THE MEDIEVAL MANICHEE

CHAPTER I

Introduction

TOLERANCE is a social rather than a religious virtue. A broad-minded view of the private belief of others undoubtedly makes for the happiness of society; but it is an attitude impossible for those whose personal religion is strong. For if we know that we have found the key and guiding principle of Life, we cannot allow our friends to flounder blindly in the darkness. We may recognize that without the key they may yet lead virtuous and admirable lives, but their task is made unnecessarily hard; it is our duty to help them on to the true Path, to show them the light that will illuminate it all. Opinions may vary as to the nature of the help that should be given, whether peaceful persuasion and a shining example, or the sword and the auto da fé. But no really religious man can pass the unbeliever by and do nothing.

Still more than the unbeliever it is the wrong believer, the heretic rather than the infidel, whose conversion is the concern of the faithful. For the infidel is often impossible to win. No one can prove that Christianity is better than Buddhism or Islam. Those who believe it to be so, do so not from logical argument but from an instinctive conviction that its fundamental message is the true revelation, whereas those of other creeds are false or unimportant. But the heretic Christian is in a different position. He believes, like the orthodox, in the basic article of the Christian faith, that Jesus of Nazareth died to redeem us. But he gives his faith another interpretation, an interpretation that leads him, in orthodox eyes, into dangerous and avoidable error.

His crime is therefore the more serious. The infidel in his unbelief leaves Christianity alone. The heretic accepts its principles but by
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perverting them destroys their value, undermining the whole Christian position. Yet heresy is hard to exterminate. “For there must be also heresies among you”, said St Paul; 1 and indeed orthodox doctrine is complex and difficult, and it is tempting to make some simplification here or there—tempting, but not to be endured. For the vast superstructure of orthodox theologians have built over the fundamental Christian revelation is not the baroque expression of the whims of a few pedants and eccentrics, but the attempt of the best brains of a great intellectual era to display all the implications of that revelation. Sceptical historians might mock at the passion with which early Christian ecclesiastics would fight over some tiny doctrinal delicacy; but even an iota might clarify or might mar an essential aspect of the Faith. In Islam the tendency to heresy is smaller; for the revelation of Islam is a simpler thing, contained in the word of Mahomet. A logical and historical exegesis of the Koran should explain it all. Nevertheless, in Islam divergencies could not be kept down. The Christian revelation is far harder to fit into simple language; the room for error is infinitely great.

The orthodox theologians reached their conclusions by continual arduous efforts of the intellect, rejecting any easy compromise or attractive gnosis that might weaken part of their structure. It was not to be expected that a body whose creed was too subtle for Tertullian and who saw weakness even in Origen, should tolerate without irritation men who sought solutions more childish or more irrelevant. The Church was narrow-minded because the true Path is narrow, and it knew that for Christians no other path led to Salvation.

This irritation led to intolerance and at length to persecution. In the first centuries of the Christian era persecution between Christians could not occur. The whole Christian community was a struggling minority, itself subject to periodical persecution. In self-defence schism was deprecated even by those that disagreed with the official theology. Sects indeed would perpetually be formed, in particular amongst the Gnostics. But they were treated as unimportant in view of the struggles for the existence of Christendom. Moreover, on

1 I Corinthians xi, 19.
many issues the orthodox doctrine had not yet been pronounced. There would be time for that later.

With the Triumph of the Cross under Constantine, the position was altered. Official recognition did not in itself create an official church; but as soon as the Emperor adopted Christianity its creation was inevitable. With the appearance of an official church, the heterodox were driven into schism. There was no longer room for elasticity. The State preferred its new servant to be united and uniform. And the State gave the Church a weapon with which to enforce uniformity. Official recognition is followed soon by the persecution of the heretic.

Persecution involves the co-operation of the State. The Church by itself has only spiritual arms; and threats of excommunication mean nothing to a wilful schismatic. But the State can bring all its physical force to bear on him. It is the State, not the Church, that persecutes, and the State that should be blamed for the cruelties of persecution. This necessarily limits the scope of persecution. Not every heretic is arraigned. Still more, on certain fundamental doctrines, such as the doctrine of Grace itself, by the wishes of all a final decision is avoided, so as to embrace as many views as possible. When a sect is persecuted it is because the State is convinced that that sect is undesirable. It may be that the sectaries, by attacking the orthodox hierarchy, weaken it as an instrument of State, and so must be punished. But the fiercest and most bloodthirsty persecutions have taken place when the heretics have seemed more seriously dangerous, when their teachings have run counter to the welfare of society, when, were they tolerated, the State itself might collapse.

