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**SAINT EPHREM THE SYRIAN
THE GNOSTIC CONTROVERSY**

ABSTRACT

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SAINT EPHREM THE SYRIAN - THE Gnostic CONTROVERSY

Our work, entitled *Saint Ephrem the Syrian – The gnostic controversy*, has been structured according to the following plan: *Introduction, four main chapters and conclusion*. In the introduction we have tried to put forward the reasons which have determined us to pursue the above-mentioned topic – namely the troubles related to doctrine which have affected our Church during its first centuries – troubles out of which the gnostic heresy has been the most important one.

”As far as the spreading of Christisnity is concerned, a religion whose roots were growing stronger and spread over such a vast area, the attacks aimed at its unity and homogenity, in the abseance of one single unique, overarching authority, have been inevitable. It is nevertheless remarkable and worthy of mention the degree of uniformity which the Church managed to maintain, in spite of the new situation, challenges and ideas with which it was being confronted during those troubled times. The clear, single conscience of belonging to a unique community of faith and practice had a decisive role for the Church and for Its unity”¹.

Due to the factors described above, the end of the age of persecutions against Christians has brought peace in the life of the Church - following the Edict of Milan (313) the Church could once again turn to matters related to the practice of the Services, to Church architecture, literatute, theology and homiletics.²

¹ A. Hastings, *150-550* în *A World History of Christianity*, London 1999, p. 28

² Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Belu, *Predica veacului de aur*, în *Mitropolia Ardealului*, anIX, (1964), nr. 1-2, p. 119

The Catechetical schools of Alexandria, Antioch and other cities of the Byzantine Empire, as well as pagan schools of rhetoric of those days, greatly contributed to the development and blossoming of theology, and of the Christian Church.³

Thus, the most brilliant and prosperous age of theological thought, the golden era, belongs to the fourth century – a time dominated by some of the most brilliant and enlightened minds and Church Fathers, among whom we also find Saint Ephrem the Syrian.⁴

The vast majority of believers are familiar with St. Ephrem only because of his beautiful prayer, *Lord and Master of my life*, used by the Church during the Great Lent, but his fervent activity and struggle against gnosticism is less well known. The discourses written against the gnostics, as well as his apologetic hymns, are of invaluable importance in showing the Christian struggle against systems which "for more than one millenia had been the constant preoccupation of the Church", systems known under the generic name of gnosticism.⁵

The gnostic ideas are believed to have originated in Syria and have subsequently spread to alexandria, given their distinctive nature, easily appealing to hellenistic thought⁶.

Because of this, Basilide, Marcion, Mani și Bardaisan are the most representative exponents of the gnostic heresy, having also created a number of gnostic schools of thought in Syria. Although they did not restrict their activities to Syria alone, they remained partial to it, having adopted many religious elements found in their syncretisms from this area.

At the forefront of the Syrian fight against this newly emerged religious syncretism, which was already attracting a great number of Christians through its

³ Drd. Sebastian Șebu, *Contribuția Sfântului Efreem Sirul la dezvoltarea prediciei creștine*, în *Studii Teologice*, seria II, anul XIX, (1967)nr. 7-8, p. 467

⁴ *Ibidem*

⁵ I. P. Culianu, *Gnozele dualiste ale Occidentului*, trad. Tereza Culianu-Petrescu, Polirom, Iași 2002, p. 13

⁶ Remus Rus, *Dicționar enciclopedic de literatură creștină din primul mileniu*, Ed. Lidia, București 2003, p. 108

various forms of propaganda, we find Sf. Ephrem the Syrian, who fought against the heretics using their own weapons. Saint Ephrem's verses and discourses against gnosticism had not only put forward the true teachings of the Church, but also became a source of invaluable Patristic studies dedicated to understanding the teachings of those times.

