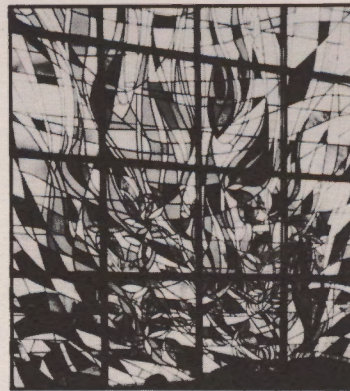


RELIGION

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The Major World Religion that Vanished: Gnostic Manichaeism

by

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Early History of Manichaeism

"You will not die, for God knows that when you eat of [the tree of the knowledge of good and evil] your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

Genesis 3:4-5

The Religion of Light, now referred to as Manichaeism, was one of the major world religions and the only such religion to grow out of late antiquity's Near Eastern gnostic religious tradition. Originally considered by scholars to be a Christian heresy, Manichaeism is now properly understood in the context of third-century Mesopotamian oriental religions. It was founded by the Iranian prophet Mani (216-77), who created a universal propagandistic religion from a mix of Christian, Zoroastrian, and Buddhist practices and concepts. The religion moved east toward India and west into the Roman Empire already in Mani's lifetime, reaching as far west as Algiers and southern Europe and as far east as Central Asia and southeast coastal China where traces of the religion datable to the early seventeenth century can be identified.

Mani was born on 14 April 216 in Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) and his parents were of Persian descent. His mother, called Maryam was of royal descent, while his father, Patik, was a devotee in a Jewish-Christian baptismal sect with gnostic beliefs and ascetic practices. Mani entered the baptismal

sect at the age of four, but received a revelation at the age of twelve when an angel called "The Twin" appeared to him and ordered him to leave the baptismal sect at an unspecified later date. The crucial second revelation came at the age of twenty-four when the angel ordered him to begin his public ministry by preaching the newly revealed doctrine. His "new teaching" (Mark 1:17) put Mani at odds with the traditional community and he was forced to leave with the support of his father and only two faithful followers. The primary point of contention was probably his typical gnostic argument that baptism was useless and that true redemption only comes from the physical and moral separation of light from darkness, spirit from matter, and good from evil. Mani proclaimed himself the Apostle of Light (1 Corinthians 9:1), the Paraclete Incarnate whose coming was prophesied by Jesus (John 14:16, 26), and the Seal of the Prophets who would bring the final revelation to all the world. He viewed all previous religious traditions as contaminations of the originally true teachings of the earlier prophets Buddha, Jesus, and Zoroaster. He proclaimed instead the final revelation, the true universal religion which would unite all people through his teaching.

His grand plan required propagandistic methods designed to overcome the language barriers which ultimately prevented the revelations of earlier prophets from reaching the universal audience. Mani emphasized the need for the translation of his writings into all languages in order to propagate his teaching as effectively and quickly as possible. In

direct contrast to earlier true prophets (like Jesus), whose teachings were put into written form by their followers (like Mark) who then contaminated those teachings with their own interpretations, he himself produced seven "canonical" sacred writings: (1) *The Living Gospel*, (2) *The Treasure of Life*, (3) *The Pragmateia*, (4) *The Book of Mysteries*, (5) *The Book of the Giants*, (6) *The Letters*, and (7) *The Psalms and Prayers*. None of these texts is known to survive today in a complete form. Perhaps Mani's most effective propagandistic tool was his ability to instill in his followers a sense of the absolute necessity for an extreme ascetic lifestyle characterized by the propagation of the religion.

Mani's first mission was eastward, like that of the legendary apostle Thomas before him, and he met an early success in what is now southeast Iran (ca. 240-42). He continued to meet successes when he met with the Persian emperor Shapur I and was granted the freedom to propagate the Religion of Light throughout the empire. Although Mani enjoyed imperial favor, the Magian clergy (cf. Matthew 2:1-11) of the official Persian state religion Zoroastrianism grew intent on persecuting him. The Zoroastrian high priest, strengthened by widespread nationalistic aspirations, was successful in convincing the new emperor to begin official persecution of the movement, and Mani was quickly arrested, interrogated under torture for one month, and died a martyr's death in prison in about the year 277.

