon (*dēw*, q.v.) refer at the same time to the opposition between the spiritual and material (corporeal) world. Thus Mani represents the main Gnostic principle of the fundamental rejection of the body as being incapable of redemption. Along with the gift and virtue of "cognition" (gnosis), asceticism is the only way which leads to the liberation of the soul. It is not only a question of the separation between light and darkness, but also of that between spirit and matter. The end of the world marks both the elimination of its physical substance and the return of the divine light to its spiritual essence.

The way in which Mani used the Gnostic tradition despite his original assimilation of Zoroastrian, Christian, and Jewish ideas is shown by some parts of his subtle, adjustable system, especially those based on his Coptic sources (cf. Rudolph, 1996, pp. 629-66). His description of the "Father of Greatness" corresponds with the Gnostic *Agnostos Theos*, that of the "Mother of Life" or "Mother of the Living" with the Gnostic *Paredra*, whether it is *Barbelo*, *Sophia-Zoe*, or the heavenly Eve, while the trinity of Father, Mother, and Primeval Man corresponds with the Gnostic trinity with *Monogenes* or Christ (cf. Rudolph, 1996, pp. 638 f.). The events concerning Primeval Man in the Manichean sources evoke those regarding Adam, whether by their idea of likeness, their temptation motif, or the awakening through the brilliance of Jesus (light, nous). Some figures like *Hyle* (Darkness), *Saklas* (Demiurge), and Adam's son, Seth (Sethel), can be found in both realms. The effect of soteriology on the "spirit" or "reason" (*nus*, *epinoia*, *ennoia*, *pneuma*) and on the members of Primeval Man or the heavenly anthropos is characteristic of gnosis and Manicheism. The same is true of the position of Jesus Christ, whom Mani firmly establishes as "shining Jesus," Herald of light, and Soul of light, like Gnostic Christology with its pneuma Christ and Jesus as the earthly savior. The heresiological reproach raised in this connection by a certain docetism (the apparent body of Jesus) has been abandoned by current research (cf. Rudolph, 1994, 157 ff.; idem, 1996, pp. 266 ff.). The con-substantiality of savior (*salvator*) and "the one to be saved" (*salvandum*) is a crucial idea in both realms and is even more forcefully elaborated by Mani. The same is true of the idea of light-bringers who spread the tidings of redemption, in Mani's case Buddha, Zoroaster, Jesus, and in the Gnostic texts Baruch, Seth, Jesus, and

Zostrianos (cf. Rudolph, 1994, pp. 130 ff; idem, 1996, pp. 651 f.).

The eschatological ideas are in fact closely related, whether they are based on Iranian or Judeo-Christian models: the new eon marks the end of darkness and *Hyle* (Matter). Even the concept of the church as a structure of the earthly community of the "elect" (*electi*, *pneumatikoi*) and the "hearer" or catechumen (*katechumenoi*, *auditores*, *psychikoi*) is gnosis and Manicheism combined, although consistently fashioned anew by Mani, with the additional idea of a heavenly church. On the whole, it can certainly be said that Mani's doctrine was either a Gnostic religion on Iranian soil or a peculiarly Iranian religion on a Gnostic basis. At the same time, its individual components are evaluated not only by the subjective approach of the inquirer, but also with a view to the respective markedness or "development" towards the missionary adjustment of this singular ancient world religion.

Mandaism. Unlike Manicheism, the Mandaic gnosis has no known founder. Due to the lack of adequate historical sources, its origin remains hypothetical. In its practical form as a community with marked water ceremonies, namely regular baptisms in running waters, it probably goes back to the Baptist milieu of early Jewish groups of the Palestinian region of Jordan. Not later than the 3rd century C.E. (under a king named Ardban, i.e., Ardavān/Artabanus) this community set out via Carrhae (Ḥarrān) and the mountains of Media towards Mesopotamia and further to Ḵuzestān. Through their religious ideology, the Mandaeans belong to a specific kind of Oriental gnosis (*mandā* "knowledge") with its own literature in the Mandaean language and script. It centers around a strict dualism between light (*ālmā dnuhrā*) and the world of darkness (*hšukā*). While the former is ruled by the god of "life" (*haiji*)and the creatures of light (*uthri*), the latter is the chaotic empire of *Ur*, also called "King of Darkness," and of the evil "spirit" (*ruhā*). The earthly world (*tibil*) emerges from a fallen creature of light (*ptāhil*), and the first human being (Adam) is also created with the aid of evil powers (planets and signs of the zodiac); only the "soul" (*nišimta*), which is sent by "life," leads to the life of Adam, who is enlightened about his origin by the "gnosis of life" (*mandā dhaiji*), so that his soul may return to the empire of light. This event is a model for the release of the soul from the world, which is like darkness; heralds of light (*adyaura*, *parwanqa*) such as *Hibil* (Abel), *Anōš* (Enoch), or *Šitil* (Seth) teach mankind and help them to surmount the purgatories above the earth (guardhouses) of the "Seven" (planets) and "Twelve" (zodiacal entities), so as to rise to the world of light. This is done through requiem masses and meals, and baptisms are also

necessary. Only at the end of the world will the original separation between light and darkness again be brought about (cf. Rudolph, 1960, pp. 124 f., 161 f.).

Despite their anti-cosmic approach, the Mandaeans (also called Nasoraeans, Ar. Ṣābeʾin) developed no ascetic lifestyles, so that they could independently assert themselves up to the present amidst Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Since the Persian Gulf wars (1980-86, 1990-91), they have been also present in Europe, America, and Australia. Their close relations with the Iranian world are witnessed in numerous Iranian loan words, including even the cultic spheres (cf. Rudolph, 1960, I, pp. 118 ff.; Widengren, 1960, pp. 89 ff.). There is even evidence of old contacts between Manicheism and Mandaism, the latter representing a hitherto preserved part of the southern Mesopotamian Baptist world, where Mani once grew up (cf. Rudolph, 1996, pp. 592-95, 607-26). The dualistic concept with its anti-cosmic organization is shared by both and differs from that of Zoroastrianism. So even regarding the Mandaic gnosis, we can only speak of an “Iranian” gnosis in a figurative sense.

Mazdakism. The doctrine of Mazdak (5th century C.E.) is also often referred to as the legacy of the gnosis of late antiquity on Iranian ground (Widengren, 1965, pp. 308 ff.; Klima, 1957, pp. 132-83), although hardly anything definite is known about it, and there is a lack of original sources. As a precursor, the Byzantine sources mention a certain Bundos, a Manichean who worked in Rome around 300 and then went to Persia. It was apparently through him that Manichean or Gnostic ideas were introduced into Mazdak’s teachings. If this is not a heresiological construction (cf. Klima, 1977, pp. 18 -19), then Mani and Mazdak were both Zoroastrian “heretics” (*zandiq*), and here, too, there is primarily a case of dualism evoking Gnostic models, or the Seven and Twelve Forces ruling the world. According to Mazdak, salvation depended on knowledge about the correlations of the world, expressed in letters, words, and numbers, but also on moral behavior, which apparently had certain features of social criticism, or even communism, to which the doctrines of the Gnostic Carpocrates (3rd century in Egypt) were applied (Klima, 1957, pp. 209 ff.). Yet, in my opinion, these references do not suffice to define Mazdak’s teachings as a form of “Iranian gnosis.” What he apparently wanted was to carry out a reform of the Zoroastrianism of his time, in order to improve the critical situation of Persia and its Zoroastrian state religion with the help of King Kawād I (488-96, 499-531). But after some early results, his ultimate failure led to his execution in 524 and the persecution of the movement.

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