Furthermore, this becomes of even greater relevance bearing in mind the fact that the gnostic ideas and systems have not disappeared, but have merely changed and "mutated" to adapt to the very times we live in, whilst keeping some of the same doctrinal fundamentals as those of the first Christian centuries. An appropriate example is the New Age movement, while another is the Gnostic Church, which have attracted many personalities of Western culture.

In the first chapter, entitled *General presentation of gnostic concepts*, we undertake a short description of gnosticism. The first part of this chapter, *Defining gnosticism*, presents a general overview of this heresy, a "syncretic doctrine, made up of various elements of mystical religions popular in India, Babylon and Persia, as well as Greek philosophy myths associated with certain Christian ideas taken from the Gospel of John. The idea which is common to all gnostic systems, be they pre-Christian, para-Christian or Christian, is the dualism between the primordial Divine Being and a series of *debris* elements of an evil nature which permeate matter, and the world".⁷

All gnostic systems reached their peak during the 2nd-4th centuries, a general period of development for all religious syncretism. As a consequence, mystical religions, with their mysteries passed on through initiations, found a favourable medium for development, as the secrecy of their acts of worship and that of their ideas were vital to their existence.

Further on in the chapter we present various aspects of gnosticism, especially the way in which the gnostics understood the relationship between

⁷ I. Bria, *Dicționar de teologie ortodoxă A-Z*, E. I. B. M. al B.O.R., București 1994, p.185

God and the unseen world, as well as gnostic thought on the fall of Man, Creation, Salvation and gnostic morality.

Also in the first chapter we present analogies and interferences which reached gnosticism, originating from other religions and philosophical schools, such as Judaism, Greek philosophy, hermetism and Christianity.

The Gnostic movement had many various aspects during antiquity, which made it difficult to define, due to all the ambiguities related to it. The academic term of *gnosticism* suggests a degree of uniformity which in fact has never existed. If we are to use this term without any pejorative connotations, we should then use it in connection to the elaborate mythological systems which developed from the 2nd century onwards. The gnostic character of various texts attributed to this movement can be disputed, as their contents show in fact an intermediary position between gnosticism and philosophical, hermeneutical or generally Christian ideas.

The bottom-line criteria is the non-*ezoteric* knowledge which is indispensable to personal Salvation, as well as that of a return to one's divine origin. But even these criteria can be misleading and difficult to apply, as this *indispensability of gnosis* is often only a supposition, and has no explicit form. In any case, all these ambiguities are not a motive enough to deny the existence of gnostic religiosity in the Roman world, or to affirm that the terms *gnostic*, *gnosticism*, *gnostic movement* etc. are without significance – on the contrary!

Gnostic religion and all its mythological variations have not merely been derivatives of Greek philosophy, or emerged as a Christian heresy and nothing more. To a certain extent, it has been a fully-fledged religion in its own right, or at least a distinct religious mentality, which managed to express an undivisible combination of major notions deriving from Judaic mysticism, Greek philosophy and Christian theology. Its central creed was succinctly expressed in

the Christian gnostic text *Testimony of truth*⁸. (NHC IX, 44, 30-45, 6): *when man wants to know himself, and to know God, Who is above all truth, he shall be saved and be crowned with an everlasting crown.*⁹

The second chapter, entitled *Syrian gnosticism*, aims to present the historical context within which this heresy had developed. In the Mesopotamian area, religious syncretism became merged with elements of Iranian, as well as Zoroastrian, Gnostic and Judeo-Christian religions, thus leading to a great number of theological disputes.¹⁰

According to al-Biruni, in this area Christian preachers arrived in Merv¹¹ roughly 200 years after the birth of Christ¹², but without doubt Christian missionaries had already reached Iran much earlier. In the Western part of the Empire we had Christian communities ever since the 2nd century, and they further developed and organised themselves during that same century¹³. All these testimonies serve to show how much Christianity had expanded by then – thus, ever since the 2nd century it had reached as far as the South of the Caspian Sea.¹⁴

Initially, the arrival of the Sassanids did not greatly influence the situation with regard to the general attitude towards the leaders of the Church. During the time of Shah Shapur I, Iran came under the influence of manicheism, a new spiritual alternative which was in fact a syncretism between Christianity, mazdeism and gnosticism.

