

Hermann Detering

Traces of Indian Philosophy by Basilides

Part 2: Religious Historical Intersections

Translated by Michael Lockwood

1. Platonic background?

As a result of the first part of this investigation, we were able to conclude that Basilides undoubtedly possessed knowledge of Indian philosophy, in particular, the Sāṃkhya. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that his own theology was influenced by it. Their DNA is still being assessed today while almost completely ignoring this possibility, probably, for reasons already mentioned, it is considered an “impossible possibility”. As already indicated in Part I, most scholars have only one answer to the question of the origin of the traditions used by Basilides, and this is Plato!

According to Gerhard May, whose opinion is to be cited as representative of many other theologians, Basilides was “the oldest Christian thinker truly familiar with Platonism that we know”.¹ Reference is made especially to second-century Christian history. Moreover, the middle Platonism “discovered” by Praechter, in 1920, includes, in particular, here and there Aristotelian, Stoic,² Epicurean³ and Pythagorean traditions, or draws the lines of Middle Platonism further towards Neoplatonism. The latter is methodologically not completely accurate. For, even if the parallels in Neoplatonism are used only as

¹ Gerhard May, *Schöpfung aus dem Nichts, Die Entstehung der Lehre von der Creatio ex Nihilo* [Creation from Nothing: The Origin of the Doctrine of Creatio ex Nihilo] (*Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte* 48, Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 2011), 76.

² Gerhard Uhlhorn, *Das Basilidianische System: Mit besonderer Rücksicht auf die Angaben des Hippolytus dargestellt* [The Basilidian System: With Special Regard to the Information Provided by Hippolytus] (Göttingen: Dieterich, 1855), 12.

³Hans Leisegang, *Die Gnosis* (Vol. 32, 5th ed., Kröner’s pocket edition, Stuttgart: Kröner, 1985), 235.

enlightening analogies, one must not forget that Basilides himself already participated in non-Platonic Indian ideas, which is similarly true of Pythagoreanism.⁴

Of course, nothing can be said against the thesis that the views of Basilides may have been influenced by Platonism, provided that this view has been plausibly justified – and that it has come about through arguments with opposing views. This, however, can not be claimed to have happened.

In the book on Basilides by the Heidelberg theologian Winrich Löhr, regarded as a foundational work, not only is there no discussion of the India / Buddhism thesis, even the essay of the most important representative of this position, J. Kennedy's "Buddhist Gnosticism, the System of Basilides", in *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1902), remains unmentioned in the bibliography.⁵ It remains unclear whether Löhr did not address Kennedy's essay because he did not know of it or (which is more likely) he consciously passed over it. In the first case this would indicate a lack of scientific care, in the second, an ignorance for which there is an apt word in German: 'vernagelt' ('obdurate').

Of course, from today's perspective, Kennedy's investigation is in need of much correction and supplementation. A major shortcoming is that his arguments often remain vague and the Buddhist parallels are usually quoted only from the secondary literature. Nevertheless, his essay contains numerous insightful observations, which should be enough reason for today's Basilides researchers to subject the Buddhist thesis to a closer examination.

⁴ Ernst Dassmann and Theodor Klauser, ed., *Vivarium: Festschrift Theodor Klauser zum 90. Geburtstag* [*Vivarium: Festschrift for Theodor Klauser's 90th Birthday*] (Yearbook for Antiquity and Christianity Supplement 11, Münster / Westf: Aschendorff, 1984).

⁵ Peter von Bohlen had already observed in 1830 the close connection between Gnosis and Indian philosophy (Vedas, Sāṃkhya, and Buddhism). In particular, an understanding of the Sāṃkhya philosophy is very important for "throwing light on 'Christian Gnosis'" (159). Later, unfortunately, these clairvoyant words have been forgotten. Peter von Bohlen, *Das alte Indien, mit besonderer Rücksicht auf Ägypten* [*Ancient India, with Special Regard to Egypt*] (Gebrüder Bornträger, 1830).

2. What Basilides taught

Our information about the teaching system of Basilides is quite varied and comes mainly from three different sources: *Irenæus*,⁶ *Hippolytus*, and *Clement of Alexandria*.

1) Irenæus begins his discussion with *cosmogony* or *cosmology*, which was of central importance to Basilides, as well as to most of the other Gnostics. At the top of the hierarchy is the “Unbegotten Father.” From the known pattern of the emanation model, different hypostases are derived from it. First the Nous was begotten, from this the Logos, from the Logos the Phrónēsis, from the Phrónēsis the Sophia and Dynamis, from the Sophia and Dynamis the powers and angels. Basilides is said to have described her as the “first”. They are also the creators of the “first heaven”. In a graduated form follow other angel powers, which in turn are responsible for the creation of new worlds, so that eventually a cosmos of a total of 365 skies was created. As the leader of the lowest angel class, the Basilidians claimed, was the god Abraxas, whose name is based on the number 365.