Mani's Theology and its Ethical Implications

"If the eye could see the demons that people the universe, existence would be impossible" Talmud, Berakhot, 6

Mani's teaching embraced an elaborate historical drama of supracosmic proportions in which humanity's past origin, present predicament, and future possibilities are described. The drama centers its theological concern on the existential question of the origin of evil in human experience. Mani employed a typical apocalyptic scheme in which cosmic history was divided into three time periods: the past, the present, and the future. In the past there existed two eternal principles, one all good and the other all evil. The good principle exists exclusively within the Kingdom of Light and finds its focus in the Father of Greatness whose throne is surrounded by 156 peace-loving spirit-beings in five peaceful "dwellings" (intelligence, knowledge, reason, thought, and deliberation). The evil principle and the Kingdom of Darkness are the complete antitheses of the good principle and the Kingdom of Light. The many monstrous inhabitants of the Kingdom of Darkness are controlled by five evil rulers who are in constant opposition to each other and who, collectively, make up the hellish "Prince of Darkness." They are controlled by unreined passions and dwell in an ominous netherworld of smoke, fire, wind, water, and darkness. The two kingdoms are completely distinct yet eternally coexistent.

The present period of human existence begins when the evil inhabitants of the Kingdom of Darkness drive a wedge into the Kingdom of Light in a lustful desire to possess it. The Kingdom of Darkness is thoroughly aroused and its vicious inhabitants enter the light in a full-scale invasion. The rest of the drama in the present time focuses on the work of the Father of Greatness to regain each and every one of the precious light particles swallowed by the evil rulers. He causes the creation of an elaborate cosmic mechanism (visible in the sky at night) to distill the light from the matter. This "cosmic distillery" is the Column of Glory (our Milky Way) which transports the recovered light particles (the visible stars) to the Moon-ship (one can observe it filling up over the course of a month!) and then to the Sun-ship which transports the light particles to their temporary haven (the New Earth; cf. Revelation 21:1).

The Prince of Darkness, in an attempt to prevent the cosmic distillation of light particles, gives birth to two evil demons who in turn give birth to exact miniature replicas of the confused "light-matter" macrocosm: Adam and Eve (Genesis 1:27). In a typically gnostic "inverted reading" of Genesis 1-5 (an orthodox rabbi's nightmare!), the evil creator of the Genesis story only creates

matter (which for the gnostic Manichaeans, is inherently evil) and is unable by his very nature to create in the manner of the Father of Greatness by evoking pure *spiritual* beings. Consequently, Adam (representing humanity) is specifically designed by the evil creator "in his own image" to procreate sexually (Genesis 1:26-28). Thus, Adam can only continue the evil cycle of birth, copulation, and rebirth and in so doing fulfills his natural evil inclination (representing human sexuality) to be "fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28), and so entangles more precious light particles in potentially endless generations of human bodies (representing the mistake known as human history). But since Adam was ignorant of the light within him and the facts of his true origin in the Kingdom of Light, the evocations of the Father of Greatness send the redemptive "Jesus of Light" to awaken Adam, to lead him to the self-recognition of his true nature and his true origin in the Kingdom of Light (Genesis 3:1-22). Jesus of Light helps Adam eat of the Tree of Life (thus Adam receives the *knowledge* of good and evil), warns him of the dangers of sexual procreation with Eve, and so encourages an ascetic lifestyle (absolutely central for Manichaean ethics). Then Eve, through an evil male angel, gives birth to Cain who then copulates with his mother Eve who gives birth to Abel (Genesis 4:1-2), and so begins the incestuous interaction of Cain and Abel with Eve and with each other's daughters borne by Eve (Genesis 4:2-17; Cain's wife was thus his sister-daughter). Eve then receives magical knowledge from an evil angel which would enable her to copulate with the ascetic Adam. She succeeds in her desire with Adam and bears Seth who, as the first true son of Adam (Genesis 4:25a, 5:3, 4b), contains a significantly larger amount of light particles than the other offspring of Eve. The ascetic Adam and Seth become the exemplary human figures in Manichaean ethics (Genesis 4:26b; 5:1-32; Luke 3:38) since, like all human beings, they are self-conscious particles of light entrapped in innately evil material bodies.

The future time is the third and final act of the historical cosmic drama and provides for Manichaean ethics a preview into the system of rewards and punishments. The Great War will break out among the unenlightened powers of darkness when the distillation of light particles from the material cosmos has neared its completion. Jesus will return at a decisive eschatological moment as the Great King and will judge humanity and the infernal powers. The Elect will become angels, the Auditors will be judged righteous, and the sinners will be cast into hell with Eve and her hellish offspring. The remaining light particles will be gathered and finally return by ascent to the Kingdom of Light while the Prince of Darkness and his diabolical minions will be cast into a bottomless pit permanently sealed with a huge stone for all eternity. The two principles of Light and

Darkness will again be two separate and distinct entities, but never again to mingle.

