

AN IRANIAN CULTURAL APPROACH TO MANICHAEAN GNOSTICISM

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1. Introduction

The cultural origin of Manichaeism was first in Babylonia and Mesopotamia. Mani, although of an Iranian monarchy family, was nurtured in the Gnostic society of Babylonia. He was an expert intellectual and artist who had an undeniable and durable influence on Iranian culture through writing Gnostic works, paintings, calligraphy and *tadhib* ‘book-gilding’). Manichaeism and its religious-gnostic ideas, however, when reached the territory of Persia, naturally took on a Persian tincture. This can be clearly seen through the terms and the nomenclature of Manichaean deities such as Zurwān, Ohrmizdbay, Mihr Yazd, etc.¹ One can see Iranian cultural influence on Manichaeism through its original themes and motifs and also through the functions of the deities. Zoroastrian dualistic doctrine and its impact on the Manichaean approach are undeniable. The specific functions of deities such as Zurwān and Mihr Yazd, and their reflections on Manichaeism are noticeable as well. In other words, the characteristics and functions of Zoroastrian deities match those of the Manichaean deities that were given their names. For instance, Zurwān, according to Iranian and Armenian sources, is a God of Time with an unlimited realm, who is

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¹These names, however, are found only in the Middle Iranian *translations* of Mani’s works and in the literature that developed among his Iranian followers. The original names and terms were Syriac, and did not include any of these Iranian deities. In addition, Mani himself made the first efforts at applying such names to the Manichaean pantheon in his *Šābuhragān*. For Iranian influence on Manichaean gnosis, see P. O. Skjaervo, “Iranian Elements in Manichaeism” in *Au Carrefour des Religions: Melanges offerts a Philippe Gignoux*, Res Orientales (Bures-sur-Yvette 1995), vol. 7, 236f.

the origin of Ohrmazd and Ahriman, twin gods of Good and Evil.² In this way, Ohrmizdbay in Manichaeism is comparable with Zoroastrian Ohrmazd. The former is the symbol of forgetfulness and gaining knowledge to be redeemed, and he is the first deity to fight with Ahriman, while the latter is the Lord of knowledge and wisdom and is in conflict with Ahriman too.³

Mihr Yazd of Manichaeism, on the other hand, is comparable to Iranian Avestan Mithra to some extent. The former is the saviour of Ohrmizdbay and together with his Five-Sons fights with demonic powers, while one main function of the latter is also fighting with evil power, and we can see the Avestic “verethraghna” (Varahrān or Bahrām), god of war, among his companions.⁴ We also see Manichaeism cultural representation in Iran during the first centuries of the Islamic period. Although Manichaeism religious practice could not be as effective in Iranian religious life during the Islamic era, it had a deep impact on the culture.

2. Historical Context

Gnosticism has vast, multiple, and even universal aspects. Some scholars regard it as a universal religion that once influenced both the western and eastern world,⁵ and even now it can be a response to some ideological and cultural quests at the dawn of the third millennium. Manichaeism was also a widespread universal religion in specific periods. It was influential in Iran, Central Asia, India, and China as well as in Mesopotamia, Asia

² On Zurvan of Zoroastrianism see H. Zahener, *Zurvan: A Zoroastrian Dilemma*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955.

³G. Widengren, *Mani and Manichaeism*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1965, 69-74; G. Widengren, *Cambridge History of Iran 3, 2; The Seleucid, Parthian and Sassanian Periods*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, 955-990; M. Tardieu, *Le Manichéisme*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997, 98-101.

⁴ Gershewitch, *The Avestan Hymn to Mithra*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954, 28ff. Also on Mithra in Manichaeism Cosmogony, see W. Sundermann, “Manichaeism Cosmogony” in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, ed. E. Yarshater, Columbia: Columbia University, 1993, vol. 6, 89-94 and G. Gnoli, “Manichaeism and Persian Religions” in *Messina Congress on Gnostic Origins*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1966, 123f.; H-Ch. Puech, *Sur le manichéisme et autres essais*, Paris: Flammarion, 1999, 143f.

⁵Of these scholars, Hans Jonas should be noted. See his *Gnostic Religion*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1970.