In order to redeem humanity from its tyranny, the ineffable Father sent the begotten Nous, also called Christ, to earth. According to Irenæus, Basilides claimed that although Christ appeared as a human being, he did not die on the cross. On the contrary, Simon of Cyrene, who had been transformed into his form, carried the cross in his place and suffered death for him; he himself, laughing, stood next to Simon’s figure. His ascension to the Father means salvation for crucified. The souls of the confessors would be saved, but their bodies were a work of demiurgic powers and therefore doomed. Finally, Irenæus mentions the alleged libertinism of the Basilidians, their indifference to the idol sacrifice, their rejection of martyrdom and their magical practices.

It has been noted that Irenæus conceived his heresy lectures according to a very definite scheme: they all “begin with an aeon emanation, then pass on to world and human creation, treat salvation, and exclude remarks about the morality and the morality of the sect their originating lifestyle.”⁷ This pattern – apparently “painted with Valentinian colors”⁸ – was also easily recognizable in the Church Father’s report on the teaching of

⁶ *Adv. Haer.* 1.24, 3-7; It is followed by Pseudo-Tertullian, *Adversus Omnes Hæreses* 1, 5 and Epiphanius, *Panarion* 24 and *Philastrius* 32, *Diversarum Hæreseon Liber* 32.

⁷ Leisegang, *Die Gnosis*, 248.

⁸ Kurt Rudolph, ed., *Gnosis und Gnostizismus* (Darmstadt: Wiss. Buchges., 1975), 331.

Basilides. This suggests the suspicion that Irenæus introduced traits into the system that were originally foreign to him.

2) In fact, there is a second source that gives a very different picture of the teachings of Basilides. It was first discovered, in the 19th century, in the *Refutatio* of the Church Father Hippolytus. Instead of listing various emanations, Hippolytus begins his heresiological presentation with - nothing:⁹ “There was a time,” says Basilides, “there was nothing there; but even nothingness was nothing that existed, but, to say it naked and without any meaning, without any sophistry: there was absolutely nothing there.”¹⁰

It is also worth noting how Basilides, according to Hippolytus, imagined the further course of cosmological development: From the world-name or world-thing (Basilides compares the seed with a mustard-seed or a world-thing), the cosmos develops according to a predetermined immanent order from bottom to top, that is, from the unformed, amorphous depth to God.¹¹ This upward movement of the lighter spiritual forces, which separate themselves from the heavier, material ones in the course of world development, seems, if we may trust Hippolytus, for Basilides and his thinking has been characteristic and permeates his whole system. Here is the fundamental difference to the representation of Irenæus, in which the center of gravity of the cosmological process, according to the model of the Valentinian Aeon theory, lies on the movement from top to bottom.

