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The Buddhists, the Gnostics and the Antinomistic Society, or the Arabian Sea in the First-Second Century AD

Thirty years ago, at the Colloquium on the origins of Gnosticism held in Messina, Edward Conze placed in evidence the numerous phenomenological aspects common to Gnosticism and Buddhism, and more precisely, accepting the methodological and chronological limits established by Ugo Bianchi, to Buddhism and Gnosis. He cautiously associated only Mahāyāna Buddhism with Gnosticism, understood as a historically defined phenomenon of the first-second century AD.[1] Conze noted that the common aspects were not chance, but derived from the very essence of the two systems,[2] stressing, however, that the means of transmission of the loans from one system to the other remained obscure (Conze 1967: 665). Earlier Giuseppe Tucci had drawn attention to the similarities between the most ancient of the Tantric texts, the *Guhyasamāja*, and the Manichaean doctrines, in particular to the importance of the luminous elements in the process of cosmic emanations and mystic salvation as well as to the identification of the divine that is in us with the male seed -- a point in which Tucci (1935) saw a direct influence of Manichaeism on Buddhism.[3] The debate was joined by Gherardo Gnoli (1962: esp. 126-27) and, in particular in the second of his essays on the symbolism of light, by Mircea Eliade,

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[1] See Conze (1967). Ugo Bianchi, organiser of the Colloquium, had restricted to only the second century AD the group of systems that could properly be called Gnostic, defining the term 'gnosis' as a more general 'knowledge of the divine mysteries reserved to an élite' (Bianchi 1967: xx).

[2] Cf. Conze (1967: 661-62). Earlier, Filliozat (1949: 26-27), for example, had insisted that, even in the absence of precise documentation, it was impossible to think that the doctrinal coincidences between some religious and philosophical systems of the ancient Mediterranean and India were fortuitous, including those between Gnosticism and Buddhism.

[3] Cf. Tucci (1935; for the Manichaean beliefs and practices relative to sperm, the source is Augustine, *Haereses* XLVI, 9-12); id. (1948: I, 210 ff.; II, 711, 730 ff.). On the relationship between Manichaeism and Buddhism, see also Ries (1980).

who specified how the identification of light (and of the light-seed) with mystic knowledge was earlier than the relationships between Buddhism and the luminous gnosis of the Manichaeans, going back perhaps to a common Indo-Iranian tradition.[4]

Differently to what Conze maintained, I believe that, on the phenomenological level, it is early Buddhism (to the extent we are able to say), more than the Great Vehicle, that shows clearly the characteristics of a Gnostic system[5] – although the emphasis put on the precise correspondences between Gnosticism and Mahāyāna observable in the first centuries of our era remains perfectly right. In recalling that today there is a favourable orientation towards accepting the low chronology of the Buddha,[6] who would have died in the fourth century BC, and, despite some disagreements, towards considering the Mahāyāna not so much as a late antique development of Buddhism but the form that its northern tradition assumed in very early times,[7] the following characteristics can be observed in Buddhism very early, often *ab origine*:

Anticosmism. For Buddhism the phenomenal world is sorrow, and the causal chain risks keeping, and in fact keeps, men bound to it even in their future lives.

Dualism. To *saṃsāra*, the becoming (i.e. the world) is in sharp contrast *nirvāṇa*, identified as a state of emptiness (not an ontological reality, which does not exist in Buddhism) experiencing which means the exit from the cosmos during lifetime.

Degradation of the divine. The gods exist, but do not count. Even the greatest gods of Brahmanism, Indra and Brahma, are forced to recognise the superiority of the Enlightened One; it is they who solicit the first sermon from him. Without gods and a true ontology, Buddhism can effectively be considered a non-religion or, as is often asserted, an 'atheist religion'.[8]

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[4] With respect to the problems mentioned here Eliade (1982) develops some themes already introduced in the first chapter of his *Mefistofele e l'androgino* (Eliade 1971), 'Esperienze della luce mistica' ('Experiences of the mystic light'), an updating of a still earlier contribution.

[5] In truth, Conze (1967: 651) warned that not all the Buddhist doctrines that were close to gnosis were 'exclusively Mahayanistic'; he did not think, however, that there could exist a systemic relationship between Buddhism (and therefore also Buddhism of the Small Vehicle) and Gnosticism.

[6] For the whole question the reader is referred to the two volumes edited by Bechert (1991-92), especially the first.

[7] It is impossible here to more than mention the problem, one of the most controverted in Buddhist studies. Mahāyāna, a doctrine that cuts across the traditional eighteen schools in which ancient Buddhism was subdivided (Bechert 1973), can be considered the Buddhist response to the reorganisation of Brahmanic power, which began much earlier (in the second century BC) than usually believed but for other, including some serious, periods of crisis and backsliding. See Verardi (1996: *passim*); id. (in press).

[8] With reference to Émile Durkheim, for whom the evaluation of Buddhism had been crucial for

Antinomism. The division into castes of Indian society is not recognised as valid, nor especially is the divine sanction that according to the Brahmans is at its basis.[9] Here then is an

Anticlerical position. The Brahmans, from whose ranks the priest class comes, are not such by birth: the true Brahman is whoever enters the spiritual élite founded by the Buddha. The Buddhist opposition to the rituals, very sharp with respect to bloody ones, has as its aim the emptying of the sacerdotal functions.

Individualism. The *jñāna* or gnosis is a means of individual salvation that is valid for the *āryas*, equivalents of the Pneumatics and *Electi*. But an individualist ethic also informs the *upāsakas*, the lay followers; the individual moral action guarantees their well-being on earth and a favourable rebirth (Thapar 1978: 52-53, 78, and *passim*; id. 1992*b*: 49-50 and *passim*).

Hierarchy of human beings. The Buddha observed that humans fall into three categories, of lower, medium or higher quality, like lotuses in a pond. Some do not emerge and bloom on the bottom; others rise to the surface of the water; and still others emerge and are not muddied. The Buddha who makes this observation is that of the Pāli Canon, not that of the Mahāyāna texts (Lamotte 1981: 31).

Universalism. It is not programmatic, as in Manichaeism, but the preaching of the Buddha is freed from social, ethnic, national and even religious ties.

Presence of the Saviour. The historical Buddha is conceived as one of the numerous Buddhas who have appeared over time. In words that describe the Gnostic Saviour, he too is conceived 'as teacher or enlightener (*phōstēr*) and as example', since 'it is the teaching imparted by him that saves' (Puech 1985: 286-87). From this assumption the Mahāyāna will elaborate as a bridge to-

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defining his concept of 'religion', Thapar (1992*b*: 36) has observed that 'nevertheless Buddhism is a religion since it admits of the existence of sacred things'. The question is not secondary for the ultimate meaning of the things we are talking about here. It is necessary to distinguish among the Buddhism of the *āryas* and that of the laymen, whose devotional practices were admitted and encouraged, to the extent that it is difficult not to revert to the concept of 'religion': it is true that devotion was directed to beings (an inaccurate term for a Buddha or a Bodhisattva) who symbolise the non-ontological state of 'reality'. Lamotte (1958: 476-77) observes that also in the Mahāyāna the devotion is depersonalised, and focused on the original aspiration that consists in the reawakening of the thought of the bodhi.