⁸ Briger A. Pearson , Soren Giversen, *Nag Hammadi Codices IX and X*, E.J. Brill, Leiden, The Netherlands, 1981, p. 101-205

⁹ Briger A. Pearson , Soren Giversen, *Nag Hammadi Codices IX and X*, E.J. Brill, Leiden, The Netherlands, 1981, p. 101-205

¹⁰ *Ibidem*

¹¹ Actualul oraş Gyaur Gala din Turkmenistan, cunoscut în vechime şi ca Antiohia Margiana, era un punct de reper important pentru istoricul *Drum al Mătăsii*

¹² Biruni, *Pamyatniki minuvshikh pokoleniy*. Translation and notes by M.A. Sal'e. Selected Works. Tashkent 1957, p. 330.

¹³ J.P. Asmussen, *Xuastvanift. Studies in Manichaeism* în *Acta Theologica Danica*, Vol. 7. Copenhagen 1983, p. 928

¹⁴ E. Sachau, *Die Chronik von Arbels*. Berlin 1915, p. 20.

Generally, Christians enjoyed a tranquil life within the Sassanid Empire, the persecutions only starting when the Zoroastrian priests and the State authorities decided on it. Nevertheless, even the persecutions of Bahram I and Bahram II did not have strong consequences on the Christian communities, especially once Emperor Nasreh (293-302) decided to change the tactics of his predecessors, and distanced himself from the Zoroastrian leaders¹⁵.

However, the situation changed dramatically under the rule of Shapur II (309-379), when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, during the time of Constantine the Great. This led to a prolonged, systematic persecution of the Christians for almost 40 years. The situation did not continue under Shapur II's followers, starting with Yazdrgid I (309-379), who was quite hostile towards the Zoroastrian priests, and thus the Christian faithful could again enjoy a time favourable to the development of theology and Church Services.

Within the same chapter we look especially at *the most prominent Syrian gnostics*, with special emphasis on those against whom St Ephraim the Syrian has argued in his discourses to Hypatius – therefore we look at the *life, writings and doctrine of Mani, Marcion and Bardaisan*. If during the first century gnostics such as Symon Magus (Symon the Sorcerer) had been strongly influenced by Greek philosophy, those of the 2nd century were closer to Christianity in their ideas, thus leading to the birth of a new religion, having been especially active in their apologetic endeavours.

Gnosticism eventually became a movement mirroring Christianity, and borrowing many Christian elements, but giving them a totally different connotation. Such an example is the Church mystery of Baptism, also practiced by gnostics but in a different form (it was given three times during one's lifetime, through the laying-on of hands, and was even administered to those who were already dead); the Epiclesis, the Liturgical prayer invoking the Holy Spirit to come over the Baptismal water, over the wine, bread, or any of the elements

¹⁵ Asmussen, *Christians in Iran* in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, Vol. 3/2, 1983, p. 936

of the Holy Communion; as well as the Last Supper, which had nothing to do with the Eucharist in the gnostic rituals¹⁶.

At the same time, they used incantations and magic formulas, talismans and types of sexual magic based on the tradition of the ancient pagan mysteries, but giving them a different metaphysical perspective.

Regarding the beginnings of gnosticism, its origins cannot be pinned down to a single geographical area or a single Empire. More often than not, the leading gnostics came from a certain part of the Roman Empire, but studied at the most famous schools of their day, and therefore came into contact with very different cultures, traditions and ideas.

