

# The Schleiermacher-Manichaeian Synthesis

## By Douglas Lockhart

[I]n the unity of the moment is the consummating point of self-consciousness.

Friederich Schleiermacher  
*The Christ Faith* (p. 22)

### Self-consciousness Re-evaluated

Friederich Schleiermacher's religious liberalism turned Christian theology on its head, his feeling-based insights proving to be an acceptable alternative to Christianity's belief-based conception of religious reality. Gone was Descartes' intellectual rationalism and Kant's ethical imperative: in their place reigned *immediacy* of awareness as an experiential consummating point of self-consciousness. Ordinary self-consciousness differentiated between one thing and another; *consummate* self-consciousness allowed access to higher levels of perceptual experience. The notion of "self-consciousness" had been redefined to include the possibility of mind intercepting a higher state of consciousness, a state of transcendental "reasoning" that accompanied our moment-by-moment existence. The argument was still a religious one, but with one major difference: in the place of "beliefs" about God and much else, ordinary self-consciousness became, *in potentia*, a conduit to ultimate categories of transcendental experience. But there was of course a problem in all of this: how we perceived self, other and world would have to undergo a subtle transformation if mind was to be released from its inbuilt, historically-conditioned, perceptual categories. At least that is how I interpret both Schleiermacher's specialist terminology and Jacqueline Marina's insightful breakdown of that terminology; a breakdown within which there is, I think, either direct Manichaeian influence, or perhaps a rediscovery of Manichaeian insights. Some may consider such an influence improbable, but given the convoluted intellectual interpretations of Schleiermacher's equally convoluted spiritual theology, a Manichaeian perspective may prove useful

Speaking of the evil *condition* from which human perception requires redemption, Schleiermacher interpreted "sin" not as a moral failing, but as a perceptual failing. In doing so he aligned himself with Manichaeism's unique notion of sin's origin and opened a way into his own theology that resonates with Manichaeism's mode of reasoning. But it's still no easy matter interpreting his tortuous language and opaque conclusions. He tells us, for instance, that what is given through the senses is finite and corruptible, but also the medium through which the infinite can be experienced because without the capacity to distinguish between self and world the capacity for recognising transcendent experience as transcendent would not have arisen. This is a necessary argument given that he has already claimed transcendent experience

to be possible; in doing so he had to find a way out of the cognitive dilemma that that constituted. But is it a way out? Is it not merely the kind of unsubstantiated claim berated by Daniel Dennett? But there's a twist in Schleiermacher's reasoning, and it helps unravel this cognitive dilemma in that it upholds, on the one hand, Gadamer's observation that immediacy of experience is beyond the detection of ordinary mind, while on the other nominating immediacy of experience as not only an ongoing backgrounding condition of mind, but also an attainable state of self-awareness. Ordinary mind is generated through immediacy of experience broken down into manageable time-bits, whereas "consummate" self-consciousness is a bringing together of self and world to a point of consciously registered unity. Unity of self and world is therefore the key factor in this exalted state, the experience had that of the *stream of immediacy* become an experience in its own right, an experience had beyond finite perception's temporal, differentiating grasp. With all of this in mind, let us now take a close look at Manichaeism. As the correspondences with Schleiermacher's theology are, I think, obvious, I will comment little on what follows.

### **The Manichaeism Synthesis**

The common view of Manichaeism (216-276 AD) is that Mani, its founder, synthesised different religious traditions in an attempt to produce a universally applicable religious system, but something much more profound may have been going on. A cursory glance at Manichaeism terminology suggests that a coded language was in use, and further investigation suggests that this language harbours a yet to be properly understood formula in relation to self, other and world. In this sense, the Gnostic term "locked in physis" may carry within it a deeply pertinent insight in relation to Schleiermacher's re-developed notion of "consummate" self-consciousness.

Of all the groups thrown up as a result of doctrinal tensions between so-called Jewish Christianity, Pauline Christianity, Roman Christianity and Christian Gnosticism, Manichaeism is the doctrinal area where close investigation affords glimpses of an underlying set of ideas both explosive in content and expressive of a line of reasoning stemming from early periods of religious exploration. Embedded often in speculations inspired by naive piety, or in what appears to be such, this set of ideas surfaces again and again to tantalise and surprise. Aware of this fact, A B Kuhn names Manichaeism and Neo-Platonism as the two great philosophical rivals of Christianity, and asserts that they “. . . held the ancient body of sage-wisdom to its highest standards of intellectual appreciation.”<sup>1</sup> In relation to Manichaeism, that's quite a claim; but as we shall see, not entirely without foundation - Manichaeism does seem to harbour an advanced psycho-spiritual system.

