

RUSSIAN SOPHIOLOGY

(II)

It is commonly thought that gnostic systems are grounded upon a dualist conception of the origin of the Universe, but this is subject to question. Gnosticism was the source of many religious and philosophical movements in nowise marked by dualism, suffice it to recall Clement of Alexandria and Origen, and later the mediaeval adepts of secret teachings who, through many perversions, were seeking for the one Divine Absolute. Dualistic elements, more or less marked in different gnostic systems, co-existed with a monistic element often predominant.

In Christianity pure dualism, *i.e.*, the essential and primordial opposition between two distinct principles, has existed only within Manicheism which owed its origin to Persian Mazdeism. Before Manes this Persian dualism had only an indirect influence upon the great syncretistic movement of the Hellenic world. Actually this term—dualism—is applicable only there where the principle of evil is considered to be in its origin independent of its opposite—the principle of good. In the gnostic systems the evil principle is the outcome of a slow evolution proceeding from a unique First Principle. These systems are essentially monistic, differing one from another precisely by the way they conceive this creative evolution resulting in an inferior world and its final reintegration into the Godhead. The ancient gnosis, with its multiple systems, was an effort to connect the actuality of the material world with the divine transcendency. Modern Russian thinkers are concerned with the same problems. Gnosticism originated outside Christianity, but borrowed its soteriological doctrine as a basis for speculations closer to pantheism than to dualism, and it is within this pantheist evolution that the idea of *Sophia*, link between the unknowable and the actual, originated. The rebirth of this idea is now something more than a fortuitous likeness or a borrowed terminology: beyond the similarity

of terms there is an affinity of thought, the same tendencies towards a synthesis of monism and pantheism with latent elements of dualism.

In order to show the identity of the ways which led the ancient pagan syncretism to gnosticism and the Christian syncretism of Russian modern philosophy to identical conclusions, we must compare these systems, ancient and modern, on the strength of the imperfect and fragmentary data we possess upon gnosticism. We shall briefly sketch Valentinus' sophiological teaching and the systems of the Ophites and Basilidians, elements of which reappear in Valentinianism.

The Ophites are the first to speak of *Sophia* as the creative principle deriving from the divine Unknowable. In one of the systems summarized by St. Irenæus¹⁷ these Ophites differentiated between the *Primum Lumen*, also called *Primus Homo*, his co-eternal thought—*Filius Hominis* or *Secundus Homo*, lastly a third essence the Spirit or *Prima Femina, Mater viventium*. *Primus Homo* and his Son, enraptured by the beauty of the Spirit-woman, illumined her by their rays thus producing a new Light, the Third man or the Christ who, united to the Spirit-woman produced the *Sancta Ecclesia*, depositary of all divine potentiality. In this first manifestation of creative power within the ineffable Godhead there is an overflowing surplus of divine light, this surplus is *Sophia*, creative Wisdom. By one of her aspects she participates in the superior divine light, but in the cosmic element created by her she has an inferior essence which is the *femina a femina*, the passive matter, wherein the great cosmogonic drama is to be enacted directed by Ialdabaoth, *Sophia's* son, identified with the Biblical Jahve.

Basilides' system,¹⁸ permeated by a more marked

¹⁷ The principal sources for the Ophites are: St. Irenæus, *Adv. haer.* I, xxx; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* vii, 17; Theodoretus, *Haer. fab. comp.* I, xiv; Origen, *C. Cels.* vi, 24, *seq.*; Epiphaneus, *Haer.* xxxvii; Philaster, *Haer.* I; *Praedestinatus*, c. xvii; Ps.-Tertullian, c. vi; etc.

¹⁸ Principal sources for Basilides: Iren. *Adv. haer.* I, xxiv, xxviii; II, xiii, xvi, xxxi, xxxv, *etc.*; Hipp. *Philosophumena* vii, 14-27; x, 14; Just *Dial. c. Tryph.* xxxv; Clem Alex. *Strom.* I, 21; II, 3-8, 20; III, I; IV, 12-26; V, I, II; VI, 6; *Excer. ex Theod.* xvi; Epiph. *Haer.* xxiv (xxxii); Euseb. *Hist. Eccl.* iv, 7; Theodor. *Haer. fab. comp.* i, 4; *Acta Archel.* lxvii-lxviii; Orig. *Hom. in Luc.* i & xxix. *In Matth.* xxxviii; etc.