[9] According to Thapar (1978: 53) the Buddha distinguished between caste system understood as a frame of the socio-economic structures, which he accepted, and the notion of caste purity inherent in the upper castes, which he rejected. It should, however, be recalled that Buddhism succeeded only partially, and only in certain periods, in controlling Indian society (*infra*), to which it often could oppose only a sort of countersociety, that of the *saṃgha* (on the monastic organisation as parallel society, ibid.: 87); in the countries in which there was no preexisting Brahmanic control over the society and in which Buddhism put down roots, such as those of Southeast Asia, there is no trace of a caste system.

wards laymen the doctrine of the Bodhisattva, who, having escaped becoming thanks to gnosis, decides to return to it with the aim of saving the greatest possible number of beings. As an emancipated while living, he is released from every moral obligation.[10]

In a subordinate position (but in any case, see Conze for important observations) the following should be at least mentioned:

Docetism, maintained by one of the most important schools of ancient Buddhism, that of the Mahāsāṃghikas, and then by Mahāyāna. The Buddhas have nothing in common with the world (Lamotte 1958: 690-91). As in Gnostic docetism, the idea is implicit that what belongs to this inferior world cannot possess and grasp that which is luminous and divine (Bianchi 1967: 13). Docetism is connected to

Negative judgement of the body, 'privileged place of the action of the demons' for the Gnostics (Filoramo 1993: 135; cf. Puech 1985: 222-24). For the Buddhists it is foul, transient, and seat of desires. Typical of many ascetic groups are the nine meditations on its impurities, which take place in cemeteries, where the body is found in varying states of decay and decomposition (cf. e.g. Dayal 1932: 93-95).

If, as Bianchi (1967: 13) stressed, Gnosticism is essentially a dualist anthroposophy at whose basis is an anticosmic and antidemiurgic polemic, it is certainly the Gnostic perspective that better than any other clarifies the historical-religious position of ancient Buddhism. We shall see how for its part Buddhism helps to clarify the historico-social position of Gnosticism, the principal concern of this article. The clarification is needed to get out of the shoals in which it regularly runs aground a debate in progress since the last century,[11] resumed, as just seen, in the middle decades of this century and again interrupted. The impasse is due not so much to the difficulty, serious though it is, of putting together competencies relative to different and distant fields of study, but to the acceptance, now mechanical, of the historico-sociological paradigm in which the position of the Gnostics has been trapped for many decades.

Buddhist speculation has significant points in common with that of other Indian systems – those which, implicitly affirming that the sensible world is an evil, set liberation as their goal (cf. Tucci 1977: II, 30). The world of the Upanishads is most relevant to the case in question. The reference is naturally to

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[10] On the return of the Bodhisattva to *saṃsāra*, see Nagao's enlightening contribution (1981). On the moral downhill of the earthly Bodhisattvas, cf. Lamotte (1958: 90-91). Some details can also be found in the rather confused, though still useful, book of Dayal (1932: 207-8).

[11] Lubac (1987: 27-29) has gone over it briefly, discarding the possibility of relations between the two systems. I refer the reader to this work for bibliography and here will mention only the article of Kennedy (1902), who intuited the way in which the two systems came into contact (see note 37).

the earliest Upanishads, elaborated in the middle of the first millennium BC, and very influential. Authorities are not lacking (Giuseppe Tucci is one) who have seen in them 'a dualism that is anthropological and cosmic together, on one side being and eternity, on the other becoming and temporal succession, soul and body, *ātman* and things'. Between *ātman* and cosmos there would be an 'irreducible antinomy' (ibid.: 52). It is to this type of judgement that Geo Widengren certainly referred, when he drew a parallel between the Gnostic anticosmic dualism and the Upanishadic, underlining the concept of *māyā* of the latter, the illusion or error that this world is (Widengren 1952; 1967. Cf. also id. 1964: 78). Ugo Bianchi, in search of the origins of Gnosticism, accredited the idea that there were common aspects between Upanishadic speculation and the world of gnosis, referring, as western horn of the problem, to Orphism, and thus setting the question off towards a dead end.[12] The indisputable proximity of ancient Buddhism and Upanishads must not in fact make us forget the profound differences of perspective between the two systems, more important, in my opinion, than the similarities. The *māyā* doctrine is only just mentioned in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* and in the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* (Dasgupta 1932-55: I, 50); in the *ātman/brahman* relationship, perceived and insistently indicated as identical, empirical diversity comes from the *brahman*, to whom it returns (ibid.: 48), so that the cosmos cannot be absolutely 'other' from the absolute. The stated *ātman/brahman* identity is therefore an example of monistic idealism (Della Casa 1976: 20), and the ascetic outcome of the Upanishadic speculation is not without significant limitations. In the words of Della Casa 'it seems that the Upanishads hesitate to proclaim complete detachment from the world'. The phenomenal aspects contain in fact a part of truth as reflection of the One, of the *brahman*, and are therefore all justified. 'Renunciation is recommended, but life... comes first', and 'the thought is not absent that... the consideration of the apparent reality must come before the intuition of the unique reality, which without the first is mutilated.' Man, therefore, 'anchored to earth, cannot abstract from the experiences of his condition' (ibid.: 23-24).

It is very probable that in some Upanishads the dualistic, anticosmic and antinomistic positions were very accentuated, and that the radicalism of Buddhism had something in common with them. In the past an interpretative

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[12] See Bianchi (1967: 716-17). The chronological problems nailed the hypotheses of doctrinal loans between the eastern Mediterranean and India to a very early period with respect to the appearance of the true Gnostic movements: if these owed anything to the East, it was only indirectly, through a third party, Orphism. It can be noticed that the early Upanishads had a lasting influence on the Brahmanic world, that others joined the earlier ones, and that an influence on Gnosticism cannot be excluded for chronological reasons: the real point is, however, that the Upanishads have increasingly less to do with the distinctive fundaments of Gnosticism (antinomism, dualism, etc.).

model was proposed according to which Upanishadic thought originated in the caste of the Kshatriyas (Garbe 1903) by whom, in many Upanishadic episodes, the Brahmans used to go to have access to *jñānamārga*, the path of gnosis (Dasgupta 1932-55: I, 30), and it should be recalled that the Kshatriya caste is precisely that of the Buddha. The Upanishads, however, form the Vedānta, the end of the Veda: that is, they are the final texts of that corpus which constitutes the revealed book of Brahmanism, namely, the Veda. All the Upanishads proclaim their own bond with the Veda, and therefore with the Brahmanic authority, in this way stopping not only before any speculation that is effectively dualistic, but also before too-clear anticosmic, antinomistic and anti-sacerdotal positions. While persuaded, therefore, of a more accentuated radicality of Upanishadic thought before the Brahmanic normalisation, it can be affirmed that in the centuries that here interest us most – from the third BC to the third AD – two distinct models of ascetic life took shape in India. The first, while very diversified and capable of extreme experimentation, did not break with the Brahmanic power and let itself be controlled; the second, just as differentiated (it is enough to think that besides Buddhism and its various schools there was Jainism), refused Brahmanic authority and catalysed movements and antisystem institutions that had in one part of the Kshatriyas and in the Vaisyas, the 'free commoners',[13] their political-social motor. Buddhism will not be recovered to orthodoxy and the Brahmanic priesthood: through a complicated path that still waits to be properly clarified, it proceeded among political fortunes and persecutions, winding up, in India, annihilated (cf. Verardi 1996: esp. 240 ff.; see also below).

