PART TWO

ANCEINT WORLD
TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF MANI’S RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENT AND THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF MANICHAEAEN IDENTITY

Iain Gardner

Abstract

Over the last century and more, new discoveries and trends of scholarship have rescued the study of Manichaeism from the polemic of heresy, and identified it as a major world religion in its own right. It has even been claimed that it was the first real religion in the modern sense, in that it was (supposedly) created with its doctrines, practices, scriptures and institutions all in place. Nevertheless, debate continues about the core issues of Manichaean identity; and, in particular, its relationship to prior religions such as ‘gnosticism’ (sic), Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Buddhism. This paper will begin to explore some of these issues through a number of rather specific examples drawn from Manichaean thought and practice. No general theory will be developed, but rather the purpose is to show how an archaeology of Manichaean identity might be possible through an exacting examination of textual traditions. The ultimate purpose, of course, is to attempt to uncover the trajectory of Mani’s own religious self-understanding and development prior to the development of that scholastic tradition in the community which so fundamentally moulded and (I argue) altered its presentation.

The provisional thesis is that Mani regarded the community he led as ‘the holy church’ (see Evodius, de fide, V, 953. 2; P. Kell. V Copt. 31, 2–3;

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1 The origins of this idea can probably be traced back to the early elaboration (found both in Coptic and Middle Persian) of ‘the ten advantages of the Manichaean religion’; thus M5794I + M5761 / kepahaion 151 (which was partially presented in the seminal study of C. Schmidt and H. J. Polotsky 1933). I myself have found it an attractive conceit, thus I. Gardner and S. N. C. Lieu (2004,1). As will be apparent here, however, I do not now believe this. Mani was not really different from other supposed religious ‘founders’ (such as Jesus), in that he saw himself within an established tradition where he had an especial call to interpret and present the true way. It was his followers, and a peculiar trajectory of development, (which would in many ways have astonished its originator), that led to the carving out of a discrete identity called ‘Manichaeism’, (similarly) ‘Christianity’, and so on.

2 Although Buddhism has generally been supposed the major tradition of influence from India, there are good reasons to look rather towards Jainism as the predominant candidate; see Gardner (2005), and R. C. C. Fynes (1996).