Minor, Byzantium, Rome, and even Africa in the west. One of the characteristics of this religion was that wherever it reached, at once it accepted the local religious features and absorbed its cultural elements. This influence was, of course, mutual, i.e., in addition to the absorption of cultural motifs and themes, Manichaean themes themselves also affected the culture and art of every region. Manichaean intellectuals and mystics, in addition to mutual religio-cultural influences, were the best specimens of dialogue among civilizations.

Eastern Europe was a refuge place of the Gnostics and heretics of the Medieval Ages. During the fourth and the fifth centuries, Armenia was a secure region from church cruelties against Gnostics, such as the followers of Marcion and Mani.⁶

Shi'ite Gholāt established different extremist sects who believed “one of Ali’s offspring has been gifted divinity. For a long time after his death, they were waiting for his resurrection such as Jesus. Today, their last remnants are the Syrian Nusāayriyya or the Alavian. The treatise of *Umm’al-Kitāb* composed at the end of the 2nd century AH (8th century AD), belongs to the Gholāt of Kūfa. It consists of an apocalypse with vivid Gnostic motifs.”⁷

3. Universal and Mystical Dimensions

The negation of earthly life and the rejection of body and materiality in the Manichaean-Gnostic attitude are mostly in common with ascetic themes, piety, and rejection of self and sensuality in the Islamic attitude – especially in its Sufistic and mystical approaches. This attitude, in spite of the belief regarding Manichaeism as a religion with pessimistic views, is not so pessimist as it appears at the first glance. The rejection of the world and worldly inferiorities, in the Manichaean viewpoint, is to reach a deeper and more aesthetic world, and it is originally an optimistic attitude. Longing for a pure and an absolute intellectual life is not a wish unshared with the prophets, mystics, and significant intellectuals of every period.

⁶J. Petro Culiano, “Gnosticism from Middle Ages to the Present Day” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. M. Eliade, vol. 5, New York-London: Macmillan, 1987, 575f.

⁷Culiano, “Gnosticism from Middle Ages to the Present Day,” 576. See also M. Desjardins, “Ummal-Kitab” in *Acta Iranica* (Leiden-Teheran-Liege, 1977), vol. 7, 238f.

Gnostic religion has been regarded as a universal phenomenon because it was based on personal specific experience and says that the discovery of truth is possible only through illuminative and apocalyptic wisdom, a religious experience which does not belong to a special theology or philosophy, but designates a free thinking gnosis and attitude. All the gnostics agree that the world is not perfect. Nobody has reached the final redemption through 'worldly affairs'. Hafiz of Shiraz explains the theme with a sigh: "The world and worldly affairs are nonsense // One thousand times have I sought for."⁸ In view of Hafiz, nothingness of the world affairs is not pessimistic at all but is essentially a longing for the heavenly, transcendental, and spiritual world. Therefore, this is the right sort of deep optimism in the world of ideology. Manichaeism also does not reject the world through considering 'the world and worldly affairs' as evil, but wishes a heavenly, splendid, and intellectual universe. Since one cannot reach it in this material world, it should be sought in the heavens, where gods, deities, and angels live in a halo of absolute light, which is the right dwelling of the transcendent and gnostic man.

In mystical exegeses of the first centuries after Islam, the term *Nūr al-Azalīyya* (meaning, the Eternal Light) has been frequently discussed. For instance, in an exegesis ascribed to Imām Ja`far Sādiq, the interpretation of '*Nūn wa`l-qalam*', we read:

"Nūn, huwa nūr al-azalīyya, al-ladhi ikhtara`a min al-akwān kulluhā faj`al dhālik li- Muhāammad s`a`l-Allāhu `alaih."

"He is the eternal light of which all the beings are originated. So, it was established for Muhammad, Peace be Upon Him."⁹

It is obvious that the 'Eternal Light' is a key figure in Manichaeism and Mandaean gnosis. The Realm of Light or Light Paradise is the final redemption. The Eternal Light, in Islamic mystical exegeses, is a fundamental theme that is occasionally mentioned as *nūr-i Muhāammadīyya* (*Muhammadan Light*). Also in Manichaeism, the Father of Greatness radiates his eternal light and creates divinities such as the Primordial Man who evokes Five Light-Sons.