The distinction, in ancient India, between two models of ascetic life whose common phenomenological aspects often risk obscuring the crucial differences that separate them on the historical level,[14] recalls the still-discussed distinction among the models of asceticism tried in the late antique eastern Mediterranean. As it has been said, the Christian ascetics believed in the goodness of the creation, which includes matter and the body: the possibility of regaining, through ascesis, the original purity, was its proof (Drijvers 1984: 115; Brown 1992: 304). For the Gnostics (as for the Buddhists) ascesis meant

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[13] The definition is by Max Weber (1988: II, 640; see the American translation [id. 1967: 58]).

[14] This occurs not only in the studies of religious history, such as that of Eliade quoted above (1982), which is as illuminating in examining and comparing complex phenomena as it is misleading in directing the reader to consider them expressions of a unified historical tradition, but also for important historical contributions such as Thapar's collection of essays (1978), much cited here, whose penetrating vision is sometimes obfuscated by the idea that the break lines in India's past do not run at all along the Brahmanism/Buddhism split. Positions like this are easy to maintain, since it is evident that social and political forces albeit very different from each other that operate in the same place and at the same time inevitably have many things in common.

rather to put all possible distance between oneself and the world – not, however, as maintained by Max Weber (e.g. 1995: II, 193, 230-31, 233), the world *tout court*, but that upheld by a *nomos* one opposed. The fundamental point of the dissent, at times violent, as in Syria (Drijvers 1984: 115; Brown 1992: 304), was that the Christian ascetics in the end always recognised the authority of the great Church, while the Gnostic ascetics did not, preferring, if anything, to found alternative churches. The breaking point for the 'heretics', for both Gnosticism and Buddhism, passes very clearly through antinomistic and antisacerdotal positions, causing an orthodox sanction as similar as it was inevitable. The anti-cosmism and dualism of the two systems descend from this basic opposition, which should be duly identified and reconstructed. While that, albeit not without contradictions, has been done for India and Buddhism, the studies dedicated to the social history of Gnosticism are still stuck in positions that do not seem to me acceptable.

Buddhism and Jainism have long been judged as belonging to a very specific social environment, the urban and mercantile, of which they represent the religious and ideological referents in ancient and late antique India (cf. e.g. Weber 1967: 204). The Buddhist institutions were located just outside the cities, while in the vast non-urbanised regions of the subcontinent they were found along the paths of communication that joined distant and different areas. In certain regions, such as Western Deccan, they intercepted and directed inland and towards the Ganges plain the currents of long-distance, overseas trade (fig. 1): already well developed in the times of Republican Rome, from the second half of the second century BC,[15] it intensified enormously beginning in the age of Augustus and Tiberius (De Romanis 1996: 170).[16] The Buddhist monasteries were often able to supply the merchants and caravans with needed capital (Kosambi 1965: 182); loans and sales to cultivators and merchants are documented, especially by the Mahāsāṃghika communities (ibid.: 183), which we have already mentioned for their docetist orientation. To give some examples (of many recorded), at Nasik the *saṃgha* received a money grant from the wives and daughters of some merchants which was invested by the corporations of potters, plumbers, and the owners of oil presses (cf. Lüders 1912: no. 1137). At Junnar the *saṃgha* invested with the corporations of the bamboo workers and of the coppersmiths (ibid.: no. 1165). The

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[15] Already then there was such a demand among the Mediterranean élites of goods from India (De Romanis 1996: 169). Even in the Republican period Greek and Roman merchants were aware that the Indian goods demanded on the market could be obtained more directly, and probably at lower prices, by sea (Will 1991: 154). After 127 BC the merchants began to end up at the ports of Syria and at Alexandria (De Romanis 1996: 165).

[16] The new large ships that made possible the direct route between Aden and the Deccan attest the extraordinary boom of maritime traffic in the Arabian Sea.
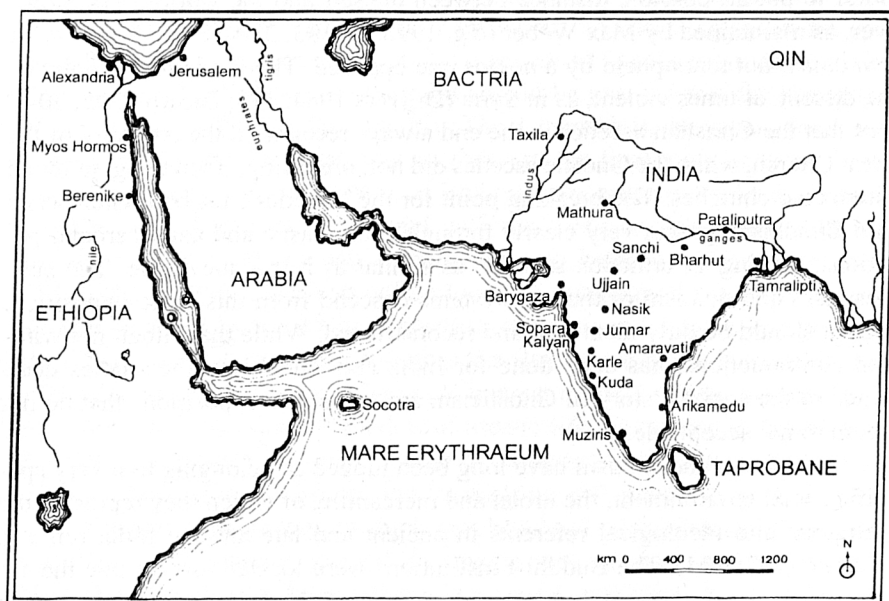
Fig. 1 –The Arabian sea and India in the first–second century AD.

monasteries, which were also major customers of the caravans, offered them-
selves not only as stopping places but as centres with functions of supplying and
banking (Kosambi 1965: 185). Taking our cue from Max Weber (1993: 200),
we can say that between merchants and monasteries a relationship was created
deriving from the need for warehousing and roads. By using a particular road
and storing the goods in a particular port or at a certain crossroads, the earn-
ings of the commercial activity were maximised, and it became possible to
create the infrastructure of trade and to bear the costs of building of roads and
other services. At the same time – the example comes from Junnar, major ter-
minus on the Western Ghats of the ports of Kalyan (Calliena) and Sopara on
the coast – the monasteries were subdivided into small groups widely spaced
to permit separate relations and patronage between different schools and dif-
ferent categories of merchants (Kosambi 1965: 185).

