

VI.

GNOSTICISM AS A PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION.

THE history of Gnosticism runs up to the end of the second century, and is most instructive. The theology of the Gnostic sects was set in a fantastic cosmogony, rather than embodied in a reasoned system; they professed an esoteric doctrine or Gnosis; the most characteristic feature of their teaching was, belief in a subordinate agent, the Demiurge, by whom the visible creation had taken place.

Gnosticism is to be distinguished from Christian teachings, on the one hand, and Hellenistic influences on the other. We need not, like Irenæus, regard it as something only evil, for it not only proved a half-way house for some on the road to Christianity, but compelled to a Christian philosophy of religion. Their method was syncretistic; they inclined to mix mythology with philosophy; and the result could by no possibility prove a satisfying philosophy of religion. They, however, made the need for it felt, and in some sense paved the way for it. Great was the clash of ideas in that early time—Jewish, Greek, Syrian, Babylonian and Persian—and there is little need for wonder, therefore, that Gnosticism was a strange compound. Gnosticism was, in fact, an eclectic philosophy issuing out of this ferment—a ferment increased by the desire to explain Oriental systems and cults. Anterior to Christianity, Gnosticism was open to the influences of India, and was influenced by the ferment of Oriental religions, which resulted in a religious syncretism running into very different extremes.

The Gnostics have been styled the "first Christian theologians," but with doubtful propriety. For, though their indirect usefulness was so great in bestirring the Church to a rational comprehension of her tenets, yet it would be rather inappropriate to apply the phrase—as has sometimes been done—to men who, if they had had their way, would have seriously imperiled, not to say absolutely destroyed, the distinctive life and character of Christianity. Indeed, the weapons that withstood and vanquished Gnosticism were drawn from the very armory of Christianity,

so that to speak of their somewhat fantastic attempts in the light mentioned seems rather a misuse of language. Gnosticism took its distinctive character from the fact that these endeavors were made, under the ruling ideas of sin and salvation, with a view to relate the ideas of Greek philosophy with the myths of Oriental religions. It was rather in spite of the Gnostics, than by their aid, that Christianity proclaimed and perfected its doctrines of the one morally perfect and omniscient God, of moral evil, of a real Incarnation, and of an ethical redemption. And not from the facts and doctrines of New Testament time did these "first Christian theologians" pretend to derive the elements of that *Gnosis* which, amid much that was commendable, freely admitted the vagaries and errors of sheer intellectual arrogance, and exalted them into the knowledge that was to dethrone faith.

The finest feature of Gnostic theology was, after every deduction for error, its aspiration after a theology that should really embrace a world-view—comprehensive and broad. They pursued the ontological problem—sought how the finite and material came from, and coexisted with, the infinite and spiritual. The Absolute Being was thus a main object of their thought. They set out from the Platonic axiom that God is good, and nothing but good. It was with them a fundamental belief that the Creator of the world is not God, the Supreme Being. That Creator is either a subordinate agent, or an inferior being. He may be evil, or He may not be unfriendly. He is the Demiurge, and so not that God who sent a Redeemer into the world. And the Redeemer, so sent, was not a real incarnation of the Divine, but One whom they viewed after a Docetic fashion. He was One, that is, no longer unique—whose humanity was no longer real. But again, the moral problem held the Gnostics. They wondered how the world, in which so much evil prevails, could come from a good Creator. They therefore sought a theodicy, and turned their attention to the origin of evil. They set an ethical dualism between spirit and body—setting, in fact, nature and spirit in absolute opposition to each other. They bridged the gulf between the transcendent Deity and the world of matter by a vast succession of spiritual powers or *Æons*. Like the Platonists and Greek schools generally, they thought not of man as making his own evil. Evil must come, they thought, from matter, and must, in fact, be the work of that being who created a material world. This belief is a characteristic and persistent feature of Gnostic theology. There is nothing Christian about it, and it is not

even Platonic. For the Platonist was confident enough that evil was not to be explained through a God.

Another prevailing feature of Gnostic theology was its making salvation consist of enlightenment or knowledge rather than faith. In their hands Redemption lost both its universality and its moral character. Their theology assumed for its *Gnosis* a higher worth than the *Pistis* of the Church. Their pretensions on behalf of their *Gnosis* were like those of Philo, who claimed to have a secret lore that came by way of oral tradition. They represented Christ to have given an esoteric teaching to His apostles, different from the teachings of the Church to the people. Yet their position, taken all in all, should perhaps be looked upon as supranaturalist, rather than rationalistic.