⁸"Jahan-o kar-e jahan jomle hich dar hic hast / hezar bar man in nokte kardeam tahqiq," *Dīvān-i Hāfez*, ed. Qazvīnī-Ghanī, Tehran: Anjoman-e Khoshnevīsān, 1993, 214.

⁹"Exegesis ascribed to Imām Ja`far Sādiq" in *Collected Works of `Abd al-Rahmān Sulamī*, ed. Paul Noya, 2nd ed., Tehran: Iran University Press, 1994, vol. 1, 48.

4. Gnostic Cultural Reflections in Iran

Cultural reflection of Gnosticism in Iran and the Islamic world began at the end of the 3rd century AD after Mani's death. Manichaeans did not withstand the affliction and execution brought by Zoroastrian fanatic clergymen during Bahrām and Shābūhr II reigns and fled to Transoxiana. In the 6th century AD, the eastern branch of Manichaeism led by Mār Šād Ōhrmīzd was established, a sect which was known as Dēnāwarīyya. In the 5th century AD, the religion of Mazdak built upon the Manichaean dualism of light and darkness and transformed it into a vast social, religious, and cultural movement in Sassanian Iran. Even before Mazdak, a person named Bundos – who was undoubtedly related to a Gnostic sect – arose and spoke of the conflict of the realms of light and darkness, thought of a social reformation and promised a classless society. Later, in Islamic period, Abū Muslim of Khurāsān was also accused of having esoteric thoughts.

Ismaili gnosis and one of its significant branches, *Zanadiqa* (the Zandiqs), in the 3rd century AD, were founded by Abdullāh Khūzi. Later, 'the Fatimid' and 'the Qirmatis' also sprouted as branches of the Ismaili Zandiqs. In the 11th century AD (5th century AH) a sect called 'the Diruzis' (or better Iranian pronounced *darziyan* = the sewers) originated from them, a sect whose followers are still living in Syria, Lebanon and Palestine. In the 12th AD (6th century AH) the sect of 'Malahida', a branch of Ismaili Qirmatis appeared. All these sects had Gnostic ideas. One of the oldest works of the Ismailites, *Kitab al-Kashf* (*the Book of Revelation*) is about creation and cosmology. It describes a kind of mythology with Gnostic-Manichaean features.¹⁰

Gnostic myths were very likely transmitted to the Gholāt of Shi'ite and the Ismailites via the Mawālī of Iran, a group who converted to Islam during the reign of the Umayyids. They preserved original Iranian customs and traditions. Henceforth, the Islamic world was directly influenced by Manichaeism and Gnostic ideas. These ideas by themselves had cultural reflections as well.¹¹

Abū 'Isā Warrāq, Ibn-i Rāvandi, Bashshār ibn-i Burd, Ishaāq ibn-i Khalaf and Ibn-i Sīyabe, most Bamakids, the most significant of them Fad

¹⁰A. Esmailpour, ed. and trans., *Ā'in-e Gnosī va Mānavī (Gnosticism and Manichaeism)*, Tehran: Fekr-e Rooz, 1994, 60.

¹¹R. Nicholson, *Mystics of Islam*, New York: Schocken, 1975, 14-20.

ibn-i Barmakī were among Manichaeen Zandīqs of Islamic era to whom Ibn-i Nadīm clearly referred in his *al-Fihrist*.¹² Of course, it is noticeable that the Zanādiqa were not exactly Manichaeans, but their esoteric thoughts had Manichaeen-Mazdaki features and they hid their pan-Iranistic and nationalistic attitudes behind them. Moreover, being a Zandīq meant by itself opposition to the predominant political system and government.

Such an attitude can be true also of Ismaili gnosis. Henry Corbin, who has comprehensively researched Ismaili gnosis, believes that “Shi’ite gnosis in general and Ismaili gnosis in particular, cannot be conceived simply as a continuation of ancient gnosis. It follows a path that is purely its own eliminating some themes it assimilates and transforms other perfectly recognizable ones.”¹³ Therefore, we cannot deny the presence of old gnosis and mysticism in Iranian culture, but its quality and functions should be considered. Iranian Gnosticism is related more with the intellectual elects than the masses. Old mystics called it ‘esoteric science’ and ‘science of truth’ that is meant for redemption of the soul. Spiritual birth (*wilāda rūhaānīyya*) is possible in the world of exegesis (*ta’wīl*), while bodily birth (*wilāda jismānīyya*) takes place in the world of revelation (*tanzīl*) from heaven. According to Corbin,