Skimming the inscriptions of the first century BC to the second century
AD from the monastic foundations, we get a vivid picture of the social seg-
ments that underlay Buddhism: at Kanheri, near Bombay, we find among the
donors merchants, jewellers, treasurers, blacksmiths (Lüders 1912: nos. 987,
995, 998, 1000-1; no. 1005; nos. 993, 996, 1033; no. 1082 respectively), and
we know that some of these lived in the coastal cities of Kalyan and Sopara.
At Kuda, on the Ghats, at the beginning of the second century, the lay donors

included traders, bankers, scribes, doctors (ibid.: nos. 1055, 1062, 1065-66; nos. 1063-64, 1073; nos. 1037, 1045; no. 1048); in the same period we find bankers, perfumers and carpenters at Karle (ibid.: nos. 1087, 1090, 1092) and bankers at Bedsa (ibid.: no. 1109). At Junnar the *yavana* (the Greek, the Westerner) Irila, certainly a merchant, pays for two cisterns (ibid.: no. 1154); at the same site is also documented a donation of the corporation of the grain merchants and another from a goldsmith (ibid.: no. 1180). The picture does not change if we move to one of the greatest Buddhist foundations of Eastern Deccan, Amaravati, which stood near the river port of Dharanikota.[17] Here too we find merchants, perfumers, bankers (Lüders 1912: nos. 1213-14, 1229, 1281-82, 1285; nos. 1210, 1230; no. 1261 respectively), and still other artisans (ibid.: no. 1298). Farther north, on the northern slopes of the Vindhyas, the great monastic centre of Sanchi, located some ten kilometres from the important city of Vidisa, channelled the commercial traffic along the valley of the Betwa towards the western part of the Ganges plain, towards Mathura, while that of Bharhut channelled it along the Son, towards Pāṭaliputra and the south-eastern part of the great plain. At Sanchi the donors included a chief artisan, a tailor, weavers, masons, the corporation of the ivory artisans of Vidisa and some corporations of Ujjayin (Ozene).[18] The Buddha had said he preferred that the young Kshatriyas should enter the *samgha*, which instead was largely formed of monks from the social background we have just spoken of[19] and supported by merchants and bankers (Lamotte 1958: 61): the Order, barycentre of the system, thus joined the urban and mercantile circles to the upper-caste one of the administration officers,[20] of the army,[21] and also of petty kings and princes, that appear too in a good number of the inscriptions,[22] whose impor-

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[17] I recall that a few kilometres from the Buddhist sacred area of Amaravati, located immediately outside the town of Dharanikota, stood the Jain site of Vaddamanu, recently excavated, and one of the very few of the kind which have been investigated. Only a few fragments of inscriptions have been found, but the presence of lay donors is attested (cf. Sastri, Kasturibai and Veerender 1992: 267).

[18] See Lamotte (1958: 414). The inscriptions of Sanchi are collected, edited by N.G. Majumdar, in Marshall and Foucher (1940: 264 ff.); cf. also Lüders (1912: nos. 162-668).

[19] Cf. also Thapar (1978: 71). The donations made by monks and nuns attested by the inscriptions (very numerous at Sanchi) actually show, once again, the position that merchants, artisans and small owners had towards the *samgha* since for them it was possible to embrace the monastic state only for a limited time after which they would return to lay life (cf. Lamotte 1958: 61), as is still nowadays the practice in the Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia.

[20] See, for example, for Amaravati, inscriptions nos. 1250 and 1279 of Lüders' *List* (1912); for Nasik, ibid.: nos. 1141, 1144, etc.

[21] See at Nasik the dedication put up by the wife of a general (ibid.: no. 1146).

[22] Lamotte (1958: 414; for Bharhut, cf. Lüders 1912: nos. 687 ff.). But the documentation is plentiful for almost all the monasteries of the Deccan and of the Vindhyas that have left epigraphic material.

tance was crucial for the political fortunes of Buddhism (*infra*). The extraordinary female presence deserves at least a mention: they are the wives, the daughters, the mothers, the sisters of merchants, bankers and princes who appear in the foreground alongside the monastic communities, which many joined as nuns.

Leaving India, we observe with greatest clarity how typical of Buddhism was, from the first centuries of our era to the early Mediaeval period, the control of the caravan routes of Central Asia. From their oases the monasteries controlled trade to and from China: that of Xinjiang is a characteristic example of an open society, where are absent the powers, tied to large landholdings, typical of closed societies. The link between Buddhism and the mercantile world is genetic: different episodes even of the life of the Buddha show it clearly. Suffice it to recall that the Bactrian merchants Trapuṣa and Bhallika were the first to whom a *deva*, astonished witness to the event, told to run to pay homage to Śākyamuni, who had just attained Enlightenment (*Theraghātā* 7; *Mahāvagga* I, 4, 1-5; *Mahāvāstu* III, 303-4; *Lalitavistara* xxiv; etc.); patron of the Enlightened One was the rich banker Anāthapiṇḍika, who gave him the famous garden of Jeta at Shravasti.[23]

Now, the ascetics of the Upanishads have very little to do with all this. They constitute one of the polarities within the closed society of the Brahmans. Instead Buddhism realised, at least in part and often (at least in India) in the form of a parallel society, a sort of anticosmos, an alternative model to the world the way it was structured socially. The first comparisons are not therefore with the Brahmanised Upanishadic world, but if anything with that which Henri-Charles Puech defined 'the most perfect example of religion of Gnostic type', Manichaeism (in Doresse, Rudolph and Puech 1988: 161). Keeping in mind the important difference that it did not succeed to take hold even marginally in its own country, where it was cut off at birth, it is well known that both west and east of Iran Manichaeism represented that same urban and mercantile ambience of which Buddhism was an expression in India. We do not have a social history of Manichaeism, but it is a well-known fact that its fortunes east of Iran were left to the merchants of Chorasmia (ibid.: 180) and, after the fall of the Sasanian state, to those from beyond Amu Darya (ibid.), from Sogdia, and from Samarkand in particular (Widengren 1964: 153). Also in the late antique West the Manichaeans were present especially in the cities (Brown 1969), and when, with the decline of the mercantile economy, the merchants settled down as local landowners,[24] the Manichaeans lost their most

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[23] *Mahāvagga* X, 5, 8; *Cullavagga* VI, 4, 9; etc. The places are numerous, in the Buddhist texts (for example, the *Udana*), in which it appears that the Blessed One was staying in the Jetavana, Anāthapiṇḍika's park.