Manichaean Church and Ethics

"Having come from the light and from the gods, here I am in exile, separated from them" A fragmentary Manichaean manuscript (Turfan M7)

Individual human beings are replicant microcosms of the confused "light-matter" macrocosm. As such they endure an eternal struggle within their own souls for release from matter and return to their true home in the immaterial Kingdom of Light. After the ignorant individual human soul has been awakened (and thus becomes knowledgeable or "gnostic"), that individual is conscious of the eternal dualistic realities which control its fate and so can only now hope to succeed against influences from the lower physical nature. This internal struggle was described by Mani in Pauline terms concerning the "New Man" and "Old Man" who are locked in mortal combat (1 Corinthians 3:9-10; Ephesians 4:22-24). The individual can succeed in this struggle through the protection of angelic guides who are accessible only in the teaching of Mani and the guidance of the Manichaean church. Strict adherence to the extreme ascetic requirements are impossible to enforce on the popular level and, were they to succeed, would result in the eventual extinction of the human race. Knowing that such commitment could only be expected from himself and a few choice believers, Mani divided his church into two basic classes, the Elect and the Auditors.

The Elect are required to keep the "Five Commandments" (to be pure and poor and not to lie, kill, or eat flesh) and to avoid evil speech and the drinking of alcohol. The vegetarian requirement was imperative for the Elect since plants contain more light particles than flesh. The light particles are digested through the bodies of the vegetarian Elect, released through their belches into the atmosphere, distilled by the cosmos, and finally sent on their homeward journey along the Milky Way to the Kingdom of Light. Orthodox Christian heresiologists thus ridiculed Manichaean Elect as "saviours of god"! The Elect were barred from any activity which might injure material objects containing light particles. Thus planting, harvesting, or even walking over the smallest plants could prevent the liberation of the light particles they contain. Since the procuring and preparation of vegetable foodstuffs often required the destruction of light-bearing plants, the elect were not permitted to prepare their own meals, and instead were served by the Auditors who were pardoned

for the unavoidable destruction of plants. Even bathing was not allowed for the Elect since pure water (an element from the Kingdom of Light) could be defiled by contact with material bodily substances! The Elect also avoided sexual intercourse since the process of birth, copulation, and rebirth was directly related to Adam's lower material nature, as human sexuality was invented by the evil creator to enslave light particles in material bodies. Only the Elect would return to the Kingdom of Light directly after death, while the light particles or souls of the Auditors could only hope to enter into the bodies of light-bearing vegetables after death and finally be freed through the digestive systems of the Elect! All humans who are not awakened will be forever damned into an inescapable cycle of reincarnation in the bodies of animals like lizards and frogs culminating in their permanent entrapment in the Kingdom of Darkness.

A History of Manichaeism after Mani's Death

"A stranger in this world, I've got a home on high,
in another land so far away,
in another time, in another place"
Van Morrison, *Astral Weeks* (1967)

The history of Manichaeism after Mani's death is extremely complex due to its twelve-hundred year development along a continuous geographical spectrum embracing western North Africa and southern Europe on its western edge and coastal south-east China on its eastern edge. The present essay traces only the general contours of that geo-historical development.

The intense heresiological polemic against Manichaeism resulted in a now only partially extant literary corpus reflecting the westward movement of the religion. Orthodox Christian theologians like Titus of Bostra (d. 371), Ephraim of Syria (d. 373), Cyril of Jerusalem (d. 386), John Chrysostom (ca. 390), and Epiphanius of Salamis (d. 403) all preached and wrote vehemently against the Religion of Light. In Egypt, Serapion of Thmuis wrote a lengthy refutation against the Manichaeans (ca. 339) and at about the same time the neo-Platonist and former Manichaean Alexander of Lycopolis rejected the naïve literalism of Manichaean cosmology, as Augustine was to do several decades later.

In North Africa, Augustine's (354-430) nine-year association with the religion and later polemical writings against Manichaean doctrine and practice are the most famous evidences of Manichaean presence in North Africa. Augustine was himself a Manichaean Auditor for nine years while keeping teaching posts in Tagaste and Carthage. His advanced studies in rhetoric led him to the philosophical analysis of logical problems

"The fear of subversive political infiltration from Persia set the Roman authorities on guard against Manichaeans."

which ultimately resulted in his gradual abandonment of the naïve Manichaean solution to the problem of evil in human experience. Augustine made a lateral move into Christianity under the influence of Christian intellectuals like Bishop Ambrose of Milan. Augustine's "Anti-Manichaean Pentateuch" included five anti-Manichaean tractates written before his ordination in 391. After his ordination he continued his polemic against Manichaeans until at least 399 with ten more polemical tractates dealing exclusively with Manichaeism.