We also notice that the leading gnostics had attempted to be part of the ruling of the Church –for example the attempt of Simon Magus to “buy” the Grace passed on through Apostolic succession and thus try to enter the Church hierarchy. The same trend continues during the following centuries, as Basilides, Valentin and Marcion even set their sights on the seat of Bishop of Rome, a seat of great importance at the time, as Rome was still the political capital of the Empire. Refused by the Church because of their heretical teachings, they did not renounce their ambitions and managed to set up a number of sects which have survived for many centuries. On the other hand, this led to the growth in the number of Christian apologetic writings, which have strengthened the dogma of the Church.

Mani was quite different from the other gnostics in that he had not benefited from a Christian upbringing as the other gnostics had, but he had also had a break-away from the Judeo-gnostic community which he had been part of, as his ideas had become contradictory to those of that movement.

Having had their teachings rejected by the Church did not determine the gnostics to reassess them or to ponder on their errors, but motivated them even more to set up new religious movements similar in structure to the Christian Church, and even with Services inspired by those of the Church, so as to attract more followers.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*

As for the new dogmas, they were strongly oriented towards a doctrine of mysteries, traces of which can be found even in the present, although they have already been proven wrong.

The third chapter, entitled *Saint Ephrem the Syrian and the gnostic controversy* starts with a presentation of the political, religious and social medium among which the Saint had lived and worked, as well as the importance of this great theologian for the Church both in those times and in our times.

The end of the period of persecutions had a great influence on the life of the Church and, following the 313 Edict of Milan, the Christian Church, freed from all oppression, could finally dedicate itself to an untroubled development of worship and Services, to architecture, literature, theology and homiletics.¹⁷

The catechetical schools of Alexandria, Antioch and other cities of the Empire, as well as the pagan schools of rhetoric of those days, had a great contribution to the overall development and flourishing of the Christian Church and theology.¹⁸

During the golden age of the Syrian Church, saint Ephrem was the foremost Church Father, confessor and teacher of the Orthodox faith. The great influence which he has had over the Eastern Christian world was not limited to Syria or Mesopotamia, but gradually extended over the whole Christian world, and his writings were being translated into Greek, Armenian, Coptic, Arab, Ethiopian as well as other languages from very early on.¹⁹

The writings of Saint Ephrem the Syrian, of a poetic nature, and a mirror to his soul, were quick to spread, and through them he became well known within and without the borders of his country even during his lifetime.²⁰ Saint

¹⁷ Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Belu, *op.cit.*, p. 119

¹⁸ Drd. Sebastian Şebu, *op. cit.*, p. 467

¹⁹ R.Duval, *Histoire politique, religieuse et littéraire d'Edesse, jusqu'à la première croisade*, Paris, 1892, p. 156

²⁰ Ortiz Urbina, *La mariologia nei Padri Siriacci*, în *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, vol. 1, nr. 1,2, Roma 1935, p. 100 *apud* Drd. I. Caraza, *op.cit.*, p. 456

Ephrem the Syrian is considered to be the greatest Syrian poet²¹ and the father of Syrian Church literature²².

The chapter continues with a presentation of the life and work of Saint Ephrem the Syrian.

According to the oldest trustworthy sources, Saint Ephrem was born in the city of Nisibi during the reign of Emperor Constantine the Great, in 306, probably the son of Christian parents and raised in the fear of God from an early age.²³

Ephrem followed an ascetic lifestyle even from his childhood, and respected without fail all the canons and difficulties brought about by his choice. Although unconfirmed, according to some traditions he travelled to Egypt to get inspiration from the great Desert Fathers – he may have remained there for eight years, fighting against the arian heresy.²⁴

Towards the end of his life, together with his fellow citizens, he had to endure a time of great draught. The difficulties encountered by those living in Edessa determined the Saint to renounce his ascetic lifestyle and try to help the city. He managed the food resources so that the period of famine could be overcome. During the following year the crops were extremely rich, and Ephrem could return to his ascetic lifestyle.²⁵

The exact date of the Saint's birth is not known, but we do know for certain that he passed away in 373, most probably on the 9th of June, as the 6th century Edessa Chronicle testifies. Other sources mention dates like the 15th, 18th and 19th of June.