The founder of Manichaeism appears to have adopted the Iranian version of dualism, but his ideas may also have had another origin. It is reported in an Arabic source (the *Fihrist*)

that he preached a doctrine of darkness and light and assumed this world to be a mixture of darkness and light, darkness being its principle essence. And so he taught a doctrine of "mixing" and "unmixing", and developed this into a system of "dispersal" where portions of light were conceived of as having separated off and mixed with a captivating darkness. In this sense, salvation was a process of gathering in the dispersed portions of light, a restoration of the original unity of light scattered throughout the creation. Human creation was therefore a trick of the Dark Powers to imprison the light more firmly, release only possible when individual beings woke up to this fact.

In a fragment of the *Gnostic Gospel of Eve* preserved by Epiphanius, the idea of "gathering light" takes on further significance.

I am thou and thou art I, and where thou art I am, and in all things  
am I dispersed. And from wherever thou wilt thou gatherest me;  
but in gathering me thou gatherest thyself . . . I have come to know  
myself and have gathered myself from everywhere . . . <sup>2</sup>

When referring to these fragments, Hans Jonas remarks that over and above a metaphysical aspect, these quotations reveal an inward aspect in relation to unity and unification. This suggests a higher form of gnosis (knowledge); or as Jonas puts it, ". . . the increasing realisation of an inner aspect purifies the metaphysical one of the cruder mythological meanings it had to begin with."<sup>3</sup> He goes on to say that Valentinian gnosis is a de-mythologising of Gnostic symbols, and in speaking thus suggests a spiritualising of previous literalisms. In line with this, the French gnostic scholar Simone Petrement notes that the idea of "self-knowledge" seems to arise with Valentinus, and is not to be found in Irenaeus' descriptions of Simon, Menander, Cerinthus, Saturnilus, Basilides or Cerdo.<sup>4</sup> The doctrine of Christ's incarnation is rejected, Jesus' redemptive role interpreted in the sense of someone who *awakens*, and having *awakened*, *awakens* others. The mythology backing this point is complex; suffice it to say that to Henri-Charles Peuch, Simone Petrement and A. B. Kuhn, it corresponds to a depth-psychology embedded in a highly complex mythology which has to be carefully handled. For example, Manichaeism's conception of matter as an evil, half unconscious 'force' trying to invade or engulf the realm of Light, is not to be taken literally. Petrement notes this and says that the depiction of matter as evil is an exaggeration of Platonic

dualism, a dualism originally understood as meaning that matter only causes evil when it is mixed with the spirit in a certain manner.<sup>5</sup> Which suggests that Platonic dualism did in fact lie behind Manichaeism, and that the idea of a physical Jesus being God had forced the gap between those two principles to widen. This suggests that Nazarene sectarian thinking (Jesus is termed "The Nazarene") had become mixed with Pauline thinking, and that this had resulted in a confused hotch-potch theory of Jesus' status and nature. And so an interesting thing happened: Nazarene and offshoot Ebionite sectarian denial of Jesus being literally God *in the flesh* was redirected and made into the Manichaean denial that God could ever possibly have been a man.

### The Engulfing of Matter

To understand what the Manichaeans meant by light being "engulfed" or "smothered" by matter, it is necessary to read between the lines and attempt to detect the psychological principles at work. Jonas is particularly good at this; his choice of words often loosens up the issues involved. For instance, in relation to the engulfing of matter, he speaks of gnosis, or knowledge, as an inner event of the mind. But not in the sense of "thinking"; more in the sense of transcendental experience. Linked directly to the idea of "gathering", this experience is defined Neoplatonically by Porphyry as a ". . . gathering in from the body all thy members which have been dispersed and scattered"<sup>6</sup> This sets the scene by way of the "senses" being pulled in and concentrated. Then with a brilliant twist Jonas completes the picture by interpreting the existential meaning of "dispersal" as *distraction*. It is through "distraction" that we are engulfed and smothered by ". . . the manifold concerns and lures of the world acting through the senses of the body"<sup>7</sup> When rescued from the obscurity of Gnostic symbols, we are confronted with a perfectly sensible series of ideas, ideas which inform us that in Manichaean terms, consciousness of self dissipated through identification with matter is what the whole bag of tricks is about. Through the senses, a usurped state of consciousness erupts. To wake up to this fact is to be "redeemed" or "resurrected" - it is to *awaken* to the fact that the self spends a great deal of time within a prison of distraction. We function mostly in an unconscious manner when conscious, and the human body is the reason for this curious state of affairs because it functions