This alliance of Church and State altered the tone of Christian polemics. In the second century Tertullian, for most of his life the great champion of orthodoxy, presented his opponents’ cases fully and fairly, for he knew that he could demolish them by theological argument, and he was writing for a public well trained in theology. But the theologians of the fourth century onwards treat the heretics less honestly. In the great Christological battles of the fourth and fifth centuries it was still the theological issue that was at stake and roused passionate interest; but the State itself was uncertain then
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which body to accept as the official Church. The difference of outlook is shown when the orthodox Church, the officially recognized hierarchy, is dealing with some definitely schismatic sect. The Church is out to crush such dissident bodies and it needs the help of the State. The arguments thus become not so much theological as social. The theological sins of the sectaries may be presented, but the State will not be interested in them. Therefore a greater emphasis is laid on their habits, which are shown to be incompatible with a well-run government. And so, with the orthodox polemical writer acting as special pleader before the tribunal of the State and with the defendants’ case no longer fairly stated, it grows harder to discover what the heretics truly thought. Moreover, the use of catchwords to attract the attention of the authorities and to alarm them becomes more frequent. These catchwords were not usually unfounded nor unfair, but their use was often misleading.

Of these catchwords, the most used in the Middle Ages was the epithet “Manichaean”, flung opprobriously at various sects that never knew Mani. It is the object of this study to inquire how far these sects deserved the epithet, how far they were interconnected and how far they represent an organic dualist tradition.
CHAPTER II

The Gnostic Background

THE Fathers of the Church, usually so careful and so precise, were now and then hesitant on matters of fundamental theology. Indeed, to one most essential question they long gave no clear answer. Concentrating their attention on the Redemption from sin, they ignored the problem of the original cause of sin. Yet sin was a very real thing to the Early Christians. The world that they knew, the cruel, luxurious, uncertain world of the Roman Empire, was undoubtedly a wicked place. How had such wickedness come into creation? If God was the Creator, and God was omnipotent and good, why did He permit such things to be? The Fall might explain why man was enchained in sin, but the Fall could not create sin; rather it was sin that created the Fall.

It is a desire to solve the problem of Evil that lies at the base of Gnosticism. The heretics and philosophers, complained Tertullian, were always asking the same question: “Whence came Evil, and in what does it exist?” and the question that arises out of it: “Whence and how came Man?” Unguided by the Church the heretics and philosophers sought out their own solutions and out of their searching Christian dualism was founded.

The origin of Gnosticism must remain obscure. Partly it is to be sought in the age-long magical tradition. Gnostic writings such as the Pistis Sophia seem to be connected with the Hermetic occultism of the Egyptians, and the Gnostic doctrine of the Eons resembles Kabalistc lore with its archangels.

But of the earlier Gnostics and their doctrines little is known. Such heresiarchs as Ceridon or Cerinthus, who disputed with St John the Divine at Ephesus, must remain semi-legendary. According to

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Irenæus, it was a sect contemporary to them, called the Nicolaïtes after a certain deacon Nicholas, who first promulgated the distinguishing doctrine of Gnosticism, the doctrine that the visible world was created not by God but by the Demiurge. By the middle of the second century Gnostic thought, infinitely varied but fundamentally the same, was widespread throughout the Roman Empire, under such great leaders as Basilides, Valentine and Marcion.