It is said of saint Ephrem that he was familiar with three cultural traditions – the old Mesopotamian one, the Judaic one and the Greek one, He was very

²¹ A. Arrighini, *I dottori de la Chiesa*, vol.1, Torino-Roma, 1936, p.49

²² O. Bardenhewer, *Geschichte der altkirchlichen Literatur*, t.IV, Freiburg im Breisgau, 1924, p. 342, *apud* Drd. I. Caraza, *op.cit.*, p. 456

²³ Otto Bardenhewer, *Les Peres de l'Eglise, leur vie et leurs oeuvres*, vol. III, Paris, 1965, p. 261

²⁴ Remus Rus, *op.cit.*, p. 207

²⁵ Remus Rus, *op.cit.*, p. 207

familiar with the Mesopotamian culture and used this knowledge extensively in his writings, giving new literary weight to the old tradition and symbols.

Similarly, he used extra-Biblical traditions, such as the post-Scriptural Judaic literature: *Targumim* (Aramaic translations of the Bible) and **Midrasim** (homilies). As far as the Greek tradition is concerned, we were aware not only of the Christian writers, but also of a number of Greek philosophical schools of thought, such as the Stoic one.

The literary legacy left behind by Saint Ephrem is extremely rich, but it has not been edited and translated in its entirety yet. As much as three million verses are attributed to the Saint, according to some researchers. Up to four hundred Hymns have reached us, but many have also been lost.

Apart from his poetic writings, Saint Ephrem has also written prose – mainly treatises against various heresies, and interpretations on the Holy Scripture. Many of them were translated early on in Armenian, Greek, Latin, Slavonic, Georgian, Coptic, Ethiopian and Arab. Thus, many of his writings survive only in their translated form, the original Syriac having been lost.

The writings in prose are rich in literary style and include interpretations on the Holy Scripture, short treatises, and Epistles. Most of his writings comprise of poetic discourses and Hymns, the Saint being a renowned poet. The *Memras* consisted of a long poem, not divided into verses, made out of double heptasyllables. Pre-dating the Christian era, this type of Aramaic poetry was later called "*the metre of Mar Ephrem*", as the Saint was the one who introduced it into Liturgical homilies. Saint Ephrem's *Memras* were later replaced by those of Jacob of Serugh, and they were composed out of two triple cvadri-syllables, and by those of Balai, made out of five syllables – something which has led to the losing of a great number of Ephreman *Memras*.

The works which we can clearly attribute to Saint Ephrem can be divided into the following categories:

1. Works of exegesis, which generally comprise of the Saint's prose. Here we have interpretations on the Holy Scripture, with the exception of the deuterocanonical writings regarding the Old Testament.

2. Works regarding dogma and polemics which comprise of 52 discourses against heresies, especially against Bardesanes, Marcion and Mani; 80 treatises against the *disturbers (Contra scrutatores)*, in other words against arian sophisms; four hymns against Julian the Apostate; seven homilies on the mystery of the Holy Trinity, in which the metaphor of the pearl was used; on Christ becoming Flesh; on the Theodokos; six homilies on faith; on free choice; and one homily against the Jews.

3. Works of a moral and aesthetic nature: on repentance; on chastity; on prayer.

4. Exegetic and parenetic homilies: 12 exegetic homilies on Old Testament themes; 12 homilies on Heaven; 10 homilies on Joseph and his brothers; homilies on Old and New Testament Saints.

5. Homilies on our Lord Jesus Christ: 25 homilies on the Birth of our Saviour; 14 homilies on Epiphany; 41 discourses on other themes related to the life of Our Lord

6. On the Theodokos: 20 homilies on the Theodokos, and several on the Apostles, Martyrs and confessors of our faith.

7. Funeral discourses: 45 homilies spoken or sung at the funerals of certain Bishops, Priests, Monks or ordinary believers.