[24] I follow Brown (1975: 98-99).

typical supporters. If in the Mediterranean Manichaean groups came into such strong conflict with the society in which they were present (id. 1975: 94), and if the most traditional pagans, and then the Christians of the victorious Church regarded them with horror (ibid.: 92), that was due to the clear perception that the economic-social model interpreted by the Electi was disruptive to their equilibria. The characteristic prohibition of any act against the life of animals and plants, for the Manichaean Electi (Widengren 1964: 114), says a great deal about the Manichaeans' hostility towards and extraneousness to the world of farming, that is, to large landownership and closed society. In its radicalism the choice of the Electi recalls very closely the *ahiṃsā* of the Buddhists and Jains, polemically addressed not only against the bloody sacrifices of the Brahman priests, but also against the non-urban world controlled by Brahman laymen. In Jainism, which in the beginning held particularly radical positions, lay followers were prohibited from farming and restrictions were imposed on the very ownership of land.[25]

Coming now to pre-Manichaean Mediterranean Gnosticism, it is, significantly, in the city-country conflict and in the opening of trade that the variables from which it drew, if not origin, development have been identified.[26] An analytic study on the question, albeit limited to Egypt (a country, however, crucial for the study of the problems discussed here), is that of Henry A. Green (1985), according to which Gnosticism was born in the most Hellenised Jewish Alexandrian milieus. Already alienated from and rejected by orthodox Judaism, the Hellenised Jews were not even accepted, although they sought assimilation, by the Greek élite, and were denied access to the Greek institutions: born from the transformation of the Ptolemaic mode of production into the privatisation of land favoured by the Romans, they felt a profound personal and social alienation (ibid.: 262). Leaving to the specialists to decide

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[25] Thapar (1978: 44). The practice of fasting is something else the Manichaeans (for whom see Henning 1954 and Doresse, Rudolph and Puech (1988: 238 ff.) and Buddhists have in common (for the Jains, see Deo 1954-55). Although the Buddha had embraced the Middle Path, explicitly rejecting extreme asceticism, there were groups of monks who, considering the life of the Buddha (in the light of a docetist interpretation) as a model worth of imitation, including the period he had spent in severe fasting, followed the same practice. The fast of groups of monks is documented in a rather late text, the *Vairocanābhisambodhitantra*, composed in the sixth century AD in Maharashtra (Wayman and Tajima 1992: 9 ff.; for the ritual, pp. 196, 200; Hodge dates the text to the seventh century and believes it was composed between Nalanda and the first Himalayan slopes; cf. Hodge 1995: 66 ff.; 72), but in first century AD Gandhara exist iconographies that already attest the monks' cult of Siddhārtha fasting (Verardi 1994: 38-39). The Indian precedents on Buddhist fasting practices in China and Japan (where they are well documented) are discussed in Forte (1971) and Forte and May (1979).

[26] This is the historiographic perspective opened by Rudolph (1977a; 1977b), judged, however, not sufficiently supported by Green (1985: 3-4), who managed to give an analytic basis to his theses.

whether it is true that the original Gnosticism belonged exclusively to the Judaic-Alexandrian world, we cannot but observe that the response mechanism to the social rejection on the part of the Hellenised Jews corresponds in India to that of a part of the Kshatriyas, to whom the Brahmans denied equal social status, reserving the right to legitimate their roles.

Among the Alexandrian Jews who became the first Gnostics there are, in addition to small owners (a very important part also of the Buddhist *upāsakas*),[27] tenants, soldiers, officials, farm workers, shepherds, petty bureaucrats, artisans organised in professional groups.[28] The de-monopolisation of key industries had placed in private hands, quite often those of the Hellenised Jews, the production of and trade in papyrus, glass, perfumes and unguents (Green 1985: 66). Even the shipping industry was in good part in their hands (ibid.: 136). Everything indicates their involvement – and therefore that of the Gnostic communities – in the trading enterprises, which proliferated in the first and second centuries AD not only in relation to the traffic between Alexandria and Jerusalem or Rome, but also to that of the Red Sea (ibid.: 136, 97)[29] and therefore with India. Let it be recalled that during the reign of Vespasian the value of the goods imported by sea amounted to 55 million sesterces a year – not only an impressive figure in itself, but, as has been written, 'the largest that could ever have been realised in the ancient world with free private trade, without controls and state subventions of any sort'.[30] It is especially in maritime trade, which partially escaped the sanctions of the antichrematist ethics (Weber 1993: 38-39), that I see the prospering of the Gnostic communities, composed of men from the middle class and characterised by individualist and antinomistic positions. Marcion, who was from Sinope, was a shipowner (Harnack 1921: 1 ff., 21 ff.). In the Acts of Saint Thomas (I, 3) it is the Indian merchant Habbān who buys Thomas from Jesus to take him to King Gondo-

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[27] I refer the reader to Lüders (1912: *passim*).

[28] Green (1985: 94-95); cf. also Rudolph (1977a: 38), who rightly observes that the Gnostics recruited followers in almost all social strata where the communities of the great Church had their roots (crucial reason for the opposition of the Church Fathers).

[29] For the trade in the Red Sea and in the *Mare Erithraeum*, that is, the Arabian Sea, see details in Casson (1989: 11 ff.) and, especially in relation to the information we have from Pliny, in De Romanis (1996: 157 ff., 167 ff.).

[30] Weber (1993: 7-8). The information comes from Pliny, *Naturalis Historia* VI.101; according to another version of the passage, the sesterces would have been 50 million (De Romanis 1996: 202; thus also Conte 1982-88, I: 710-11). Weber relied on Beloch's studies of economic history. Recent studies, such as those of Miller (1974), Casson (1989) and De Romanis (1996), already cited, amply confirm the evaluations made at the end of the last century, and almost up to when Warmington's book was first published (1928; new edn. 1974), and the figures given by Pliny (also in *Naturalis Historia* XII.84, '*minimaque computatione*') are considered exact and reliable (Miller 1974: 225-26).

phares, who ruled at Taxila, and we would have expected a trip by land. Instead, 'Judah left. He found the merchant Habbān while he was loading his good on a ship and stopped to help him load the goods'.[31] The activity of merchants on the sea trade was private, and the area involved in the mercantile operations – the Arabian Sea (Casson 1989: 31 ff., 35 ff.) was free from government controls. We are, as in Buddhist and Manichaean Xinjiang, in a geographic context where even the idea of a strong power linked to the large landholdings cannot be imagined, in an open society in which the very diversification of the Gnostic communities can be considered functional, according to the Buddhist model,[32] to economic development.