Imperial policies against the Manichaeans are clear evidence of the religion's presence in Rome itself, greater Italy, and throughout the empire. The emperors Diocletian (302), Valentinian I (372), Theodosius I (381), Theodosius II (408-50), Anastasius I (491-518), Justin I (518-527), and Justinian (529) all sought to control the spread of the religion. The fear of subversive political infiltration from Persia set the Roman authorities on guard against Manichaeans. Pope Leo I (ca. 444-45) delivered sermons meant to inform the faithful of the Manichaean threat, and even circulated a pastoral letter to the Italian bishops urging them to be aware of Manichaean infiltrations in the orthodox clergy!

Manichaeism travelled eastward across Persia into Central Asia already in Mani's lifetime through his missionaries who followed the silk routes eastward and introduced the religion to China in the seventh century (650-83). The first Chinese imperial edict against Manichaeism (732) was meant to limit the spread of the religion among Chinese nationals. It calls the religion a perverse belief masquerading as a school of Buddhism intending to mislead the common people. The religion spread through the Yangtze Basin where four Manichaean temples were built in 768 and contacts with Chinese nationals were allowed. But the Chinese populace grew more intolerant against foreign culture as the T'ang government began to legislate contacts between foreigners and the Chinese people. The government found itself relatively free of foreign influence when the neighboring Uighur empire collapsed in 840. It closed Manichaean temples with an imperial letter of 843 resulting in a most unfortunate massacre of Manichaeans. Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and

Nestorian Christianity also fell out of imperial favor as nationalistic Confucian influence now predominated at the imperial court.

A fifty-three year period of political chaos (907-60) followed the fall of the T'ang Dynasty in 907 and provided Manichaean missionaries with the opportunity to propagate the religion in the coastal regions of south-east China. Buddhist historians of the Sung Dynasty (960-1280) blamed the chaos of the earlier period and even contemporary social problems on Manichaeans who had by then successfully integrated themselves into Chinese society. The Sinicisation of the Religion of Light (Ming-chiao), involved the establishment of Manichaean temples under the guise of Taoist temples. This resulted in one of the most significant early victories for Chinese Manichaeans: the inclusion of a major Chinese Manichaean text into the official canon of Taoist scriptures compiled under the reigning emperor between 998 and 1022. The text thus received imperial protection during the official confiscations of foreign texts in the early 1120s. Many such groups were called by the derogatory name "vegetarian demon worshippers" and were subject to blanket prosecution and harassment. The government blamed five rebellions between 1130 and 1150 on "vegetarian demon worshippers" and issued twenty edicts against such groups between 1132 and 1209.

China reopened its borders to foreign influence during the eighty-eight year period of Mongol rule (1280-1368). The Silk Road was reactivated and the seas between the south China coast and the Persian Gulf were busy with trade ships. The Mongol policy of religious toleration allowed Manichaean missionaries to continue their work without official harassment. Even Marco Polo seems to have encountered a group of Manichaeans he thought were Christians! The Mongol control of China began to erode with the death of Kublai Khan in 1294. A series of uncoordinated rebellions began in south China and increased to the point that one of the rebel leaders recaptured Peking from the Mongols in 1368 and established his Dynasty of Light (Ming-chao). Several sects were proscribed by his edict of 1370 including the Religion of Light (Ming-chiao).

The rest of our knowledge of the Religion of Light in China concerns the Manichaean temple on Hua-piao Hill in Ch'üan-chou, Fukien province. An inscription on the temple's statue of Mani dates the statue to 1339. Historical references, preserved in the writings of Ho Ch'iao-yüan (ca. 1600) suggest that the southern Chinese Manichaeans in Ch'üan-chou were still considered a distinct social group at the beginning of the seventeenth century. But Chinese scholars of the Ch'ing Dynasty (1644-1912) had no exact knowledge of the identity and nature of the Religion of Light.

