

GREAT THEOSOPHISTS

AMMONIUS SACCAS

THE influence of the great Alexandrian Schools had not helped the early Christians in their work of propaganda. While the Church of Rome held up the Jewish Bible as the sole authority upon every subject, the Gnostic Schools of Alexandria and Ephesus had turned out thousands of students who recognized the absurdity of such a claim. The scattered communities of orthodox Christendom, echoing the church in Rome, were teaching that the Jewish Scriptures were the only revelation of God, and therefore not to be compared with the Scriptures of other nations. But three prominent Jewish scholars had already proved the similarity between the Laws of Moses and the philosophies of Plato, Aristotle and Pythagoras. Christians claimed that Jesus was a unique character, while the entire pagan world knew that the legends surrounding Jesus' life were identical with those of the pagan gods. Students of comparative religion recognized their similarity to the traditions of great spiritual Teachers who had preceded Jesus.

The Church now found herself in conflict not only with the *religious* ideas of her self-chosen adversaries, but with their *scientific* views as well. The orthodox Church Fathers declared that God made the world out of nothing. The Gnostic Fathers denied this unphilosophical assertion and held that the universe was the result of a gradual unfoldment from within without. Christianity asserted that the earth was flat, and against this theory was pitted that of Aristarchos of Samos, who had been a member of the Alexandrian School in 280 B.C., and had taught the sphericity of the earth as Pythagoras had taught it before him.

In the fourth century, Science and orthodox Christianity came to a deadlock, the bone of contention being the idea of the sphericity of the earth. Criticizing the ancient theory of the roundness of the earth, Lactantius, one of the most polished rhetoricians among the Christians, indignantly inquired:

"Is it possible that men can be so absurd as to believe that the crops and trees on the other side of the earth hang downward, and that men have their feet higher than their heads? If you ask them how they defend those monstrosities, how things do not fall away from the earth on that side, they reply that the nature of things is such that heavy bodies tend toward the center, like the spokes of a wheel, while light bodies tend from the center to the heavens on all sides. Now I am really at a loss what to say of those, who, when they have once gone wrong, steadily persevere in their folly and defend one absurd opinion by another."

But this statement, although written by a prominent member of their own faith, was objected to by the Christians themselves. When had they ever claimed that there *were* people on the other side of the earth? The Bible stated that the only persons who survived the Flood were the three sons of Noah, and their work was clearly described. Shem had re-populated Asia, Ham had done the same thing for Africa, and Japhet was the ancestor of the European peoples. Therefore, to quote St. Augustine: "It is impossible that there should be inhabitants on the other side of the earth, since no such race is recorded in the Scriptures among the descendants of Adam."

As if that were not enough of an argument to convince any thinking man, St. Augustine offered another which was certainly irrefutable! It would be impossible, he said, for men to be on the other side of the earth, for in that case "in the Day of Judgement, men on the other side of the earth would not be able to see the Lord descending through the air."

By the sixth century, the flatness of the earth had been definitely established by the Christian Church. In his great work, *Christian Topography*, Cosmos Indicopleustes describes the earth as a quadrangular plane, extending four hundred day's journey east and west and exactly half as much north and south. This quadrangular plane he said to be enclosed by mountains, upon which the sky rests. As the mountain on the north is larger than the others, it intercepts the sun's rays and produces night. The plane of the earth is not exactly horizontal, but inclines slightly from the north. Therefore rivers like the Tigris and Euphrates, which run southward, have a rapid motion, while the Nile, which runs northward, naturally moves more slowly.

In addition to the pagan and idolatrous religions of the "heathen" and their absurd scientific views concerning the sphericity of the earth, there were the teachings of the great pagan philosophers which had to be refuted also if the Christian Church were to become the ruling force of the day. The orthodox Fathers devoted all their time and energy to this task. But in spite of their best efforts, the Pagans laughed quietly at Christian ignorance. The Church was in a quandary. How could she continue to refute the pagan doctrines unless she understood the theories she was trying to combat?

In self-defence, the Church decided to adopt new tactics. She would establish a School of her own in Alexandria, the city of Schools. This School would serve two purposes: first, it would enable her to introduce Christianity into this hotbed of heresy; second, it would give the Church Fathers an opportunity to study the pagan doctrines, and thus give a greater appearance of authority to their Refutations. As the Reverend Father Stebbing points out, this School

. . . aimed at using philosophy, especially the speculations of Plato, to serve the cause of the Church, and to answer the objections of pagan philosophers on their own grounds, demonstrating that true philosophy led the way to Christianity and not to Paganism.