Mercantile activity at Alexandria resumed after the crisis caused by the policy of the Ptolemies, and especially by that of Ptolemy Euergetes and his successors.[33] After Actium, Alexandria again became a great metropolis thanks to the Roman policy of privatisation and thanks precisely to the enormous volume of trade with the countries on the Red Sea and on the Arabian Sea, in particular with the west coasts of the Deccan (Casson 1989: 22), whose ports, as we have seen, were directly linked to the Buddhist monasteries. The remark of Dio Chrysostom (*Orationes* XXXII, 40; cf. Lubac 1987: 24; Daffinà 1995: 34) that there were some Indians at Alexandria (we are in the second half of the first century AD) has recently been made credible by the discovery, on the Egyptian coast of the Red Sea, of *ostraka* bearing the names of Indian merchants in Prakrit and Tamil (Salomon 1991; I. Mahadevan in Begley et al. 1996: 291).[34] We could now reopen the old question, answered in the negative (Lubac 1987: 20 ff.), whether there actually was a Buddhist colony at Alexandria. It is very unlikely that merchants of southern India could be, in the first and second centuries AD, other than lay followers of Buddhism or Jainism, given the fact that the maximum expansion of the heterodox movements in the Deccan coincided exactly with the era of the overseas trade with Rome and

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[31] I follow Moraldi's translation into Italian (Moraldi 1971: 1245).

[32] I have referred above in the text to the settlement model of Junnar, where can be seen separate groups of rock-cut cells and *caityagrhas* rather far from one another and probably belonging to monks of different schools to which were linked up laic devotees with partly different interests, according to a tendency typical of a free economy. We can say the same for Bhaja and Karle, located almost opposite one another along the same valley.

[33] I follow Lamotte (1953: 100); however, 'at least from 62 BC and perhaps as early as 74/3 BC' in the Ptolemaic bureaucracy there was 'a superintendency ἐπὶ τῆς Ἐρυθρᾶς καὶ Ἰνδικῆς θαλάσσης' (De Romanis 1996: 165).

[34] Inscribed sherds in Tamil-Brāhmī script giving the names Kaṇan and Cātan and dated to the first century BC have been found at Quseir al-Qadim. The fact that the name Kaṇan has also been found on the rim of a thick jar at Arikamedu on the Coromandel coast (Begley et al. 1996: 309) may not be a coincidence (ibid.: 23-24). Another inscription reading 'Korran, the chieftain' has been found at Berenice (ibid.: 291).

southeast Asia (Thapar 1978: 72). R. Champakalakshmi recalls a Tamil-Brāhmī inscription recording the donation of a cave to a Jain monk probably made by a merchant from Sri Lanka and the presence of Simhala merchants along with monks and nuns in Buddhist sites of Andhra (Champakalakshmi 1996: 105, 114). Gifts to the Buddhist and/or Jain ascetics by the Cera ruling family and by merchants are recorded in inscriptions from the Kongu region of Karnataka, which points to the influence of the Shramanic religions over the trading community and the rulers (ibid.: 119). Except for brief periods, the Brahmanic dynasties did not succeed in that period in controlling the urban society of the Deccan.[35] The equivalence of the social environments represented on this side of the *Mare Erythraeum* by the Gnostics, and in India by the Buddhists, is significant. The merchants, in particular, enjoyed a very similar social position: inferior to that of the aristocracy of the large land-holdings in the West (Green 1985: 71) – and to that of the Brahmans and the Kshatriya landowners in India – and superior to that of the artisans, workmen, and peasants. For the Gnostic communities, therefore, we have to envisage an economic function like that fulfilled by the Buddhist communities: a substantial part of the goods and of the money from and to India had to pass through their hands.[36]

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[35] In the second half of the first century BC the Sātavāhanas (an orthodox dynasty) succeeded, as shown by the inscriptions and what remains of the iconography – almost nothing – on the Nanaghat pass, in taking possession at least of the region of Junnar. The highly complicated debate on the chronology of this dynasty obliges me to refer the reader only to Sircar (1965: 190-97) for the inscriptions, and to id. (1968: 191 ff.) for a reconstruction of the historical picture. In the first half of the second century AD, Gautamīputra defeated the pro-Buddhist Kṣatrapa Nahapāna and took possession of Nasik, where at least initially he could not but confirm the privileges granted to the monasteries (Sircar 1968: 201). Famous monuments such as the stūpa of Amaravati were not commissioned by the Sātavāhanas, as usually stated, but rather by the small dynasty of the Sadas, probably pro-Buddhist (cf. Verardi 1996: 235, n. 29).

[36] This could be the reason why, as some authors have stressed (for example, Filliozat 1949: 27-28; Daffinà 1977: 32-33), the late antique sources continue to know, for India, only the world of the Brahmans, known since the classical period, and to ignore Buddhism. It was not so much Greeks and Romans who were in direct contact with India but Roman Jews and Gnostics. The fact that the first writer to leave us an attestation of the Buddhists and Jains was Clement of Alexandria (*Stromata* I, 76, 6; III, 60, 2-4) is significant. There is no doubt that Clement had received direct news 'from someone who had ploughed the maritime trade routes and frequented the ports of southern India' (Daffinà 1995: 36; it is more difficult, however, to think that the Christianity of the second century opened itself to Buddhism). Here it is impossible to enter into the question (much studied between the end of the last century and the beginning of our century, as shown for instance by the papers published in *The Indian Antiquary*) regarding the presence of Christians in southern India (the terms of the question can be found summed up in Smith 1957: 245-50, and esp. 260-52), but the point is that the St Thomas who went to India was not a Christian but a Gnostic (*supra*). The topic could be reopened by relating, with Dihle (1963), St Thomas only with the Parthians, and St Bartholomew with

As for the first two centuries of our era, it seems therefore possible to identify not only the mode of transmission of the loans between Gnosticism and Buddhism, still unclear for Edward Conze,[37] but also the reasons for the borrowing, as on another occasion Conze (1955: 162) would have wanted to see clarified. The reason is to be seen in the need to adopt similar social-religious mechanisms to represent similar social environments in contact, at times direct, with one another, both interested, moreover, in a response to the great organised powers (the Brahmans in India and, double problem for the Gnostics, Romans and Christians in the Near East and in the Mediterranean, who did not waste time in crushing them with a flanking movement). To return briefly then to religious phenomenology, for the possible loans between the two systems one should investigate in particular, besides the relationship between *sophia* and *prajñā* (as already suggested by Conze 1967: 656-57), that between the Mahāyāna concept of *bodhicitta* and the divine Gnostic spark in relation to their identification with sperm,[38] as well as the relationship between the Gnostic identification of the self with the divine and the Mahāyāna identification of the essence (if we can call it that) of each man with that of the Tathāgata. The relationship between the Bodhisattva and the Gnostic Saviour, who are crucial figures in the development of the respective policies towards the laymen, and litmus test of their capacity to oppose contrary strategies, then deserves particular attention. We are here, yet again, at the relationship between Gnosticism and Mahāyāna Buddhism, aware, however, that it should be seen in a perspective that considers Buddhism and Gnosticism linked from a systemic point of view, given the common phenomenological characteristics (mentioned briefly at the beginning) and the common historical features we are trying to bring out.