Tanzīl is a figurative shape and *Ta’wīl* is a spiritual exegesis. They are two opposed poles. Etymologically *T’wīl* means ‘to bring back or lead back to’, i.e., to bring literal forms *zāhir*, *sharī’a* (appearance, Law) back to the plane of spiritual Truth (*haqīqa*). By this exegesis, Ismailism transforms the literal forms of Koranic Revelation in the same way that the gnosis of antiquity worked with the given forms of Christianity: it performs a transformation of all these forms, events, and persons into symbols. In so doing, it realizes a transmutation of the soul, its resurrection (قیامه ‘*qiyām*’) – and thereby bears the fundamental feature that relates it to the other forms of gnosis.¹⁴

The oldest gnostic treatise of the Islamic period, *Umm’al-Kitāb* (*the Mother-Book*) was composed in the 8th century AD (2nd century AH). The author, Abū’al Kattāb’, was one of Imām Ja’far Sādiq’s devoted disciples. Later, the Ismailites knew themselves as the spiritual offspring of the same

¹²Ibn-i Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, Tehran: Air Kabir, 1978, 660.

¹³H. Corbin, *Cyclical Time and Ismaili Gnosis*, London: Kegan Paul, 1983, 153.

¹⁴Corbin, *Cyclical Time and Ismaili Gnosis*, 153.

Abū'al Khattāb regarding him as loyal to His Majesty Ismā'īl, the son of Imām Ja'far Sādiq.

5. Mystical Works and Gnostic Motifs

There are some Gnostic motifs, but with different specifications, that can be seen in the religious-mystical works of Islamic period. How they are reflected in the source materials depends on different mystical schools. Gnosticism expressed in *Umm'al-Kitāb* is different from the doctrine described through Ismaili works of the Fatimid period. For instance, the structure of paradise and the celestial essence described in the works of Nāsir Khusraw is different from the parallel view in Hamīd al-Dīn Kirmāni's works.

Proto-Ismailites emphasized the case of individual redemption and knew their school as the religion of resurrection (*dīn-i qīyāma*), i.e., the resurrection and release of the soul from the material body. This influenced all Iranian Sufistic attitudes. Even the *Mystical Secret* (*sirr-i 'irfāni*) ascribed to Shams-i Tabrīzī, recorded in the *Walad-Nāmeḥ* composed by Sultān-I Walad, the son of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, has its exact equivalence in the commentary on the *Khutbat al-Bayān* (*Sermon of Expression*), which Ismaili tradition has attributed to Hassan Sabbāh.¹⁵ On the other hand, *Ismaili 'hukma* (philosophy) contains Islamic gnosis. It is a kind of gnosis that, in view of *Ismaili 'hikamā* (philosophers), should present spiritual redemption, and it is possible through illumination and epiphany of the soul. The soul's redemption has common points with the *Hikmat al-Ishrāq* ("the philosophy of Illumination") of Suhrawardī and the *Hikma* (philosophy) of Ibn-i Arabi.¹⁶

The theory of *'uqūl* 'intelligencies' or *malā'ika* (angels) of Avicenna is substituted for "a succession of *syzygies* that correspond to the structure of the major Gnostic systems. From each Intelligence (*'ql*), Nous, or Cherub (*karrūb*) there proceed a soul (*nafs*) that forms a couple with it... The name of the first of these Cherubs, Wajh al-Quds ("the Holy Face") corresponds to that of the first hypostasis (the Monogenes) in *the Excerpta* of Theodotus: the Face of the Father. The *Tasawwurāt* (Concept) of Nāsir

¹⁵Corbin, *Cyclical Time and Ismaili Gnosis*, 156.