Early in the second century, then, a Christian School was established in Alexandria. At first it was a school for children only, located almost at the doors of the Old Museum, from which the majority of Christians, owing to their ignorance of science, art, and philosophy, had hitherto been debarred. Out of this grew the famous Catechitical School. Its first director was Pantænus, a converted Stoic, who was deposed and sent to India as a missionary in the year 191. He was followed by Clement of Alexandria, whose study of Greek and Egyptian philosophy had convinced him that truth could be found even in the heathen systems. But Clement's eclecticism met with no enthusiasm from his superiors, and in the year 203 he was deposed and replaced by his pupil Origen, who was only eighteen years old at the time.

Origen's work for Christianity commenced with a deep and profound study of the Hebrew Scriptures. Dissatisfied with the translations which were then extant, Origen determined to make his own translation. He brought out what is known as the *Hexapala*, or six-fold edition of the Old Testament, in which he set forth, in parallel columns, the various versions of the Scriptures, including his own. In addition to this, he brought out three Greek versions of the Psalms. Some notion of the

magnitude of Origen's work (which occupied twenty-eight years of his life) is gained by an examination of some recently discovered manuscripts. One may be found in the Ambrosian Library in Milan, and another in the collection of palimpsests discovered in Cairo.

Origen's knowledge of the Jewish Scriptures convinced him that the orthodox Church was making a fatal mistake by denying the authenticity of certain documents. He openly rebuked the Church for rejecting the Book of Enoch, which contained the history of the early races of mankind and completely destroyed the Jewish chronology. He also called attention to the *esoteric* doctrines of Moses which the Church had failed to notice. He discovered that Moses, in addition to the teachings of the Covenant, had communicated some very important secrets to the seventy elders, enjoining them to disclose these facts only to the worthy.

Origen's fearless attitude toward the accepted Scriptures of the Christians, as well as his openly-professed interest in Neoplatonism, aroused the wrath of the Patriarch of Alexandria. Origen was banished from the city in the year 232. But his thirty years of study had convinced him of the truth of Neoplatonism, and in the School which he subsequently founded in Caesarea, Origen openly taught the doctrines that he had learned from Ammonius Saccas.

Ammonius, who later became the teacher of both Clement and Origen, received his early education in the children's school which preceded the Catechetical School. He was born in Alexandria about the middle of the second century. His parents were very poor, and the boy was obliged to add his share to the family earnings by working as a porter on the docks located in the Egyptian, or Rhakotis portion of the city. There he saw ships from far-off lands, heard queer dialects and met many strange people. Perhaps he gained his first acquaintance with the philosophies of the East from some Hindu sailor. The Song of Krishna is always on the lips of the son of Hindustan.

The parents of Ammonius were devout Christians, and Ammonius was sent to the Christian School, where he learned about the Christian Christ. He must have heard that Krishna, too, had been immaculately conceived, was persecuted by a wicked King, and had finally died upon a cross. Why were the stories of the two Christs so similar? Could it be possible that both were legends? If that was the case, there must be other legends of Christs in other lands. The priest told him there was only *one* Christ. All the others were impostors. The priest told him to *believe*, but he wanted to *know*. So he left the Christian School, and started out upon his journey of honest investigation.

When he grew older he attended some of the lectures in the pagan schools and eventually became acquainted with the basic ideas underlying all the great philosophies. He pondered over the profound statements that he heard, and often in the night their meaning, it is said, was revealed to him in dreams and visions. In the course of time people began to speak of him as *theodidaktos*, the "god-taught." But Ammonius was a modest man, and called himself merely a *Philalethian*, or lover of truth. He started the Neoplatonic School in Alexandria in the year 193 A.D.

The objects which Ammonius Saccas had in view were the same as those of H. P. Blavatsky in founding the Theosophical Society in 1875. The first of these objects was to form the nucleus of a Universal Brotherhood without distinctions of any kind. Ammonius knew that Brotherhood means *unity* on every plane. He saw that without this idea of unity the entire manifested universe would be an expression of chaos. With unity as a basis, it would appear as an expression of law and order.

The second century of the Christian era was marked by *tolerance*, but not by *unity*. The ancient Wisdom-Religion, which is the only true basis of unity, was now forgotten. The Schools of the Mysteries were gradually dying, and with them the knowledge of the Wisdom-Religion. The various Schools of the *Gnosis* were presenting different aspects of the Wisdom-Religion, but their underlying unity was still unperceived, in spite of Valentinus' efforts to disclose it. Ammonius recognized that religious tolerance was not enough. For even tolerance, without a philosophical basis, soon sinks into apathy. He saw that the only way to establish the brotherhood of religions was to show the identical source from which all of them had sprung; and from that point to explain the diversities. He began by postulating the existence of the ancient Wisdom-Religion, and showed how all religions sprang from that, as the branches of a tree from a common trunk.