unconsciously. In this sense, consciousness is a battle continually won through effort, and we are engaged in this battle from the moment of birth. Spending most of our time caught in the grasp of images, ideas and sensations, we forget to remember who we are, and the result is an automaton unleashed on the world who only occasionally remembers that it actually exist as a being.

The Manichaeans claimed that their doctrine of redemption and resurrection was based on an authentic science, and not on "authority" and "faith". They saw redemption and resurrection as a problem of "insight" objectively solved by the mind. As with Gnostic ideas in general, this is where interpretations of Manichaeism as nothing more than a rational philosophy arose, but the so-called "objective" approach of the Manichaeans had in fact nothing whatever to do with rational systems of thought. Their idea of solving a problem did not require extended thinking; it entailed *revelation*. Switching from one method of perception to another, the initiate came to understand how self related to world. And so, borrowing from Paul, Manichaeism evolved the idea of the Old Man, and the New Man, and in these terms can be seen the basis of a depth-psychology teasing us towards an appreciation of what it means to be *awake*. The Old Man represents the soul suffering from "dull consciousness" and "dark insight", the New Man as the *I- here*. The "i-here" is the actual terms used in Manichaeism. This reflects the notion of being fully present.<sup>8</sup> And so the idea of "redemption" is disconnected from the notion that Jesus' crucifixion was in some sense vicarious, and as Puech so clearly states, it becomes ". . . first and foremost the awakening of a consciousness which has been lost for a time through the forgetfulness and ignorance induced by the flesh".<sup>9</sup> Or, as cited in an early Manichaean work by Theodore bar Khouni, "Then Adam examined himself and knew who he was."<sup>10</sup> Regaining consciousness of self in the fullest sense, Adam undergoes deification; for that which finally sees God, is God. There is no other.

According to Manichaean doctrine, life is light, a luminous substance resident in matter attested to by just about everyone who has ever taken LSD. The purpose of creation is the rescuing of this divine substance. Functioning like a machine, or factory for the gathering and refining of light, the world's elements liberate the divine substance and it rises as a pillar of light towards the moon, and is then transferred to

the sun and finally to its heavenly home. The mythology surrounding this subject of life and light as a substance locked up in matter is complex, but the end result is pretty clear: human beings are intrinsically involved in the redemption of the planet, and in their own redemption as material beings through realising that life is itself a transformative process, and that the world is a kind of cosmic machine, or factory, for gathering and refining the divine light buried in dull consciousness. This causes Puech to refer to the cosmos as a pharmacy ". . . where poison and medicine lie side by side".<sup>11</sup> To the Manichaeans life was a battleground, an area of conflict where the Old Man (the constantly distracted "I") and the New Man (the intermittently awake "Self") fought for ascendancy. Which suggests a state of suffering; or, as Manichaeans saw it, a damned state. And so, in the writings of Theodore bar Khouni we have demons associated with matter, and they are described as making the first man *blind, deaf, confused and unconscious*.

Having revived the theory of the "true prophet" as found in the Nazarene pseudo-Clementines, the Manichaeans then developed the idea of two traditions, one governed by light, the other by darkness. The tradition founded on darkness was said to create false religion, the one on light true religion. Christianity after the time of Paul was seen as in decline, the new Manichaean gospel as an attempt to recapture the original meaning of Jesus' message. And so the historical Jesus was interpreted as different from the transcendent Jesus, the transcendent Jesus being referred to as ". . . he who has awakened the Living "I". In this sense is Jesus' Passion changed from being a vicarious sacrifice into an example of the very problem faced, the problem of full conscious awareness dispersed and crucified in matter.<sup>12</sup> But more than that, for as our attempts to awaken are intermittent and prone to reversal, the necessity of sustained awakening becomes the central issue, a task-oriented issue belonging to the Church proper and linked to the "Majesty of the Law". It is the Law which awakens. The Law is the "unique awakener", the moral life it inspires the instrument which makes man an instrument for the liberation of light.<sup>13</sup>