8. Lyrical works: a body of works including the 77 nisibian poems (*Carmina nisibea*), 15 hymns in honour of Abraham of Qidun and 24 hymns for Julian the Old, using themes in which lyrical imagination is combined with real pieces of history, a calling to lead a moral life and perseverance in the faith.

The Testament of Saint Ephrem, in Greek, is not thought to be authentic.

After a presentation of Saint Ephrem's life and work, the third chapter continues with a presentation of his apologetic work, against the gnostics, written in both poetry and prose.

To illustrate the Saint's poetic work we have included one of his Hymns against Bardaisan²⁶, translated from English and entitled *And again, a Hymn of Mar Ephrem against Bar-Daisan*.²⁷

Around 12 of the Saint's homilies against the gnostics have survived, all of them in Syriac, and have been translated into English at the beginning of the 20th century.

To further attest to the clarity of Saint Ephrem's arguments against the gnostics we have used the second and third discourses, written for Hypatius, the Saint's brother in Christ. The two discourses clearly show the doctrinary mistakes made by the three heretics.

If the first five discourses to Hypatius argued against the gnostic teachings, referring to the heretics Mani, Marcion and Bardaisan, they are followed by others which are dedicated separately to each of them. Thus, there are two discourses against Bardaisan, three against Marcion and one against Mani, all of them showing the Saint's fight against Syrian gnosticism.

The treaties of Saint Ephrem shed new light on what was already known on Marcion and his heretics, and especially on Bardaisan's system. Although fragmentary, there is a wealth of information provided to us by the Saint regarding Bardaisan.

²⁶ In acest imn, Sfântul Efrem arată că Dumnezeu este pretutindeni și umple toate lucrurile, totul este creat. Focul creat este pur și simplu și nu pre-existent așa cum încearcă să argumenteze Bardaisan în teoria sa.

²⁷ Traducerea acestui imn în limba română s-a făcut din limba engleză după Ephrem the Syrian, *A Hymn against Bar-Daisan*, translated by A. S. Duncan Jones, 1904 (from India Office Ethiopian and Syrian Library No. 9)

The theological doctrine put forward by Saint Ephrem is the true Orthodox one, relying heavily on the teachings of the Cappadocian Fathers. According to the Saint, one has to be careful when employing theological definitions, as they can be limiting to the concept they discuss, especially when we discuss the nature of God.

The Saint's treaties are also telling us in great detail about the Syriac-speaking followers of Marcion, being richer than any other source on this particular topic.

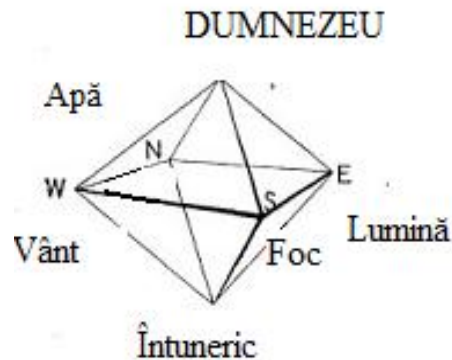
We must also point out the fact that the Saint's polemical writings against Marcion are different from those of Tertullian and Epiphanius in that there is no room for controversy regarding the so-called *Gospel of Marcion*. Marcion, having rejected the authority of the Old Testament as being the work of "Christ's adversary", considered that many of the Christian writings of the day had been manipulated so as to serve Judaic interests, stating that he himself was in fact the only one to have received the true gospel, which was simply a review of the Gospel of Luke.

What made Marcion a gnostic was his use of the dualism between the Good God and the Evil One, inferior in nature, just, but unkind. He puts forward the idea of an unknown God, working against the true Creator, set against the concept of a secondary Creator, an oppressive one. All these elements are purely gnostic, and the images used in his *Gospel of Marcion* are those of a foreign and kind God, the Father of Christ, which rescues us from the chains of human misery, which are totally alien to Him.