pantheism (Buddhist influences may be detected in it) places *Sophia* among the eight primary divine emanations, the higher *Ogdoad*, the names of which are: The Father (Πατήρ), the Spirit (Νοῦς), the Word (Λόγος), Reason (Φρόνησις), Strength (Δύναμις), Wisdom (Σοφία), Justice (Δικαιοσύνη) and Peace (Ειρήνη). This is pure abstraction and *Sophia* plays no part in the further development of Basilidian cosmogony, she is not its creative principle which Basilides sees in the First Cause, the inconceivable mystery of the impersonal divine essence, so remote from creation and any manifestation that it is non-existent for the world, it is the *non-ens-Deus*, the ὄνκ ὄν Θεός which contains, however, the germ of being and the whole cosmic seed (τόν χόσμου πανσπερμία). From this unfathomable mystery originates creative evolution of which the higher *Ogdoad* is the first emanation, or rather the first manifestation of the divine idea, the *fatherhood*, the second being the realm of the Son, the *ύότης* (*filietas* of St. Irenaeus' Latin text) which is the spiritual plane between the divine essence and the lower world, and the third *filietas*, wherein begins the evolution of created matter. Here Christ appears as a manifestation or incarnation in the man Jesus of the *Nous* of the higher *Ogdoad*, and through him the entire psychic element of the lower world will detach itself from matter in order to be reintegrated into the divine essence and the impassibility of the higher spheres impervious to suffering. Outside these spheres all is pain, thus final salvation lies in this impassibility, the "great unknowing".

It is easy to grasp why in this deeply pessimistic system *Sophia* could not become a creative principle co-eternal to God, for creation as such is but a deterioration of the divine principle, the evil and pain inherent in matter, which can be conquered only through the surrender of all desire and all knowledge, by a return to the immobility and impassibility of the impersonal divine essence. Thus Divine Wisdom is only an abstract faculty of the Godhead, devoid of any contact with the lower world.

In the teaching of Valentinus the sophiological doctrine

is the central point of a markedly optimistic system in diametrical opposition to Basilidian pessimism despite the fact that the structure of Valentinus' system approximates to the Ogdoad of Basilides and its ulterior developments.

Here this higher Ogdoad consists of two tetrads, each composed of two syzygies. The inconceivable Abyss (Βυθός) produces the Unutterable (Αρρητον) and Silence (Σιγή) from which emanate the Father (Πατήρ) and Truth ('Αλήθεια); from this first tetrad emanates the second: the Word (Λόγος) and Life (Ζωή), Man ('Ανθρωπος) and the Church (Εκκλησία). From the *Logos* and *Life* emanate a decad of aeons, from *Man* and the *Church* a dodecad; thus the mystical figure of 30, the divine Plenitude (Πλήρωμα) is completed. These aeons are not hypostatized, they are pure abstractions reflecting the conceivable attributes of the inscrutable Godhead. Their successive emanation is produced by syzygies and in each of these metaphysical couples we perceive a male principle, symbolized by an adjective ('Αγήρατος, Ακίνητος, etc.), and a female principle, symbolized by a substantive ('Ησονή, Σύγκρασις, Μακαρία, Πίστις, etc.). Obviously these female names represent potential passive powers, whereas the male names reflect the active principle of the divine attributes. The five syzygies deriving from the *Logos* and *Life* symbolize the attributes of divine transcendency, whereas the six syzygies forming the dodecad deriving from *Man* and the *Church* represent the creative principle, or rather the creature's contemplation of the divine Absolute. The last syzygy of this dodecad is formed by the Desired (Θελητός) and Wisdom (Σοφία). Thus *Sophia* is here the last member of the *Pleroma*, limit of the divine essence proper, link between the Godhead and the creature, and through her begins the germination of the created world.

Sophia, contemplating enraptured the mystery of the ineffable First Principle, seeks to imitate it by the development of the creative power. God, being Love, created the aeons within the Godhead to have an object of love "as love is not love if there is no loved object" (*Philosoph.* vi, 29). Similarly *Sophia* desires to continue the further evolution of

spiritual powers, but since her power is only a passive principle (its active male principle having remained in the *Pleroma*) she can only evolve a passive substance, the germ of cosmic matter. She appeals to the *Pleroma* to free her from this grosser substance, and rescue comes through two new aeons specially emanated for the purpose: *Christ* and the *Holy Ghost*, who reintegrate her into the *Pleroma* leaving the cosmic embryo outside, whence the evolution of the lower world is to begin. The reflection of *Sophia* remains in it, and is the *external* or *inferior Sophia*, whence emanate seven cosmic powers which form with her the lower Ogdoad, that of the material world. These are the "seven pillars" of the House of Wisdom, headed by a Demiurge identified with the God of the Bible. It is he who creates man to the image of the heavenly *Anthropos*, and having created him, experiences an apprehensive admiration of his work which is shared by the other six cosmic powers, for man receives the spark divine from the higher powers. Jointly the *Pleroma* creates a new aeon, *Jesus*, to be the mystical spouse of the lower *Sophia*, and it is this aeon's reflection which comes to earth as the man-Jesus to end the domination of cosmic forces. Through him the inferior world learns to separate the spiritual element from matter and reintegrate it into the divine essence. This is the mystical marriage of the lower *Sophia* with the aeon *Jesus*, the Demiurge of the lower world becoming the "friend of the Bridegroom who rejoiceth with joy" (John iii, 29). A Valentinian hymn preserved by Hippolytus' *Philosophumena* sings the bliss of the created world illuminated by this hope: the Spirit shines in the world, matter adheres to the soul, the soul takes its flight heavenwards, the embryo in the mother's womb prefigures the mystical Fruit (the *Pleroma*) emanating from the divine Abyss; the world ripens for the great final harvest, the feast of beatitude.¹⁹

