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Manichaeism

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Manichaeism was a religion that developed in the area of Babylon in the third century. Founded by a young Persian named Mani, it drew ideas from many religions, including Christianity, Zoroastrianism and possibly Eastern thought. It was an attempt to establish a world religion. In Mani's lifetime, it spread throughout the Roman Empire—despite being outlawed and labeled a heresy—and as far east as China, where it continued to exist until the 1930s. In the West, following Mani's execution in A.D. 277, his views spread principally throughout North Africa, although by the fifth century Pope Leo found it necessary to eradicate Manichaeistic heresy even from Rome.

The young Mani traveled widely. His journeys far surpassed those of his role model, the apostle Paul. Mani also surpassed Paul in the role he claimed for himself. Not to be outdone by a mere apostle, he saw himself as the Holy Spirit in person.

From Zoroastrianism, the religion adopted both dualism and gnostic ideals. Its dualism was based on belief in a fight between good and evil forces, with reason as the weapon to defeat evil. Manichaeism held that God was good and was represented by light, and that evil, represented by darkness, was an aggressive force that fought against light. Humans had sparks of light within them that had to be released.

A two-tiered religion, Manichaeism had an "elect" who lived ascetic lives by denying physical pleasures. On another level were auditors, or "hearers," who were allowed to indulge the physical without restraint as they were thought not to be in control of the physical aspects of their life. They would be purged through a series of incarnations after death and reach the

light of the elect in due course. The Manichees considered Augustine to be in this category. Those who didn't accept Mani's teachings at all were merely seen as sinners destined for destruction.

As a religion, Manichaeism provided intellectual stimulation and companionship to young people such as Augustine, as well as a denial of personal responsibility for evil. In portraying the physical aspect of the body as evil, it provided part of the foundation for Augustine's views on sin and the fall of man.

Mani had his writings translated into some 11 languages. Many of these documents were rediscovered in the late 20th century, shedding new light on this religious force.