¹⁶On Suhrawardī's unique attitude of Gnosis see H. Corbin, "Aql-e Sorkh" in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, vol. 1, ed. E. Yarshater, Columbia: Columbia University, 1993, 87f.

al-Dīn Tūsi preserves the same schema, although there it is complicated by the fact that not only the Intelligence, but also the Soul produces acts of contemplation that gives rise to being.”¹⁷

The classes of *Ismaili ukhuwwa* (brethren) and human characters have spiritual and celestial aspects. For instance, *Nātiq* or the ‘Enunciating’ is the Prophet (*Nabī*) or the First Nous (ʿAql-i Awwal) and his spiritual successor or *Wasī* (heir), that establishes the foundation of *Imāmat* (leadership), is the Second Nous (*aql-i thānī*). Henry Corbin believes that the idea that “an earthly person may represent or typify a heavenly hypostasis also occurs in Medieval Latin Gnosticism.”¹⁸ The second Nous can be conceived as the World Spirit that, with the First Nous, makes the eternal couple, or Intelligence and Soul. The First Nous is *Nātiq* (Enunciating) and the Second is *Sāmit* (Acute). So, the Soul is not completely perfect and there is the possibility of fall in it.

Sayyed Ahmad ‘Alavī, one of the significant disciples of Mīr Dāmād (11th century AH/17th century AD), found a relationship between old Iranian Zurvanism and this notion that “with the unfolding of the First Intelligence there emerges a shadowy dimension (its aspect of non-being, inasmuch as its being is not necessary in itself), a shadow that goes on growing and intensifying until the tenth and last Intelligence (ʿql-i ‘āshir). To be sure, this comparison does involve a profound modification of Zurvanism, by delaying somewhat the moment at which the Zurvinite schema makes its appearance (since Zurvan here becomes an angel in the Pleroma, rather than the absolute godhead). Moreover, this is the same transposition that one also finds in the cosmic dramaturgy of Ismailism, and the shift had already taken place in the doctrine of the Zurvanites and the Gayomartians (as that was described by Shahrastānī). This transposition must be listed among those characteristics differentiating Ismaili gnosis from dualism in general. Here the crisis that gives birth to Darkness is conceived as situated within the Pleroma – but only so that Darkness may be overcome and can be banished from it, as soon as it has emerged. That is why the Intelligence who will assume the role of the Demiurge in Ismaili gnosis has none of the disquieting traits of an Ialdabaoth, any more than the angels governing the celestial spheres resemble hostile archons. On the contrary, the notion of angelic *tarbīya* or

¹⁷Corbin, “*Aql-e Sorkh*,” 156-157.

¹⁸Corbin, “*Aql-e Sorkh*,” 157.

pedagogy (already indicated in the *Mi'rāj-Nāma* [or *the Book of Ascension*] attributed to Avicenna) shows the angels ready to come to the aid of the gnostic in order to help him to 'escape', to return 'home', and carry out his mystical *mir'āj*. Instead, the demonic force is on the earth, where it manifests itself in the implacable battle carried on by the opponents of Imam."¹⁹

The Tenth Nous, or the "active intelligence of philosophers, is seen in Ismailism. In the mystical traditions of Avicenna and Suhrawardī, the personal relationship of this Nous with a mystic and the role of his celestial pedagogy are decisive. The Tenth Nous is the end of a pilgrimage that is described in the *Treatise of Ghurbat al-Gharbīyya* in which some famous themes of Manichaean gnosis can be found: "the young man thrown into the bottom of a well, the Stranger who is reawakened to the awareness of his Self by a letter sent to him by his heavenly family, the stages of the pilgrimage of return, etc."²⁰

One of the angels or the mentioned 'uqūls (Intelligences) in philosophers' words is Jibra'īl (the revelation angel, or the same 'Rūh al-Qudus' (the Holy Spirit) in Suhrawardī's words. He was called a human deity. This 'ql in Ismaili religion, called 'Ādam-i Rūhānīyya' (the Spiritual Man) is the same Anthropos or the celebrated Primordial Man in different Gnostic schools. According to philosophers' cosmogony, he descends from the third stage to the tenth stage of angels and is the origin of sacred and mythical history. This spiritual man is the same celestial Messiah who has earthly representation.²¹

Abū Hatim Rāzī in *Ālam al-Nubuwwa (The World of Prophecy)* and Abū Ya'qūb Sejestānī in *Ithbāt al-Nubuwwāt (The Proof of Prophecies)* have presented different gnostic commentaries of *Gospels*, especially *Gospel of Matthew*. They have understood them as the early gnostics of the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD.

¹⁹Corbin, "Aql-e Sorkh," 158.

