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The Gnostics

- di Rienzi, Michelis. Les Petites Églises. Librairie Universelle, Paris, 1937; pp 89-94, written circa 1920.

Perhaps it is necessary to define Gnosis for non-initiates?

According to its Greek etymology, gnôsis, signifies Knowledge; by extension, Complete Knowledge; and again by extension, the “sublime Knowledge of nature and the attributes of God.”

It is in this latter sense that the first Gnostics understood Gnosis, which they also considered as being a science superior to that of religious beliefs.

Although Gnosticism was mainly practiced at the beginning of our era, it would be an error to believe that the essence of gnosis is purely Christian – some have considered it to be the philosophy of Christianity.

We find it, however, at least in its major strains, with the Greeks, Egyptians and Jews.

According to early Gnosis, God is supernatural and invisible and manifests by means of demigods called Eons and it is one of these demigods, the Demiurge, who was the architect of the Creation.

From God supreme emanated noûs (Spirit), ennoïa (divine thought), logismos (speech) and enthymesis (meditation).

The greatest Gnostic of ancient times was, indisputably, Simon Magus, who wanted to purchase from Saint Peter the gift of miracles (from which derives the term ‘simony’ used in the trafficking of sacred things).

When it comes to Christian Gnosticism, it was manifested by Saint Paul, who abandoned it for the apostolate that we know through Saint Clement of Alexandria, Menander, Saturninus of Antioch, and, above all, through a certain Bardesanes of Edessa. It was he who, being inspired by Zend-Avesta, imagined that the famous Unknown Father of Zoroaster had begotten from his thought. Jesus Christ, who had as a companion, the Holy Spirit from whom was born the Eons and, from these, the syzygies, eptades, etc.

We do not follow these fantastic “pedigrees”, any more than we delve into, along with Marcion, Syriac Gnosticism which pretends that the divine Eon Jesus Christ could not have taken on a material body.

Let us be content, in order to understand the terms used in the current religion, with exposing that the Pleroma represents heavenly perfection, Sophia, Wisdom (or the Holy Spirit)... who were not always perfect, which is evidenced by the texts of Bardesanes where the name Sophia is sometimes accompanied by the name achamoth, which, to be quite honest, is evocative of an expression a little too familiar in Montmartre and elsewhere, applied to the distractions one can be led to by the freedom of thought!

Let us also recall that if Gnosticism was rigorously opposed by Saint Irenaeus and Saint Epiphanius, it was defended by Origen, Tertullian and even by Saint Augustine. But let’s come back to our time.

The Gnostic Church had, a century ago, as its principal protagonist, a certain Jules Doinel (an archivist in Orléans, mundanely) and who, as the president of the Holy Synod of the Perfect and Pure [Saint-Synode des Parfaits et des Purs], claimed, in 1867, to have been consecrated a bishop by the Eon Jesus.

Its doctrine rejected any relation with anti-Christian philosophies, pantheism, magic, etc. Without ever being too numerous, it was able to gather, most notably in the Midi region of France, a sizeable number of faithful – enough, in any case, for the Roman Catholic Church to have taken offense, since, in 1891, the Holy Office solemnly condemned it for reviving the Albigensian heresy.

We thought that Gnosticism had more or less disappeared with Doinel, when, a few years ago, we received through some unknown connection, a pastoral letter from His Grace Mgr. Synésius, primate of the Gnostic Church, upon the occasion of his election to the primacy. We thought it would be of interest to reproduce here this curious document, since it seems to establish a new priestly hierarchy and to reveal an unexpected apostolate:

Dearest Brothers and Associates,

“Even if I did not go into the vineyard of the divine Master until the last hours, here I find myself, by your wishes and by the Will of the Holy Pleroma, elevated to the supreme rank of the Gnostic hierarchy. I is, I’d like to believe, more for my religious zeal than my doctrinal knowledge that you have thought to cast your votes for me, and I imagine that it was my experience in life more than my evangelic piety which caused me to become your choice. So heavy for my feeble hands is the task which has befallen me, all the more because the following day I will take possession of the primatial functions of an apostolate which has caused turmoil in the souls and which would certainly have discouraged them if we did not all have the unshakeable conviction that the work of God is accomplished despite all human weakness.

You help me, my dear associates, to heal the gaping wound that our emerging Church bears in her side, by fraternally gathering around your pastor under the radiant aegis of the mystic Tau, in tightening once again, if possible, the links of harmony and love which unite us, and by increasing the public apostolic works.