Afterthought

"And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good"
Genesis 1:31

What we observe in the checkered history of Manichaeism is the rejection, and in too many cases the annihilation, of a minority religious group which struggled against all odds to find a home within several cultures over a twelve-hundred year period. To read the accounts of professional orthodox heresy-hunters like Augustine is to read the story of a nefarious devil-inspired religious movement intent on damning human souls to hell. To read actual Manichaean texts (pick any one, the *Psalmbook* for example) is to read the story of an intensely pious, harmless, and quiet people who wanted only to experience God (which they recognized as the same God Jesus worshipped) and to help the plight of a suffering humanity by their unique combination of an ascetic lifestyle and a radical critique of the status quo. The orthodox heresiological tradition, whether Christian, Muslim, or Confucian, may have been justified in its attacks on the naïve literalism of Mani's cosmology and his simple solution to the problem of evil in human existence. No

doubt the Manichaeans, like Jews and Christians in various times throughout their histories, were challenging the commonly accepted interpretation of human reality which just did not work for them, and in so doing presented themselves as a political threat (an eastern "Persian threat" to Rome, a western "barbarian" threat to China). The destruction of the Manichaean religion, the only major world religion to grow out of late antiquity's Near Eastern gnostic religious tradition, has resulted in the destruction of a human natural resource, a voice that offered a viable alternate perspective on human existence. Mani's negative evaluation of human existence, that the physical creation was a mistake of an inferior minor god, was certainly in sharp contrast to orthodox Christian and Jewish belief that human existence in this world is positive and meaningful (Genesis 1:10 "And God saw that it was good"). This clash of mythological structures, of opposing and irreconcilable world-views, led ultimately to the destruction not of those who were essentially in error, but of those who were without political power, and who were perhaps too convinced for their own good of the absolute "truth" of their own religious beliefs.

Paul Allan Mirecki is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies, with interests in the areas of New Testament Studies, Hellenistic literature, the Roman World, and Gnosticism. He received his B.A. from Roosevelt University, his M.A. from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, and his Th.D. in New Testament and Christian Origins from Harvard University in 1986.

KSR Fall Conferences "Spirituality and Life Changes"

"Spirituality and Life Changes" will be the theme for the annual Kansas School of Religion Conferences at the following cities:

Parsons	September 19
Salina	September 20
Hutchinson	September 27
Topeka	September 28

The presenter will be The Reverend Vincent Krische, Director of the St. Lawrence Catholic Campus Center at the University of Kansas. Father Krische will give four presentations at each site where participants will be enabled to:

1. Identify individual and family life changes within the context of spirituality.
2. Identify life changes as part of the natural process advancing toward a fuller life.
3. Describe the relationship between life changes and the principal virtue of love.
4. Describe ways to enhance human dignity through life changes.

A panel consisting of a nurse, social worker, and a member of the clergy will respond to the two morning sessions; following the afternoon address, conferees will be involved in group discussion.

These conferences are sponsored by the Kansas School of Religion, the Washburn University School of Nursing, and locally by the Ministerial Associations of Hutchinson, Salina, and Parsons, and by Interfaith of Topeka.

The cost is \$40 and includes lunch for those who preregister. The cost is \$45 for those who register the day of the conference (lunch cannot be guaranteed). Space is limited at several locations so please preregister early. For further information on these conferences, please contact Judy Ventsam at the Kansas School of Religion, 1300 Oread, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas 66045. Telephone 913-843-7257.

Support for the Department of Religious Studies

The Executive Committee of the Kansas School of Religion has authorized funding for the 1991-1992 fiscal year in the following categories:

Direct Grant—A direct grant of \$15,000.00 has been allocated to the Department of Religious Studies to be used for faculty outreach, conferences and lectures, faculty development travel, library student personnel, audio visual aids and computer equipment.

Student Aid—The scholarship grant is \$10,000.00 for the 1991-1992 fiscal year and will increase to \$15,000.00 for the 1992-1993 year.

Library—The William Moore Library in Smith Hall has been given \$5,000.00 for library acquisitions.

This support reflects the Executive Committee's confidence in the Department of Religious Studies and its belief that the Department has made wise use of such support in recent years. For example, last year the Department used the support for student personnel to supplement its University allocation in order to keep the library open longer. This was very important to the increasing number of students taking courses in Religious Studies. (It also meant a lot to the students thereby employed by the library.) There are several other examples.

The KSR supported the Department's conference and lecture program, enabling it to bring to campus outstanding scholars. Professor Zimdars-Swartz's national conference on "Visions and Visionary Experience in Religion" has received much recognition, and is typical of the quality of the Department's offerings—and one reason for its growing national reputation.

Finally, KSR support has allowed Department faculty to attend national and international conferences, and to travel to use special collections here and abroad. Such activities are crucial to the scholarship of the Department and in turn to its clients—whether students or reading audience in the profession and general public.

Thus, as noted above, the Kansas School of Religion's support over the past several years can be seen as a crucial factor in the emergence of the Department of Religious Studies as a nationally important program for students and scholars. The Kansas School of Religion's relationship to the Department models other similar programs which bring important levels of outside support to religious studies on a university campus. (Ed.)

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