This carries us back to Nazarene insistence that observation of the Law could not be done away with. Faith in Jesus as a redemptive sacrifice was, in their opinion, a mistake, atonement and salvation was by and through the Law alone. Only the Law

consciously lived out in life could reveal how unconscious we really were. The Redeemer's revelation of this was important, but believing what the Redeemer said was not enough in and of itself; it was also necessary to maintain without interruption the form of consciousness that had been aroused by the Redeemer's words.<sup>14</sup> And so was formed the basic Manichaeian attitude towards body and world, an attitude which demanded rejection of the world and of those who found its poisonous effects to their liking. Renunciation was the key, detachment from the world and the flesh the means by which the baleful influence of matter could be overcome.

### Life and Light

The twist in Manichaeian mythology was that Adam's eating of the fruit in the Garden of Eden had resulted in his liberation, not in his downfall (shades of Irenaeus?). Sunk in the body, he had become ". . . an instrument of the unconscious",<sup>15</sup> a state of captivity from which the Redeemer (the First "awakened" Man?) awakens him; that is, through insight the soul awakens the soul to itself. Able now to see that his soul's substance is diffused or scattered throughout all matter, he determines to hold matter at bay and so rescue the divine substance. As this soul substance is consubstantial with God, the idea of redemption fans out into the creation itself, the symbol for this Living Soul imprisoned in matter being *Jesus Patibilis*, that is, Jesus in the "pathetic aspect" of his suffering. Crucified throughout matter, the divine substance or "life" in matter is held captive and has to be taken back into the self.

In relation to the idea of light being rescued from matter, the Manichaeians also developed the idea of feeding on the divine substance, so making human beings an essential component of the world machine, or factory, where squandered energy is gathered and refined. Strict vegetarians, the Manichaeian Elect looked upon themselves as digestion machines capable of purifying and releasing the light from the fruit, vegetables and grain through controlled attention. Allowing themselves only one meal per day, and fasting at regular intervals, they ate just enough food to sustain life, so reflecting the equally strict habits of the Nazarenes, Eionites and Elchasaites, all of whom were doctrinally functioning aspects of so-called "Jewish" Christianity. But there were also many differences between the Manichaeians and these earlier groups. The

Manichaeans condemned baptism and did not seem to have bothered with sacraments or rites. Certain rituals were observed, such as the laying on of hands, the kiss of peace and the viaticum for the dying, but basically there were no sacraments, the Elect believing that their transformed state of consciousness made all sacraments obsolete. It was the state of consciousness that mattered, not adherence to ritual: "attention" itself became their sacrament. The Manichaeans did however recognise confession of sin as necessary, but their main emphasis was on quality of consciousness and on a special kind of knowledge which helped transform the inner man. It was knowledge that redeemed the soul, knowledge which transformed consciousness, knowledge which produced liberation from the material body.

### Transcendent Knowledge

The Manichaean conception of "knowledge" was infused with important philosophical repercussions in relation to perception. In alignment with Gnostic conceptions, Manichaeism trained its adherents in a process of perception which, if successful, resulted in *immediate* redemption. This process of perception was considered sufficient in and of itself to redeem the individual due to its extraordinary effect on consciousness, and resulted in complete knowledge - absolute, universal or cosmic knowledge. *Uniting with the world of objects*, the initiate experienced the world as a series of objects perceptually united and encompassed by the self. This suggests that he/she had found the means to short-circuit the dualistic "gap" between self and world, so releasing a state of conscious unity grounded in their own living presence. Fundamentally transformed by this experience, the initiate began to perceive the transcendent realities and became aware of his/her true identity.<sup>16</sup>