²⁰"*Risālat al-Ghurbat al-Gharbīyya*" in *Collected Philosophical and Mystic Works of Suhrawardī*, ed. Henry Corbin, Téhéran-Paris: Association de Irano-France, 1977, 274-297; See also H. Corbin, "Aql-e Sorkh," 159; H. Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shiite Iran*, trans. Nancy Pearson, 2nd ed., Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989, 87f.

²¹H. Corbin, *Cyclical Time and Ismaili Gnosis*, London: Kegan Paul, 1983, 160-161.

Ibn-i Nadīm asserts in his *al-Fihrist* that the Daisānīyya, the followers of Bardaisan, were scattered throughout Khurāsān and China. Bardaisan was one of the gnostics before Mani, who disputed with him only in the quality of amalgamation of light and darkness. The Daisānīyya themselves were divided into two sects: one believed that light mixed with darkness voluntarily to refine it, but could not do it; the other sect believed that as soon as light felt the cruelty and stench of darkness, it wished to separate from it, and disputed with it involuntarily.²²

It is obvious that the Daisānīyya were active in the 2nd century AD too. “A fervent disciple of Imām Jaʿfar Sādiq,” as Corbin says, “was a family friend of the Barmecids Hishām ibn al-Hakam, in contact with all sorts of non-Muslim elements (Bardaisanian Gnostics, Manichaeans, Nestorians, and Jews), he was one of the first Shiʿite theologians and a supporter of the nascent Imamology. A good number of Shiʿite traditions refer to his authority. That someone so representative of the Shiʿite milieu could have had such connections and could even have served as an intermediary between them and the Imam should give some indication of the ways in which Gnostic ideas and influences were able to penetrate both Shiʿism and Sufism.”²³

The influential paths of Gnostic thought, especially in its mystic dimension, have been spread in Iranian-Islamic culture in general, and in Iranian mysticism in particular. So, the analysis of all its cultural influences and reflections needs a comprehensive research. However, we cannot deal with all Iranian Gnostic aspects here.

6. Artistic Forms and Literary Contributions

Gnostic-Manichaeans myths and doctrines have undoubtedly influenced Manichaean art. Originally, the religious-mystical representation of art is one of the significant and vast dimensions of human culture that has been reflected most aesthetically in Manichaeism, especially in the shape of the visual arts. In fact, the relationship of art and mythology has shown its transcendental shape in Manichaean gnosis. Art and myth have been knotted here in an inseparable way. Mani himself was among the artists who tended to painting, calligraphy, and *nibēgān-nigārīh* (a special term of Manichaeans for *tadhhīb* or the art of book painting, gilding, and

²²Ibn-i Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1987, 602-603.

²³Corbin, *Cyclical Time and Ismaili Gnosis*, 166.

decorating) in order to promote and preserve his religion. Manichaean art was not really intellectualistic as it was at the service of the doctrine and religion.

Mani's innovation in his religious-mystical attitude was also represented in his art. It created a new artistic characteristic which is worthy of investigation. The prophet had a volume of illustrations, known as *Ardahang* (Cop. *Eikon*) that illustrated the most important motifs of his teachings. This painting book was even known as 'the Great Men-ho-i' (*Drawing*) in China.²⁴

The most important aesthetical aspect of Manichaean art is also the theme of the human soul's redemption and its reaching the Paradise of Light. The concept of the soul's redemption has been probably illustrated in Manichaean paintings. The release of souls from the earthly world – that was regarded as a mixture of light and darkness – would be considered the most significant theme of Manichaean art. Manichaeism, like other Gnostic schools of thought, wished to flee from the material world and seek salvation beyond it.

The Iranian tradition of *pardeh-khānī* (narrating through pictorial curtains in front of the audience), which continued up to the centuries after Islam in Iran and Central Asia and also it is still a living tradition in Iran by the traditional narrators of the *Shahname* of Firdowsi, can be originated from Manichaean pictorial traditions. This is clearly described in one of the Manichaean scriptures (M 219).²⁵

Each of various Manichaean arts is related to a specific geographical and cultural domain and later spread to other regions. For instance, the art of *nibēgān-nīgārīh* or *tadhhīb* (book-painting and gilding) originates in Jewish and Gnostic artistic traditions of Mesopotamia. Mani himself learned the arts of paintings and calligraphy among these Gnostic sects.