¹⁹ The sources for Valentinus are innumerable. We may quote especially Irenaeus *Adv. haeres.*, *passim*; *Philosophumena* vi, 3, 21-55; vii, 31; x, 13; Clem. Al. *Strom.* vii, 17; ii, 3, 8, 20; iii, I, 7; IV, 9, 13; vi, 6; *Excerpta ex scr. Theod.*, *passim*; Tertull. *Adv. Valent.*, *passim*. *De praescr.*, etc.; Euseb. *Hist. Eccl.*, iv; *Praep. ev.* vi, 9 sq.; Just Mart. *Dial. c. Tryph.* xxxv; Epiph. *Haer.* xxxi-xxxvi, lvi; Theod. *Haer. fab. comp.* i, vii-ix, xii, xxii-xxiii; *Dial. Adam. De recta in Deum fide*, *passim*; etc.

This outline shows the analogy existing between these systems and the speculations of some modern Russians. The Christian trinitarian doctrine obliterated traces of metaphysical mythology expressed by ogdoads and tetrads, but something still subsists of the idea of a passive female principle completing the divine creative essence. Valentinus' sophiological conception was not more dualistic than that of Soloviev and Florensky, it devolved from a monistic aspiration which must not be overlooked despite its deformations. It is, we reiterate, pantheism striving to preserve the idea of a unique and transcendental divine essence. Dualism appears only in the opposition of matter to a spiritual or psychic element in the inferior cosmic spheres, and yet for Valentinus this matter is irradiated by the presence of the spiritual element. In this his doctrine is nearer Christianity than other gnostic systems, and a closer study of it manifests a rehabilitation of matter very similar to the deification of man and the cosmic element which forms the main thesis of these Russian speculations. Of these philosophers, as of Valentinus, it might be said that they are Platonists, but less dualistic than Plato.

Valentinians considered themselves Christians: Valentinus was a member of the Roman Church at the time when he disagreed with her (*semel et iterum ejectus*, says Tertullian, *De Praescr*, xxx); he even coveted a bishopric. His followers resented being treated as heretics. St. Irenæus' text is definite:

Hi (qui a Valentino sunt) enim ad multitudinem propter eos qui sunt ab Ecclesia, quos communes et ecclesiasticos ipsi dicunt, inferunt sermones . . . qui et jam quaeruntur de nobis, quod cum similia nobiscum sentiant, sine causa abstinenceamus nos a communicatione eorum, et cum eadem dicant, et eandem habeant doctrinam, vocemus illos haereticos: et cum dejecerint aliquos a fide per quaestiones, quae fiunt ab eis, et non contradicentes auditores suos fecerint, his separatim inenarrabile Plenitudinis suae enarrant mysterium. (Adv. haeres. III, xv, 2.)

So it was not in opposition to Christianity that Valentinians developed their esoteric teachings, but as a complement to the doctrine taught to the people—here we see again the close analogy between them and these Russians who believe

their sophiological philosophy destined to complete the official doctrine of the Church. The similarity with Valentinianism is not superficial but deeply rooted in a kindred mentality.

By what channels did these gnostic influences filter into Russian religious thought? It is through Western occult sciences that traditions preserved throughout the centuries by esoteric teachings penetrated into Russia. In the East it was the thought of the great Byzantine mystics derived from Neo-Platonism, with reminiscences of ancient theurgy, which gave mystical contemplation a more concrete character, whilst Western mysticism was fed by philosophical speculations. The encounter of these two currents in modern Russian religious thought, compound of Western culture and Eastern tradition, has favoured the growth of ideas reminiscent of gnostic syncretism.

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Translator's Note. J. Danzas has incurred the bitter criticism of several writers (see Berdyaev in *Eastern Church Quarterly*, July 1937 and Dom Th. Wesseling in same magazine, October 1937) who deny any connection of modern Russian *sophiology* with ancient gnosticism. For those desirous of making a serious study of the question two recent Russian works are recommended, both unwittingly supporting J. Danzas' thesis. These are Fr. Florovsky's *The Ways of Russian Theology*, and Archbishop Seraphim Sobolev's *Fr. Bulgakov's Defence of the Sophianic Heresy before the Episcopal "Council of the Russian Church Abroad"* (Sofia, 1937). This latter work repudiates all Fr. Bulgakov says in his defence in his *memoranda* presented to Metropolitan Eulogius. The second chapter of this ably-written book examines the origins of modern *sophiology* and establishes its undeniable relation with Valentinian gnosticism. Archbishop Seraphim ends his book by the solemn declaration that "the *Sophianic* heresy" is a dangerous temptation demanding immediate and severe condemnation.

—OLGA BENNIGSEN.