As concerns me, I solemnly promise, before you all, to live and die in the Gnostic Faith and to give my life to its dissemination throughout the world.

Dearest Brother and Sister in the Eon Christos, to forget the woes of the present, we have only to turn our gaze upon the Holy Mountain where our Albigensian brothers cemented with their blood, flowing like streams, and with their flesh, so cruelly tortured, the sublime beliefs which constitute our Religion. This example should be a precious reassurance to our sickened hearts.

In this, dearest Brothers and Associates, I pray that the Holy Pleroma fill you with its favors and gifts and give you the grace to keep your Faith in the Most Holy Gnosis.”

This letter was accompanied by a convocation planned as follows:

For these reasons, I convoke, this up-coming Sunday, February 2, in my provisional primatial residence, at 17 rue des Martyrs, at 8 o’clock in the morning, the Sophia, the Bishops, and Deacons (both male and female), Perfecti (both male and female), currently residing in Paris, for the purpose of assisting me in the Holy Sacrifice which I must celebrate in order to draw forth the benediction of the Most Holy Pleroma upon our Church. I encourage all those bishops who may not be able to be among us to also celebrate the Holy Sacrifice, for the same intentions, in their own chapels.

I also announce that a Gnostic catechism shall be forthcoming and which will be distributed to all who are zealous in our work; and, for this publication, I call upon all the light of my dearest Associates.

Given in Montségur, under the Tau, this 4th day of the 1st month of the 7th year of the Restoration of the Gnosis.

SYNÉSIUS, Gnostic Primate

As one might have guessed, we did attend this unforeseen convocation.

The provisional residence of Mgr. Synésius was on the 4th floor of a respectable bourgeois house which housed a literary Review whose name has escaped us. We were greeted by a young catechumen with a Greek profile who led us into a half-lit where there were already a dozen people present. Among them, we noticed a lady with white hair whose accentuated characteristics were quasi-masculine and upon whose head was an ornate sort of diadem in the center of which glistened a metallic T (the Tau).

There was no ornamentation to speak of upon the walls. At the back of the room, a large table covered with a blindingly white cloth with neither lace nor embroidery. Two candles kept watch upon the Gospel – that according to Saint John, the grand patron of the Gnostic Church.

Near 9 o'clock, a door opened along the side of the room and an individual we thought we recognized appeared: short in stature, slightly stooped, a handsome head akin to the apostles of ancient times, with a long salt-and-pepper beard, but modernized by a pair of glasses sitting astride a fine aquiline nose, he resembled, with his mitre and despite his thick glasses, the saints one sees depicted in medieval stained glass windows. He was dressed in a black cassock to the waist and red below. On his breast hung the famous Tau from a violet cord. It was Mgr. Synésius.

The ceremony began with a short address to the faithful, in French, followed by the Pater Noster recited while kneeling. The “mass” (?) followed, celebrated in Greek, during which the bishop turned toward the assistants and urged them to publicly confess their sins (as did the first Christians) before partaking of the body and blood of the Eon Jesus.

Earlier, the servant had prepared on the table a small loaf of bread and a champagne flute in which glittered the ruby of a consecrated wine. As a sort of incense, a piece of papier d'Arménie slowly burned on a plate.

No one, except the celebrant and his assistant, communed that day.

When we were able to reach Mgr. Synésius after the ceremony, our memory became clear: the Gnostic bishop was none other than the poet F. des E., author of *Humanité*, a commensal of Victor Hugo, and who, a few years earlier, had welcomed us into the house of the Master.

It was through him that we learned of the Gnostic religion containing only three sacraments : the imposition of hands (the manner of baptism used by the Albigensians) ; the breaking of bread in communion, or the symbolic sacrifice during which the astral body of the Eon Jesus descends, and, finally, the Grace, which only the patriarch may dispense.

The Church has an entire hierarchy: prelates, priests, deacons. It is from among these last that the earthly Sophia, symbolizing the soul of the Universe, is chosen. Gnostic bishops reside in Toulouse, Béziers, Avignon, and Milan. As for the Patriarch, the supreme head, his Episcopal Seat is in Montségur...

Mgr. Synésius spoke with us at some length about Eunoïa become God, of hylics dedicated to the predominance of the flesh, of psychics and pneumatics who communicate with the Paraclete, so well that when we left the « episcopal residence, » we were not sure if we had dealt with a visionary, an enlightened being or simply a poet drowning in the depths of metaphysics!