The solution of the Gnostics was to take from God the responsibility of having made the visible world. God the Father, the First Principle, was far removed from it, with many heavens lying in between. Basilides in the early second century counted 365 of them, but the later Gnostics were satisfied with a mere seven or eight. Beneath God were the eons, semi-divine eternal beings ranged in groups, usually of eight, ten and twelve, the ogdoad, the decad and dodecad. To Valentine the eons were abstractions, with such names as Silence, Intellect and Truth, while God Himself was the Abyss; but he grouped them as it were in married couples. The later Gnostics turned the eons into more concrete beings, giving them fantastic names without meaning, and usually leaving them unpaired. God and the eons formed the Pleroma, the perfect group. The visible world was created owing to a Fall within the Pleroma, due usually to the curiosity or desire of one of the eons. This disturbance produced a new emanation, as a result of which the world was ultimately called into being. Here again many stages may have to be gone through before we come down to the Creator of the World, the Demiurge. The exact placing of the Demiurge varied amongst the sects. He might be a fallen eon; he might be Jehovah, God of the Jews, who, we learn from Genesis, made the earth and all things in it. In any case he was either ignorant of or hostile to God the First

2 Irenæus, *op. cit.* 1, 24, 3, *M.P.G.* vol. vii, col. 696. Migne’s text reads “trecentos septuaginta quinque”, but then refers to the number being that of the days in a year.
3 Valentine chose seven, to fit his Hebdomad: Irenæus, *op. cit.* 1, 5, *M.P.G.* vol. vii, coll. 493–6. Others preferred the number to coincide with the Ogdoad.
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Principle. But somehow into this created world and into the Demiurge’s proudest creation, Man, a spark of divinity was inserted, either by accident or by the deliberate work of God or one of the eons. Henceforward it became God’s task to give this figment of the Demiurge knowledge of Himself, so that He could rescue the pieces of divinity imprisoned in it. This knowledge He gave by sending Jesus into the world. According to some Gnostics Jesus was merely one of the eons, differentiated even from Christ; to others Jesus was an emanation from God, the eternal God the Son; or again, He might be called into being by God as part of Himself for this particular task. But whichever He might be, He was unquestionably divine. It was impossible for Him to become a man, a creature of the world of the Demiurge. He could only seem to be so. The Gnostics were necessarily Docetist in their Christology. The Virgin Mary became therefore of no great importance. Some Gnostics, like Heracleon and Marcion, declared that Christ only appeared in the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar at Capernaum. Most, like Valentine, using a phrase often to be heard later, spoke of Him passing through Mary as through a canal.

How far the Gnostic sects varied in their practices we cannot say. But they all seem to have had some sort of initiation ceremony. The very word Γνώσις meant the knowledge of the initiate, as opposed to Πίστις, the faith of the mere believer. And most sects divided mankind into three categories, according to the amount of divine sparks that existed in each man. According to Valentine these were: the Spirituals, the ὑπερβασίων, who were full of divinity and only needed for their salvation the Gnosis and the words of mystery, Christ only brought them the doctrine of illumination. Next the Psychics, the ψυχικοί, who had a little spark in their souls but were not assured of salvation. They must do good to earn it. Christ was necessary for them too, by His life-work and His seeming death upon the Cross. Finally, there were the Materials, the ὑλικοί or χοίκοι, men without the spark, who return inevitably to the dust

2 Irenaeus, op. cit. iii, 11, 3, M.P.G. vol. vii. col. 881: “quasi aquam per tubum”.
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from which they came. Such was the usual Gnostic view at the time. Nor was it confined to the Gnostics. Origen, too, had his initiated Perfects and thought that the salvation of the simple believer differed from that of the elect, while Clement of Alexandria wanted to have his chosen few initiated. But the doctrine faded out of the Orthodox Church. It was one great Gnostic organization that kept it alive.

This organization was the offspring of Marcion. Whereas the other great Gnostic leaders had been essentially philosophers founding short-lived schools of religious thought, Marcion was a religious leader who founded not a school but a church, which lasted for several centuries and was the main conservator of Gnostic ideas. Marcion was less ambitious in his views than the other Gnostic teachers. Though he taught in the midst of the second century, when Gnostic speculation was at its height, he was not interested in discovering families of gnos. To him the universe was simple. There was the visible world in which we live, a cruel world governed by the principle of retribution; there was the heaven of the Creator-God, the Demiurge, the stern Jehovah of the Old Testament. Finally, as it were in another dimension, there was the true God, the Kind Stranger, gentle and merciful, Who always existed but only revealed Himself to man by sending His spirit, Jesus Christ, on earth to oppose the bleak teaching of Jehovah with the gospel of Love.

Marcion was profoundly struck by the divergency between the messages of the Old and New Testaments. The latter he in no way saw as the complement of the former; even the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament, the warrior avenger, could have nothing to do with Jesus. The two teachings, he considered, were in utter opposition to one another, and he made this opposition the basis of his creed.  