If future investigations better clarify the role played by the Gnostics in Alexandrian trade, a more precise light will be able to be shed on the equivalence of the social environments on both sides of the Arabian Sea. I believe that we must abandon the idea, accepted even by Green (1985: 67), that mer-

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southern India. In the absence of any archaeological investigation aimed at solving these problems we can only take note of the fact that the indications we possess suggest, for southern India, a later settlement of Nestorian Christians. Theophilus the Indian (a missionary sent to the East from Constantinople by the mid-fourth century AD) should be recalled, however: on him see Fiaccadori (1992), with a very large bibliography also on the preceding centuries.

[37] Cf. Conze (1967: 665-66). Kennedy (1902: 386-87), who had not read Weber, had instead had very clear that 'Indian merchants, as a rule, have always been Buddhists or Jains. Buddhism was a merchant religion *par excellence*', and that it was their monopoly of the Indo-Alexandrian trade that had made possible the meeting between Buddhism and the Gnosticism of Basilides (the object of his attempted investigation).

[38] We can recall, for the Gnostic side, the Valentinian Marcus (see Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* I, 13. 3). For the Phibionites I will here simply refer to Eliade (1982, with bibliography).

cantile society was always marginal in the ancient world, even in the periods of greatest commercial growth: here come into play the theories, very influential also in Italy, of Moses Finley, which he himself revised and which are again today being questioned also on the basis of the archaeological evidence (Cameron 1993: 123). [39] But yet another conviction that prevents us from putting into focus the social history of Gnosticism should be abandoned. With some exceptions (such as Rudolph 1977a), it is generally held that the Gnostics were none other than marginal intellectuals (Green 1985: 176), that the response to their social and psychological alienation was mystic, and not political, and that consequently the institutional forms they worked out developed in total isolation from the dominant culture. Exactly gnosis, an individual liberation, would have exempted them from the necessity of concretely reforming the world (ibid.: 263). These would have been only an intellectual class placed at the margins of the Roman Empire, prisoners of an ahistorical perspective (Kippenberg 1970: 225). To give another example, Odo Marquard has stated, from his particular view point, that 'gnosis is de-politicised Platonism' (cf. Kippenberg 1984: 134).

It is difficult to subscribe to these opinions. It is not credible that the Gnostics were satisfied, from the beginning, with a simple role of intellectual opposition: certainly not those who were best able to organise themselves in the 'forest' of which Tertullian speaks (*Adversus Valentinum* 39, 2). Their geographic marginality in the Empire (Kippenberg 1970: 225) was due, if indeed it was such (there is cause for doubt when we think of the thousands of pages written against them by the Church Fathers), to their presence on the Red Sea and on the Arabian Sea in those areas of the Mediterranean and Near East that were touched most directly by the type of economy that they represented. Their withdrawal from the urban centres after the second century, like the similar withdrawal of the Manichaeans after the fourth century (Brown 1975: 97), did not signal, as has been maintained, their rescue, both by chance and providentially, from the shipwreck of ancient culture (Kippenberg 1984: 121 ff.), but rather the defeat of an economic and political model, and one of the fundamental reasons for that shipwreck.

Behind of the mistaken understanding of the Gnostic phenomenon stands Max Weber, who, on the basis of the same premises, significantly also gave an erroneous interpretation of Buddhism, which occupied his attention for a long time. Weber was the first to define the Gnostics as a stratum of de-politicised intellectuals, socially frustrated, lacking an ethic of responsibility and incapable of political action (Weber 1993: 315; 1995: II, 185, 193, 196-200; see also Kippenberg 1981). As has been noted, Weber removed Gnosticism from the ambit of the classical world, placing it on the side of the Asiatic religions

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[39] This new perspective is clear to Thapar (1992b: 4).

(Drijvers 1984: 110) – the Asiatic religions as he considered them. Weber was on the right track when he looked at the two systems together, but, drawing together with Buddhism and Gnosticism systems very distant from them, such as Brahmanism, his perspective was as wrong as – thanks to his immense prestige – it was seriously misleading for all later scholars. Christian, western asceticism represented for him the intramundane model; the various types of Asiatic asceticism, the model of the rejection of the world and of the contemplative withdrawal from it (Weber 1995: II, esp. 230-31, 233). In his distinction between ethical and exemplary prophet, the exemplary prophet is the Buddha, indeed capable of indicating a path of personal salvation but not of founding a universal ethic.[40] Buddhism – the Asiatic religion to which, as Thapar has observed (1992b: 56) Weber did least justice – would have been a religion of ascetic mendicants, apolitical and anti-political. This interpretation has been dismantled and abandoned for decades (see especially Kosambi 1952; 1965 and Thapar 1978; 1992b); not only a great capacity to organise the world of the laymen but to promote in them the principle of the individual moral responsibility centred on the puritan ethic of the austerity of saving and investment has been recognised in ancient Indian Buddhism (Thapar 1978: 52-53, 93; 1992b: 56).

If then ancient Buddhism has long been placed in a perspective practically the opposite of what Weber maintained, scholars of Gnosticism who, with insignificant variants, still refer to it and to these days consider Gnosticism part of a non-existent single Asiatic ascetic model, should be ready to reconsider the whole matter. The repeated exhortations to address the sociology of Gnosticism (see, for example, Green 1985: 1 ff.) have as their premise the abandonment of the Weberian paradigm.[41] We could rather agree with an observation of Couliano (1989: 189) that 'Gnosticism represents an anthropological optimism without equal in the history of Western ideas'.[42] Based on an exclusively historico-religious analysis, this observation finds independent confirmation in what I have attempted to show here: the Gnostic communities, and with them the Buddhists, were the optimistic bearers of a model of an open economy and society lacking the defences (and the vexations) of *no-*

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[40] Ibid.: esp. 147, but *passim*. On the ideas of the German thinker on Buddhism, clearly to be rejected, I refer the reader, as an example, to Weber (1967: 206, 216). He marvels that 'Buddhism became one of the missionary religions on earth' given that, on the basis of his premises, 'rationally, there is no motive to be discovered which should have destined it for this' (ibid.: 218): his premises and his interpretation were, of course, mistaken. For this part of the discussion on Weber, I refer to Schluchter (1984), Bechert (1986) and, for a critique, as dispassionate as it is acute, to Thapar (1992b: 41-58).

[41] Nevertheless, Green's book (1985) is important; without its analysis I would not have been able to reach the conclusions and proposals presented in these pages.

[42] It must be noticed that Couliano does not include Marcion in this picture.

mos.[43] It is worth the trouble to observe, as corollary of this position, how both systems opened readily to women. We have spoken of Buddhism; for the Gnostic communities, Rudolph (1977*a*: 39) has noted how women were offered possibility of self-fulfillment unthinkable elsewhere.