The two great divisions of original Gnosticism were the Jewish and the Pagan. Judaic Gnosticism was the first to come into contact with Christianity, but the pagan Gnosticism was most influential in its results upon it. For Christianity, though a living power, needed a philosophy. Basilides, Valentinus, Marcion, Tatian, and Bardaisan would give it one on a Gnostic basis. But the Gnosticism of Basilides and Valentinus was not the pure Hellenism it has often been represented to be: their Gnosticism is much more Oriental—is, in fact, Orientalism masked in Hellenism. Judaic Gnosticism we find pluming itself upon a hidden wisdom, special illumination, and exclusive mysteries. Theirs was an exclusiveness of an intellectual sort. On the other hand, the apostolic insistence is on mystery that is no longer mystery, but made open and manifest. Judaic Gnosticism attributed to angels what belonged to the Logos, the Eternal Son. Besides these vague mystical speculations and esoteric teachings, there inhered in this incipient Gnosticism a baleful ascetic tendency. From the Judaic form of Gnosticism, the transition toward later Gnostic doctrine is marked by Cerinthus. Cerinthus attributed creation to an angelic Demiurge, and paved the way by his angelology for the coming of that time when a later Gnosticism should transform the angels of Cerinthus into ideal powers or *Æons*.

When we come to Hellenic Gnosticism, we find fantastic attempts to solve the problems raised by philosophy by means of a mystical interpretation of the Scriptures. These attempts were results of the working of Christianity upon the speculative tendencies of the Greek mind, with its inherent craving for intellectual clearness. Gnosticism was, in fact, essentially a philosophy of religion, whose starting-point was the ultimate principle of things,

even the Deity who was raised beyond all thought and expression, and from whom all things were deduced. The Gnostics believed in revelation in a general sense, and adhered to the reality of the revelation given in the Scriptures, albeit they rejected portions of these writings as due to inferior agencies than God. By Hellenic Gnosticism the Divine authority of the Old Testament was admitted, but it was viewed as containing a hidden philosophy, by which account was taken of the liberation of spirit from the bondage of nature. The allegorizing method was resorted to, so that the contents of the Old Testament were interpreted as symbols of this hidden truth. For dreams of a Messianic kingdom they substituted a mystical philosophy with a whole series of vague personified spiritual abstractions. And the same method was applied by Hellenic Gnosticism to the New Testament. To it the inner light, on which it prided itself, was necessary to such Gnosis or illumination as was supposed to give true mystical interpretation of the sacred record. The Gnostics' problem was to explain the relation of the God of pure monotheism to the world and to man.

The two great representatives of Hellenic Gnosticism were Basilides and Valentinus, the latter a less consistent thinker than the former. The great work of Basilides is the *Exegetica* in twenty-four books. But his teachings are also preserved in the writings of his son and chief disciple, Isidore. Origen tells us he also composed odes. The cardinal fact for Basilides is the suffering of the world. In the Basilidian system, the universality of suffering is base, and the extinction of suffering is goal. He uttered the paradox that "the martyrs suffer for their sins," because to him it seemed better to take suffering as a consequence of sin or inherited tendency to sin, rather than admit the Divine constitution of the world to be evil. Basilides has a philosophical purpose: the mystery of suffering—the burden of existence—weighs upon him: he would justify the ways of God to men. And here we come upon the keystone of the Basilidian system, which is the law of transmigration. Transmigration is to help the complete purification of the soul. Basilides lays down that the soul has previously sinned in another life, and bears its punishment here. Despite his fatal bondage of rebirth, man's will is in this life free. Salvation is therefore possible to him, but only the elect are saved. The system of Basilides is of markedly dualistic character in its theories of nature, of man, and of the intermediate agencies between God and the world. In the Basilidian psychology, the

soul, in the ordinary sense of that term, can hardly be said to exist. But the metaphysic of Basilides affords firmer ground, for there is no doubt as to his postulation of a God, albeit a God of the most abstract and remote character. The obvious fault of this procedure is, that it assumes the idea of God without showing how that idea is necessarily presupposed by the contents of experience. The Absolute is for Basilides unpredicable, unknowable, inconceivable, and the energy of his expressions could not be surpassed. In fact, the complete transcendence and absolute inscrutability of God could not be expressed with more complete disregard of the logical consequences than we find in Basilides. This doctrine of the absolute transcendence—the complete incomprehensibility—of Deity, as set forth by Basilides, had a great influence on the Christian philosophers of the Alexandrian schools. Hence we find Clement able to say that God is “beyond the One and higher than the Monad itself.” Basilides makes much of negation. “Not-Being-God” is his name for Deity. He speaks of absolute existence as absolute nothing, in a way which anticipates Hegel. The “Not-Being-God” deposited an ideal cosmic germ or transcendental cosmic seed, which constituted at the same time the aggregate forms of the actual world. He says “the God that was not, made the world that was not, out of what was not.” The God so conceived—as “the God that was not”—was the logical result of the negative movement from the world to God. It was in danger of making God a purely indeterminate being, of whom nothing could be known or said—a kind of deification of negativity. Yet Basilides held the world to be infinitely complex, and he meant God to be infinitely determinate. The truth is, our knowledge of God is always relative and partial, but it is true and valid, so far as it goes. We know Him in a most real way, as the self-conscious, self-originating, and self-manifesting Deity. Basilides strove to preserve the absolute perfection of God, and would not allow to Him thought, perception, or will, with this end in view. A mistaken and unnecessary denial, of course, which would empty the notion of God of real meaning for us. How the actual existence of the world became evolved, however, Basilides does not tell us. We must “ask no question as to whence.” The actual world, as flowing from an ideal world laid down by an ideal Deity, seems to us rather fictitious. But some things in the evolutionary process of Basilides are made clear. The primal seed mass, in which all entities are stored up, acts without exterior aid or control. And again, the whole is a process of