Marcion was thus a thorough-going dualist. But his dualism was

2 Origen, In Johannem, vii, 36, 37, M.P.G. vol. xiv, coll. 293–301.
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not of the usual type; he did not oppose evil and good, but justice and mercy, cruelty and love. In practice, however, the difference was slight. The created world might not be wicked but merely just; nevertheless, it was to be avoided and left behind if the Kind Stranger’s arms were to be reached. Asceticism was therefore needful. Marcion took over the Gnostic division of mankind into the Pneumatics, the Psychics and the Hylics, the elect, the ordinary believer and the infidel; but he made it one of ecclesiastical organization rather than of predestined fate. To Marcion all indulgence in earthly pleasures was deplorable. Above all, marriage and generation were to be avoided, for that was to help the Creator-God in his work. The baptized Marcionite had therefore to give up any earthly partner; he or she could only be married to Christ. But the baptized Marcionites formed but a small proportion of the Marcionite Church. The average Marcionite believer postponed his baptism till his deathbed, or till the circumstances of his life permitted him to indulge in such asceticism without inconvenience. This strict view of continence and consequent postponement of baptism was not uncommon throughout the Christian Church in Marcion’s day and was probably the usual rule in Syria.¹ But Marcion seems to have fitted it into the Gnostic idea of initiation and thus to have given it a stricter and more lasting form.

Marcion’s views made him sparing in his acceptance of the Canonical Books. The Old Testament, though he studied it carefully to prove his argument, was rejected as inspired by the wrong God. The only Gospel that he admitted was St Luke’s, though he disliked its earlier chapters on the infancy of Jesus. Who, he said, appeared first at Capernaum. He accepted the Pauline epistles more willingly. Indeed, according to Tertullian,² it was the Epistle to the Galatians on which he based his ideas. But the Marcionite Church edited its own New Testament, a Testament purged of the Judaisms that the earlier authors had not dared to omit.

The Marcionite Church was the first great dualist Christian

¹ See Burkitt’s essay in Mitchell, St Ephraim’s Prose Refutations, vol. ii, pp. cxvii–cxxxii.
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Church, and later orthodox writers had some justification in hurling the epithet “Marcionite” at dualist Christian heretics. But Marcion’s own dualism, even amongst his disciples, soon was changed into a cruder form. By the early third century the opposition in the Marcionite creed was no longer between the good God and the just God; the just God was becoming inevitably the wicked God.¹ The Kind Stranger was now ranged against Satan, and Satan was the creator of the world.

Marcion’s theories added to the growing eccentricities of the Gnostics. If Jehovah were in opposition to God, then the villains of the Old Testament must be heroes. Sects arose that paid reverence to Cain, to the Sodomites and the Egyptians. Above all, the Serpent was applauded, as the creature that tried in Eden to give Adam and Eve the knowledge that Jehovah withheld from them. Such sects were grouped by the orthodox under the name of the Ophites, the Serpent-worshippers; and dark stories were told of their practices. Nor, despite Marcion’s insistence upon asceticism, were the stories wholly unjustified. Some were doubtless due to the disbelieve, held by so many cynics, that perfect asceticism is obtainable; outward asceticism must mean secret vice. But certain of the sects were frankly licentious, such as the Carpocratians, who believed that to achieve freedom from human law one must ignore the distinction between what is good and what is bad.² Moreover, the tendency towards magic, fashionable at the time and very noticeable amongst the Neoplatonists, had a strong effect on Gnosticism. Stories of the origin of the world multiplied and became more fantastic. The cons were given bizarre names of no known derivation, till a list of them, such as Irenaeus gives in his account of the Adepts of the Mother, has the same nonsensical sound as a list of the devils in a medieval Grimoire—and indeed many medieval devils may have had names of Gnostic origin. The initiation ceremony from being a mere baptism began to acquire a more complex magical form, and the

¹Philosophumena, loc. cit.: “Οἱ δὲ πάντες τὸν μὲν ἄγγελον οὐδὲν διός πεποιημέναν, τὸν δὲ δίκαιον οἱ μὲν τὸν παγκόσμιον, οἱ δὲ μόνον δίκαιον ἀνασκοιναι.”