Also, if space is the seventh entity in Bardaisan's system, we can see as Saint Ephrem shows that mathematical space has no substance, being therefore a notion and not a thing in itself. However, according to Bardaisan, it is a real place defined by real limits, outside of which nothing has ever been or existed,

while within it God and the good and evil entities have lived and acquired their own being.

According to Moses bar Kepha and Saint Ephrem, the way in which Bardaisan's theory can be represented is illustrated below:



Saint Ephrem is trying to show that each of the connections is set against itself when used to explain the origin of our world, but he does not argue against the two main connections of the system, and does not say that they are incompatible. From this we can deduct that Bardaisan must not have insisted on their being of an absolute physical reality, but used them more as explicative representations of his ideas.

Saint Ephrem's rejections of the maniheist and marcionite teachings is also useful as a confirmation of what we have already known, namely the fact that Mani's system is in fact the same old doctrine of good and evil, seen as eternal principles²⁸, a doctrine also described and fought against in *Acta Archelai* of Titus of Bostra.

Manihean teachings held that all disciples were firstly to attempt to destroy two antagonistic principles, such as for example Light and Darkness, the first one being seen as essentially good and the second one as essentially evil. It may be however more appropriate to say that the evil is in fact born out of the

²⁸Hegemonius, *Acta Archelai*, Herausgegeben im auftrage der Kirchenvater-Commission der Königl preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften von Charles Henry Beeson, Leipzig 1906, cap. LXVII, p. 95-96

mixing between the two elements, Darkness and Light. When such a mixing takes place, there are however positive consequences, as this leads to a further step being made towards salvation as seen by the heretics, which can be reached by separating Light from Darkness and thus obtaining three distinct moments – past, present and future.

To better understand these two principles we need to see how they have interacted from their beginnings, when they were still separated from one another. Thus, Darkness had been attracted by Light, its opposite, and part of Light became mixed with the Darkness, or had in fact been swallowed by it. During this struggle the world and the human race came into being, being neither wholly Light nor wholly Darkness, but mixed and, therefore, partial to evil.

The two principles of Light and Darkness are therefore seen as primordial: the ultimate cause, not only of all that we can see around us but also all the hierarchies related to the Light, was this attack of the Darkness over the Light, attack which was set off by Desire.²⁹ Here we can even distinguish an asceticism of the manicheist system, which has in turn influenced Mani's cosmology.

The fourth chapter deals with the gnostic tendencies of our day, due to the fact that many of the philosophical themes and currents of the 19th and 20th centuries are in fact deeply rooted in gnosticism: the Hegelian theory on consciousness and on the limits of knowledge, the marxist doctrine of the dialectical progress of history, the nihilist "death of God" and the epistemological arguments of phenomenology, the existentialist notion of the Self and many of the post-modern thoughts and ideas.

The gnostic systems and theories have not vanished, but are in fact still manifest under different forms, in accordance with the spirit of our age, but in keeping with the same early doctrinary fundamentals. The most suitable

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p.cxxxiii

example is the New Age movement, as well as the Gnostic Church, so popular within the Western culture.

The New Age movement brings as a novelty the so-called spiritual consciousness, or awareness, which is so highly regarded within Western, industrialised countries. It is in fact a natural consequences of the crisis of a society in which the old "humanistic" ideas were no longer needed in the new, materialistic age.

Finally, the Gnostic Church was created in 1890 by Jules Benot Doinel (1842-1902), a figure raised in a modern society and subjected to the spiritualist teachings of the Teosophical Society.

Therefore, the main four chapters amply present the role of Saint Ephrem in the struggle against gnosticism, a heresy which we can trace up to the present day in a new form but based on the same fundamental teachings. With this in mind, we can see the great necessity of understanding the arguments brought by the early Church Fathers agains these heretical teachings, in order to demonstrate that these heresies have been fought against by the Church even from their very beginnings, and that to this day they bring no doctrinary novelties.