We know that, like Buddhism (and Jainism), Gnosticism too was an urban phenomenon: besides Alexandria we find the Gnostics at Seleucia, Antioch, Ephesus, Rome (ibid.: 41; Kippenberg 1984: 121) – and we might well wonder why ever they went to Rome and what they lived on (Cancik 1984: 165). To this question a convincing answer has not been given, but to me it seems that if Valentinus and Marcion, and before them Cerdon and other groups, had settled in the capital of the Empire and opened schools (ibid.: 175), they could not have done so without a plan for protection and extension of the social and economic network already constructed in the eastern Mediterranean and on the south-east borders of the Roman territories, and without seeking political patrons and opening a breach in the élites – one of the principal reasons for conflict with the Christians. And here enter the women 'who come from good families and who have fine clothes and are very rich' whose contributions made wealthy Marcus the Magian (Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* I, 13, 3). The more crucial the search for important political support the less disposed were the Gnostics to yield on the point of anticosmism and antinomism. The support of the prince became essential. The history of Manichaeism makes this clear. It is well known that Mani long sought political support in Iran: only the Court would in fact have been able, from above, to oppose the Magi and the well-established interests. Himself from a princely family, Mani obtained the protection of the brothers of Šâpur, Mehršâh and Piruz (Widengren 1964: esp. 42-43), managing to draw to his side also a few petty princes (ibid.: 51). The orientation of the successors of Šâpur was decisive for Mani's personal fate and that of Manichaeism in the Sasanian state. In the West, the attempts to occupy social spaces and seek political protection must have been continual: the persecutions of Diocletian seem to have been provoked by political agitation (Puech in Doresse, Rudolph and Puech 1988: 178); in the fourth century, the *dux* Sebastianus, a Manichaean auditor, was on the point to become emperor (Brown 1975: 94). It is not by chance that the fortunes of Manichaeism reached their peak with the reign of the Uighurs in Mongolia after the Manichaeans of Central Asia and China obtained the support of the third *qaġan* Bögü. The Uighurs, who defeated the Chinese, saw in Manichaeism the

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[43] While I do not share the interpretation of the Gnostic phenomenon given by Kippenberg in various studies, I must acknowledge that he is certainly right in considering central, for the Gnostics, the passion for liberty (Kippenberg 1970: 225), which can be experienced, however, not only through gnosis (characteristic of the Pneumatics), but (for the Psychics) through operating in a social and economic context eluding *nomos*. For the 'vocation for liberty' of the Gnostics, see also Rudolph (1977*a*: 43).

right ideology to represent their new state,[44] which was modern in comparison with their previous semi-tribal organisation, and at the same time free from the influence of landed aristocracies and old bureaucracies. Where the Manichaeans did not obtain the support of the prince, or he was overthrown, they did not succeed, only on the basis of the social environments that they represented, to take hold definitively and create the antinomistic model of society that they had in mind.

The fundamental function of the prince for the purpose of affirming of the systems I call antinomistic[45] can be observed even more clearly in Buddhism (see, for example Conze 1955: 80 ff.). The question is not simple to put into focus, both because we know little of the nature of the Buddhist kingdoms of ancient India and of the role in them of religious ideology,[46] and because the current historiographic models still depend largely on what could be called an exotic prejudice, the idea that India has always been a place of religious toler-ance. This idea leads (among other things) to considering the type of political power installed in this or that part of the subcontinent as having no influence on social and religious phenomena. Rather, in the alternation of princes and dynasties it is possible to see the attempts to translate into terms of political power the antinomistic model or, from the Brahmanic point of view, opposi-tion to it (Verardi 1996: *passim*). The first of the Buddhist kingdoms was that of Aśoka in the third century BC, perhaps not far in time from the preaching of the Blessed One.[47] If it is not always recognised as such, it is because it was such in the conditions possible, that is in relation to a society where the weight of the Brahmanic power remained enormous. With Aśoka, who made himself *upāsaka*, that is, auditor (cf. *Dīpavaṃsa* 6, 55), economic initiative of the new urban classes, which exploded after the expedition of Alexander, Buddhist re-ligious ideology and *imperium* consolidated, realising for the first time a type of antinomistic, antisacerdotal, anticaste state, founded on the axis of free commoners, Kshatriyas broken off from Brahmanic tutelage, monasteries and prince.[48]

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[44] Hambly (1970: 63-64). On the conversion of Bögü and the presence of the Manichaeans in the eastern part of Central Asia, see also Golden (1992: 159-60, 174 ff., 172-73).

[45] Which oppose a social organisation controlled by landed aristocracies, justified by sacerdotal classes and, except for an interest in investment in the bureaucratic cities, tendentially antiur-ban.

[46] I will refer only to the recent work of Ruegg (1995), which depends essentially on Tibetan (hence late) sources but which also talks about ancient India, especially the reign of Aśoka (pp. 60 ff., with bibliography).

[47] Naturally, if we accept the low dating of the Buddha: *supra* and note 6.

[48] Since the history is also written with 'ifs', to fully appreciate what the reign of Aśoka meant we can think of the situation that would have been created if Šâpur had used the Manichaean movement, and if a strong Manichaean empire had been established, even if only for a few

The disparity between Buddhism, on the one hand, and Manichaeism and Gnosticism, on the other, is accentuated on the historical level by the fact that for several centuries after Aśoka, albeit often only in some parts of India, Buddhism, while refusing to structure itself into a church, was in power. Here it is, therefore, that alongside the inscriptions we have mentioned above, in the Buddhist monasteries between the first century BC and the second century AD there are numerous others due to local sovereigns and to their immediate entourage: at Kanheri we find a minister and the daughter of a *mahārāja* (Lüders 1912: nos. 994, 1021); at Kuda the daughter of a royal minister (*rājamacha*) and that of a *mahābhoja*, another word for 'king' (ibid.: no. 1053); at Mahad a prince (ibid.: no. 1072); at Karle appears the name of the son-in-law of the Kṣatrapa king Nahapāna (ibid.: no. 1099); at Sanchi there is a queen among the donors, and at Bharhut no fewer than seven princes and princesses, and a local chief (Lamotte 1958: 414; see also notes 55, 60); and so on. Taking advantage, after Aśoka, of the large social and geographic spaces left empty by the Brahmanic power, the *saṃgha* managed to connect the interests of the urban, mercantile and small landowner strata to the strategies of power of small, but sometimes also important and determined ruling families, or to obtain the support of foreign dynasties like that of the Kuṣāṇas, which in the impossibility of making themselves into legitimate national dynasties embraced the cause of Buddhist universalism.

To reduce the gap of this diversity (which is, no doubt, historically crucial), we must immediately add that the Brahmanic power did not tolerate the presence of an antinomistic model which had become politically viable. At first (and very early on) in the Deccan, and eventually in all India, the Buddhist kingdoms were defeated, the monasteries destroyed, the monks persecuted with increasing frequency and fury, in what sometimes became like pogroms or manhunts (Verardi 1996: esp. 222 ff., 240 ff.). All this, in general mystified in Indian historiography, draws Buddhism close to Manichaeism and Gnosticism, including in the latter its medieval avatars, Bogomils and Cathari.[49]

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decades, in Iran and part of Central Asia.

[49] Some of the theories put forward in this article were first presented at the Fourth Conference of the Association of Late Antiquity Studies on 'Aspetti ellenistico-orientali della Tarda Antichità', Messina, 24-27 September 1996.

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