Yet when back in their normal senses caught still in consensus reality with regard to culture and the general activities of mind required to live in the 3rd century. In some sense truly transformed as a result of their experience of transcendent reality, but necessary to sustain this condition of mind through practice. Not a permanent state. More a glimpse which had to be repeated until it hopefully became permanent. In other words, Jesus' dilemma all over again as he faced unfulfilled eschatological expectations in spite of a personal transfiguration. Intimations of transcendent reality



were not always in alignment with mundane reality due to the mind's need to interpret higher reality experience into useful lower reality terms. Or, as Puech puts it, ". . . it must be stressed that this body of knowledge, which purports to be scientific and even rational, actually dissolves into a system of myths".<sup>17</sup> Dealing with the same problem, Erich Neumann pushes further still and describes transcendent knowledge as belonging to the creative unconscious. Placing it at the outer limits of the ego's capacity to perceive, he says: ". . . any attempt to approach this central and primal vortex is a hazardous undertaking [because it is] in the very nature of such an undertaking that its object cannot be captured by the direct intervention of consciousness, but that one must seek to approach the centre in question by a sort of ritual circling, an approach from many sides."<sup>18</sup>

But this is only half of the story; the rest of the story is that the Gnostic and Jewish-Nazarene-based groups were also spiritual subversives in relation to orthodox Christianity's claim that it had the whole truth. Deemed heretical, they acted heretically; that is, over and above what they were actually experiencing, they also resorted to allegorical polemic in the sense of a "tendentious rewriting" of texts to confuse and bemuse their critics.<sup>19</sup> This is very important, for it suggests that the more impenetrable texts belonging to these groups may in fact be coded statements to which the Church Fathers simply lacked the interpretative key. Turning many a biblical event on its theological head, they seem to have delighted in what Hans Jonas calls the construction of "countertypes". And so what they present is often not what they actually believed, but a "rebels view of history" consciously fabricated to oppose the Church's official stance.<sup>20</sup>

Behind this, however, lay an equally complex visionary system, for initiates became capable of intercepting reality in such a fashion that reality ended up intercepting them at the deepest levels of *psyche*. Encompassing objective reality in a series of subjective moves which allowed self and other to occupy the same timeless space, the initiate cracked the cosmic egg and began to perceive transcendent reality through the aperture which appeared in time and space. Previously intoxicated or numbed by objective reality, the initiate slowly realised that he/she was caught in a state of

conscious sleep from which it was necessary to awaken at regular intervals. Summing up this curious state of being unconsciously conscious, Hans Jonas says:

We are dealing here, as in the whole group of the metaphors of sleeping, not with a mythological detail, a mere episode in a narrative, but with a fundamental feature of existence in the world. . . The 'world' on its part makes elaborate efforts to create and maintain this state in its victims and to counteract the operation of awakening.<sup>21</sup>

In Gnostic literature, mankind is described as asleep in the world, and this, as Jonas points out, refers to total abandonment to the world. But this does not refer to moral forgetfulness, or to not attending to the things that really matter, or to wilfully going about things in our own way. It refers to something strictly psychological - our habit of being unconsciously caught in a state of conscious distraction. So it is not just moral forgetfulness in the sense of wilful behaviour that the Gnostics were drawing attention to - they were much more interested in the kind of awareness that robbed the individual of self-presence and reduced him/her to the level of a reactive automaton. Creating a system born out of an experience which short-circuited beliefs about things, they struggled to find a suitable terminology in which to house their spiritual discoveries. It is this simple yet devastating realisation that appears to burble behind the extraordinary allegorical/metaphorical edifice of Manichaeism, and it is this same realisation that underpins Gnostic thinking and Schleiermacher's theology in particular. Just as geometry was "sacred" to the Greek philosophers, so, it could be argued, did this mode of perception become sacred to the Manichaeans.

The message was fundamentally this: to be robbed of sentience is to be observably unconscious; to be robbed of 'self-presence' is to be unconscious in the sense of being lost to oneself. This seems to have been the ever-so-simple heart of their message, the beating heart of sentience generally missing from the equation of sentience. Prisoners of habit in thought and deed, we disappeared from the canvas of our daily lives and functioned reactively. Shorn of self-presence we turned into "personalities" often totally devoid of a personal dimension. Surface we certainly did, but it was a surfacing generally without conscious repercussion - no sooner did we

surface than we again dipped back into the unconscious flow of mental activity which so fascinated and entertained us. Submerged in a torrent of conscious interaction, we attempted to know others and ourselves, but found, to our dismay, that we and they were seldom available.