ascent. "All things press," he says, "from below upward, from the worse to the better. Nor among things superior is any so senseless as to descend below." Thus does the process of evolution run by differentiation and selection, the only law on each unit being that imposed by its own nature. Starting with the notion of the Trinity, as found in the baptismal formula, Basilides develops his philosophy of religion with the aid of two ideas, the Sonship and the Evangel. The Sonship is, with him, deposited in the cosmic germ. But it cannot remain there. It must be restored to its fellowship with the Father. Its evolution is the history of the world-process. It is, moreover, a collective germ, carrying the seeds of many sons in itself. He has before his view the Son in the bosom of the Father, the Son by whom worlds were made, and the Son who is the historic Christ. There is little of a Docetic character, it must be said, in his religious philosophy. The Evangel is the knowledge of things supra-mundane and celestial. It is, in fact, the fourfold wisdom of knowing the Father, the "Not-Being-God," the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is a philosophy of religion made up of elements, Gnostic, Buddhist, and Christian, the last-named forming, in his own belief, the chief factor in his system. The scheme is meant to shew how power came to men whereby they could become sons of God. But it is deeply tinged with Buddhist conceptions, though partaking of historic character, and of such clearness of definition and formulation, as Buddhism never knew. The Gnostic philosophies were, in fact, pagan, but they taught men some things which are too easily forgotten. One of these was, that the origin of evil may and should be inquired into. Another was, that the preëxistence of the soul is a truth not to be easily left behind, as is evidenced by the lateness of the poet who has dared proclaim:

"Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting :
The soul that rises with us, our life's star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar."

As for Valentinus, he held the Original Father to be before any created being. In the same negative fashion he made Him the sole Uncreated, without time, without place, without any of whom He sought counsel. He is the unnamable, incomprehensible, and unbegotten God. He calls this Divine Being also the *Depth*. This shows how he conceived the infinite fullness of the Divine nature, as something of which positive predications could not be made. This transcendent fullness keeps God from being defined

in a way which reminds one of Spinoza. The Pleroma or Fullness of the Divine Life was, according to Valentinus, constituted by a series of thirty supernatural powers or Æons. Man is a creation of the Demiurgus. Jesus came into the world to free men from their subjection to the Demiurgus, but all men do not share this redemption. The Gnostics have received the spirit from Jesus. They rise beyond faith to the *Gnosis*. In the *Gnosis* they learn the mysteries of the Pleroma, and are free from the law of the Demiurgus. Valentinus has sometimes been taken as less consistent and influential in his thought than Basilides, but it does not lack in comprehensiveness. The saner elements of the Valentinian philosophy are drawn from Platonic sources. But the fantastic elements superadded detract from its value as a scientific system.

Clement of Alexandria championed the cause of orthodoxy against Basilides and Valentinus. In his *Stromata* he sets forth what he conceives to be the position of the true Gnostic, who is for him the mature or well-advanced Christian, whose "whole life," he says, "is a holy festival." His true Gnostic or perfect Christian he took to be quite superior to the ordinary believer. His Gnostic is exempt from natural passion, is superior to pain and pleasure, is one with the will of God, and is in a blissful state of pure love. So strong is his mystical tendency. Yet there is little of system in Clement's setting forth of the truth, which retains a broadly practical vein. The distinctive feature of Gnosticism is, as we have seen, its making a speculative religious view of the world—or religious knowledge of the world-process—take the place of a practical doctrine of Christian salvation. As against the Gnosticism of Basilides and Valentinus, the Christian thought of that early time held to a universe created in love by the one Infinite Deity, and not by any rival power or subsidiary creator. The Person of Jesus could simply not be adjusted to the conception of such a subordinate power, or to endless genealogies of æons and emanations from the Godhead. The speculative vagaries of Gnosticism are thus in reality a striking tribute to the unique and exceptional character of the Person of Christ. So, too, the Christian thought of the period held that evil by no means inheres in matter, but is to be traced to the will of responsible creatures. This, because the world was taken to be originally and essentially good. Nor did that thought share the Gnostic despair as to the great mass of men, for to it the many would, in the Word made flesh, find redemption. But the shortcomings of the Gnostic speculations, in these and like respects, did

not keep them from being of great service to the development of Christian philosophy. They brought into view and prominence the final problems of life, as well as the question of origins. They gave them answers which, by very reason of their being only partial and inadequate, led to fuller and more satisfying formulation and explication. They had the merit to draw attention to the use of exegetical methods of dealing with the New Testament, albeit their own methods of use were extremely arbitrary, when not something worse. The lasting service which Gnosticism, as a philosophy of religion, rendered was, to impel the Church to set forth a true Gnosticism over against that which it considered false, and this while maintaining the positive historical character of Christianity. Thus, from the contents of simple and practical Christian belief, a Christian theology eventually resulted. That theology was drawn out after such ideas of scientific method as then prevailed.

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