Using that One Source as a basis of comparison, Ammonius proved the essential identity of all religions by making his students acquainted with all the different systems of thought. In his School the Vedantic, Zoroastrian and Buddhist systems were studied side by side with the philosophies of Greece. The doctrines of Plato and Pythagoras were compared with the philosophies of the ancient East, the teachings of the Jewish Kabala with those of the ancient Egyptians. This comparative study of the religions and philosophies of all nations accomplished the second of Ammonius' objects, and gave to his School the name of *Eclectic*.

The third object that Ammonius had in view was to make the study of philosophy a living power in the lives of his students. In order to accomplish this he consistently used the method of correspondence and analogy, demonstrating to his students that the myths and legends found in the different systems were but symbolical representations of the experiences through which every soul must pass. Therefore the members of his School were known as *Analogeticists*.

The School of Ammonius Saccas was divided into two sections: exoteric and esoteric. This was merely the continuation of an ancient custom, for all the religious and philosophical schools of the past were divided in the same manner. The Mysteries of every nation consisted of the "lesser" and the "greater." The "lesser" mysteries were given to the public and consisted mainly in ethical teachings. The "greater" mysteries were reserved for the *few*. All of the great Adepts of olden times gave out their *secret* teachings only to those who had pledged themselves to silence. Even the Jews had their *Mercavah*, or outer vehicle, which concealed their highest knowledge. Northern Buddhism has its "greater" and "lesser" vehicle, known as the *Mahayana*, or esoteric, and *Hinayana*, or exoteric School. Pythagoras called his *Gnosis* "the knowledge of things that are", and revealed it only to his pledged disciples. Jesus spoke to the multitudes in parables and kept his secret teachings for the few. Therefore Ammonius, in dividing his own School into two sections, was following the lines of his predecessors.

The Alexandrian Theosophists were divided into three classes: neophytes, initiates and masters. Their Rules were copied from those which had been used in the ancient Mysteries of Orpheus, who, according to Herodotus, had brought them from India. These Rules had come down to the Neoplatonists as their natural inheritance: "What Orpheus delivered in hidden allegories, Pythagoras learned when he was initiated into the Orphic Mysteries, and Plato next received a perfect knowledge of them from Orphic and Pythagorean writings." (*Neoplatonism and Alchemy*, Alexander Wilder.)

The Rules of Orpheus have again descended as a natural inheritance to the Theosophists of the present day. For Orpheus is no other than Arjuna, the disciple of Krishna who went around the world teaching the ancient Wisdom-Religion and establishing the Mysteries. Every time the modern Theosophist reads the *Bhagavad-Gita* he is acquainting himself with the ancient Orphic discipline. The system of Orpheus is one of the strictest morality, and the Orphic concept of duty one of the noblest known to mankind. The philosophical ideas of Orpheus are known to every student of *The Secret Doctrine*. In the Orphic system, the divine Essence is inseparable from whatever *is* in the manifested universe, all forms being concealed from all eternity in it. At determined periods these forms are manifested through the process known as Emanation. All things having proceeded from this divine Essence, all things must of necessity return to it. Innumerable transmigrations or reincarnations and purifications are needed before this final consummation can take place.

The philosophical system of Orpheus was revived in Egypt by Ammonius Saccas. The central idea of the Eclectic Theosophy was that of a single Supreme Essence, Unknown and Unknowable. The system was characterized by three distinct features: first, the theory of this Supreme Essence; second, the doctrine of the human soul, called an emanation of the Supreme Essence and therefore considered to be of the same nature; third, Theurgy, the art of using the divine powers of man to rule the blind forces of nature.

The aim and purpose of Ammonius was to reconcile all sects, peoples and nations under one common faith -- a belief in one Supreme Eternal Unknown and Unnamed Power which governs the universe by immutable and eternal laws. His object was to prove a primitive system of Theosophy, which in the beginning was known alike in all countries; to induce men to lay aside their quarrels and strifes and unite in purpose and thought as the children of one common mother; to purify the ancient religions, now corrupted and obscured, from all dross of human element by expounding their philosophical principles. His chief object was to extract from the various religious teachings, as from a many-stringed instrument, one full and harmonious chord which would find response in every truth-loving heart.

Ammonius Saccas, like many other of the great sages, left nothing in writing. The records of his teachings have come down to us through the works of Plotinus, Porphyry and Iamblicus. In relation to the school founded by Ammonius Saccas, Alexander Wilder writes:

Their doctrines were adopted by pagans and Christians in Asia and Europe, and for a season everything seemed favorable for a general fusion of religious belief. The Emperors Alexander Severus and Julian embraced them. Their predominating influence upon religious ideas excited the jealousy of the Christians in Alexandria. The School was removed to Athens, and finally closed by the Emperor Justinian -- *The Eclectic Philosophy*.