Theoretically, Manichaeism redemption was a recovery of self-knowledge, a restoration of the self to the self through a process of unity brought about by a full and complete experience of duality. Taking place in time, this experience nevertheless transcended time because it was an act of re-cognition, or *ignition*, leading to a rebirth of the self to the self. Consciously usurped by events and happenings, by material reality in the form of objects, and by reality as an object in its own right, we suffered continuously because we were not properly available to ourselves, other or world. Immersed in event, interaction and thought, we stumbled about in a mentally usurped state believing that we were fully conscious because not actually unconscious. But we were not fully conscious; we were merely conscious *of*, not *as*, ourselves. The sole cause of sin was therefore material reality's mesmerising effect on our consciousness. Losing track of ourselves we became, as the Gnostics never tired of saying, *locked in physis*. This, then, was the evil detected by the Manichaeans to lie at the heart of matter, the darkness which continually threatened us as we went about our daily business. Hypnotised by reality both internal and external, we died to ourselves and had to be "resurrected" *through knowledge of our plight*.

According to the Manichaeans, sin arose solely from forgetfulness. In this sense, sin was not willed; it was simply the result of forgetting to be present. Sin was a memory, not an act; it was a condition of consciousness where self was absent and the memory of sin stirred the soul towards a belated repentance. And so the Manichaean writer Secundinus could write: "The soul is not punished because it has sinned, but because it has not repented of its sin."<sup>22</sup> The idea of "knowledge" in Manichaeism was therefore unrelated to intellectual activity in the strict sense, but to an experience of reality which translated itself into an immediate comprehension of a problem - the problem of our not knowing that we were asleep while apparently awake. Puech makes an interesting observation on this point. He says: ". . . the soul does evil only reluctantly when it is overpowered by the mixture [asleep]; given back to its nature [awake again] it can only go the way of the light."<sup>23</sup> This suggests that salvation results from strength of

consciousness, not just from a strong will. Awake, the soul can resist evil; asleep, it will probably succumb.

As the above explanation seems to be the central factor in Manichaeism, we can probably constellate everything else in the system around it. But the idea of matter as 'distracting' and "engulfing" is difficult to detect, and as interpretations of Manichaean texts tend to literalise the ideas expressed, they tend to obscure more than they reveal. Aware of this problem, Simone Petrement berates scholars for underestimating Gnostic thinking, and reminds everyone that Manichaean doctrine rests upon a very complicated myth.<sup>24</sup> Acknowledging and confirming Puech's evaluation of Gnostic texts pointing to the ". . . hidden part of each human being", she nevertheless feels that his approach is reductive in relation to what the Gnostic initiate sensed, and accuses him of spinning a quite inadequate piece of sociological theory to explain a psychological breakthrough. This seems right. What these Gnostics were involved in was not "belief" superiority in a religious sense, it was *insight* superiority resulting from an examination of the self in relation to a perceptual technique.

### The Concern with Self

Simone Petrement observes that 2nd century Christian heretics did not speak of the "self" in the same way as the 3rd century sects did, only later would this so modern theme appear in the heretical texts. Their seeming preoccupation with "self" stemmed from the desire to know the origin and destination of the soul. In this context knowledge of self was actually knowledge of the "origin" of the self, a discovery tempered by the fact that knowledge of the soul's origin came from insight allied to the conscious self, an insight that revealed the mechanism of perception at work. Petrement is particularly clear on this point "[F]or these Gnostics there is a knowledge of the self . . . but there is not, properly speaking, a search for the self. The knowledge was given without search".<sup>26</sup> That is the crux of the matter; there was no searching for the self in the sense that we now understand such a search, more a revelation spontaneously given. Not doctrinal insight, more an experiential "seeing" that revealed the complex nature of the relationship that exists between self, other and world.

**References and Notes:**

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- 13) Ibid, p. 292.
- 14) Ibid, p. 308.
- 15) Ibid, p. 270.
- 16) Ibid, p. 250.
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- 20) Ibid, p. 95.
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- 23) Puech, Henri-Charles, 'The Concept of Redemption in Manichaeism', (see above) p. 299.
- 24) Petrement, Simone, *The Separate God*, (see above) p. 17.
- 25) Ibid, p. 136.
- 26) Ibid.