Mani was assumed the inventor of a new script which was called 'Manichaean script'. It originated in Syriac-Estrangelo script with 22 alphabets. Several manuscripts have been preserved in Manichaean or Sogdian scripts. The art of *tadhhīb* and book-painting can also be observed

²⁴G. Haloun and Henning, W. B., "The Compendium of the Doctrines and Styles of Teaching of Mani, the Buddha of Light" in *Asia Major*, London: Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica, 1952, 209.

²⁵M. Boyce, *A Reader in Manichaean Middle Persian and Parthian*, Leiden: E. J. Brill / Téhéran-Liège: Bibliothèque Pahlavi, 1975, 182.

on leather, paper, or silk pieces discovered in Turfan treasuries. On these works Klimkeit writes:

The holy books of the Manichaeans, together with their illustrations, reflect an inner attitude determined by constant reference to the World of Light. The inner spark in the human person ultimately belongs to that World of Light, and as everything there is filled with brightness, is orderly arranged, is divine and fragrant, so it is also in pure and well-arranged soul. The beautifully written and embellished page of a handwritten and illustrated book is a mirror of such a soul.²⁶

The Manichaean artworks have been affected by Iranian art as the words of Louis Hambis confirm the idea:

These wall-paintings, which are the only renown Manichaean frescoes survived today, display all the characteristics of Buddhist paintings of Tang dynasty in the oasis of Turfan, and show undoubtedly some effects of later Sassanian art. A specific technique has been applied in the frescoes of Bāzāqliq, but the frescoes of Qočo have been executed upon a surface that are similar to old Buddhist frescoes of this region. The influence of Chinese art has been reflected in some of its general characteristics, such as general colourful motifs of some of the frescoes and the importance of its designs through which the lines have given a kind of splendour and fluency to the configuration... However, it seems that Chinese art was not the effective art in Manichaean wall-paintings, but the influence of Iranian Sassanian art is obvious.²⁷

As an example, the influence of Sassanian artistic tradition on Manichaean art can be seen in the Sassanian relief of Tāq-e Bostān. In the relief, one can observe the pearl band which is one of the decorative characteristics of Sassanian art.²⁸ Such examples reveal the influence of Sassanian art on Manichaean art of Central Asia and the oasis of Turfan. However, since the paintings of Sassanian dynasty have mostly vanished, should we not build on the common aesthetic aspects of Manichaean and Sassanian art

²⁶H.-J. Klimkeit, "On the Nature of Manichaean Art" in M. Heuser and H.-J. Klimkeit, *Studies in Manichaean Literature and Art*, Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 1988, 288.

²⁷L. Hambis, "Manichaean Art" in *The Encyclopaedia of World Art*, vol. 9, 433f.

²⁸Hambis, "Manichaean Art," 446.

based on the surviving Manichaean paintings? This is, of course, only a suggestion. More discoveries of Manichaean artistic works and miniatures and a comparative survey of Sassanian and Manichaean visual arts are needed to prove their close connection.

7. Conclusion

An indication of the continuity of Manichaean Gnostic themes can be seen in some Iranian cultural and literary aspects as discussed above. So, the influence of Manichaean-Gnostic approach in Iran is not deniable. However, as we have seen, the influence was indirect, especially during Sassanian and Islamic era because Manichaean idea of dualism was strictly regarded a dangerous heresy both in the early Christianity²⁹ and the first centuries after Islam. Therefore, Manichaean gnostics tried to hide their beliefs in the Christian and Islamic coverings during later periods. In this way, we observe their deep impacts on Iranian cultural, mystical, and literary dimensions up to the centuries after Islam. Although the idea of the permeation of Gnostic themes into Islamic mysticism, especially the manner in which these themes permeated through the Christian and Manichaean ascetics, is a new trend in the mystical and literary researches, the continuation of deep, sustained, and steady research might bring about a profound change in the study of mystical texts.

²⁹On Christian influence upon Manichaeism, see G. Quispel, "Mani: The Apostle of Jesus Christ" in *Manichaean Studies*, vol. 3, ed. L. Cirillo and A. Van Tongerloo, Turnhout: Brepols, 1997, 6f.; E. Rose, *Die manichaische Christologie* (Studies in Oriental Religions 5), Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 1979, 194-199.