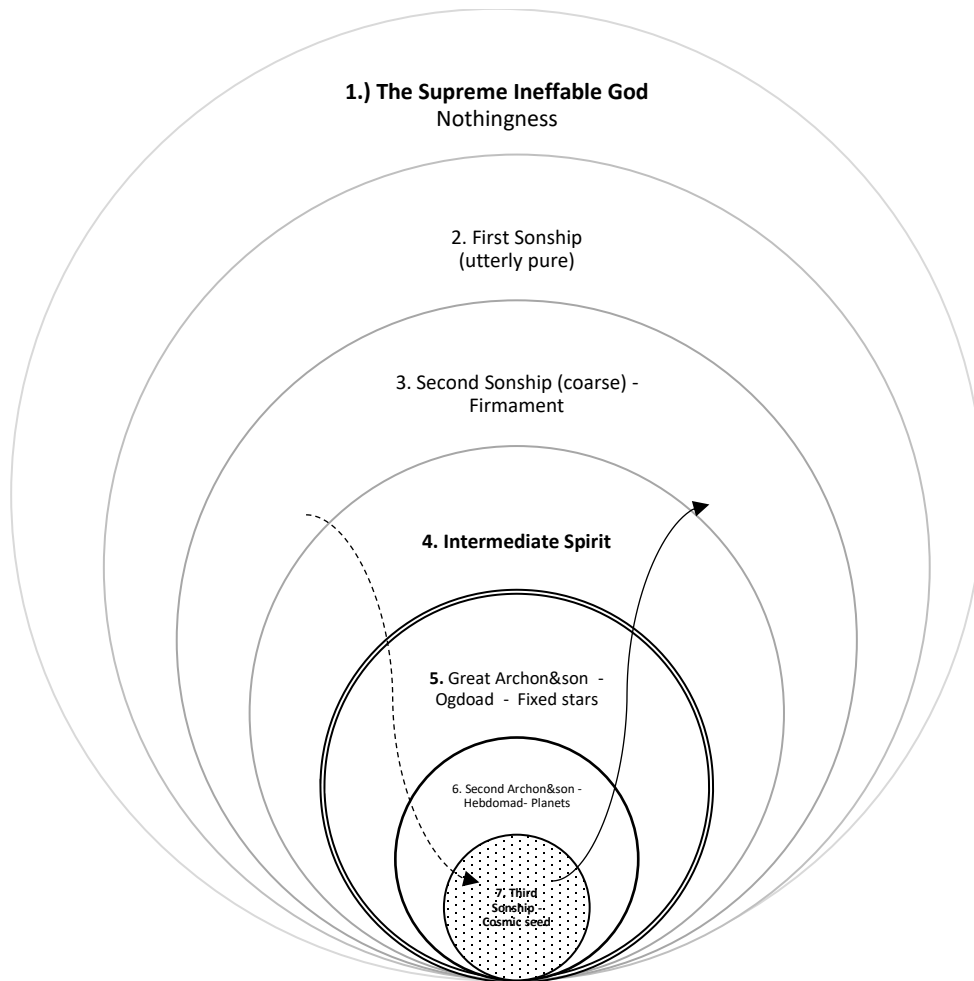
After the disentangling process has begun, the spiritual forces, depending on the degree of their density, find their way back to the “non-existent” Divine, to which every being strives, “because of its exceedingly great beauty and grace.” First of all, these are the first sonships at the head of the spiritual hierarchy, the second being able to do so only with the help of the Holy Spirit or Pneuma, who is left behind by them and now – similar to the Valentinian *horos* – a partition (middle / feasts)) between the Supercosmos and the Cosmos with the third, yet unredeemed Sonship. For its deliverance, the Gospel that stands for Christ is sent to the spheres under the rule of the ruler of the world and his subjects. As good news, it brings knowledge and belief in the supernatural things that the great (world) ruler did not understand” (*Hipp* 7.27.7). After Jesus ascended again to the Father as the first of the “species-separation” of the mixed things (*Hipp* 7.27.8), the

⁹ Uhlhorn, *Das Basilidianische System: Mit Besonderer Rücksicht auf die Angaben des Hippolytus Dargestellt* [The Basilidian System: Illustrated with Particular Reference to the Information of Hippolytus], 5.

¹⁰ Translation here and below, unless otherwise stated, after Leisegang, *Die Gnosis*, 196-256.

¹¹ Antti Marjanen and Petri Luomanen, *A Companion to Second-Century Christian “Heretics”* (The Netherlands: Brill, 2005), 3. *Hipp* VII, 22:16.

other parts of the third sonship follow him. The world process is complete when the disentangling is complete and all spiritual components have moved to their proper places under the first two sons. To put an end to the unruly quest of the creatures, God in His mercy finally opens the veil of ignorance of His creation.



The cosmological system of Basilides

Obviously, the design of the system presented by Hippolytus, which can only be outlined here, and will be presented in more detail below, is significantly different from the heresiological section of Irenæus because of its originality, which is merely a kind of “Gnostic Normal System”.¹² In addition, due to the lack of an Emanation doctrine, lack of syzygies and the lack of dualism, the legitimate question could already be asked here

¹² May, *Schöpfung aus dem Nichts* [Creation out of Nowhere], 64.

whether Basilides should be mentioned together with other Gnostics, since his system seems rather un-Gnostic in many ways, and more like a continuation of “Wisdom” thought.

Further, Hippolytus’ work can be viewed with due skepticism in some places. His view of the heresies and their representatives is mainly distorted by his tendency to convict them as followers of pagan philosophers, *i.e.*, in this case, to make of Basilides a mere imitator of Aristotle.

3) The least “biased” is commonly found in the heresiological testimonies recorded by *Clement of Alexandria*. They are therefore considered the most reliable source by researchers. Unfortunately, the fragments recorded by Clement have the disadvantage that they do not provide a comprehensive view of Basilides’ entire system – they are restricted almost exclusively to anthropological topics. Anyone wishing to get to know the Basilidian system as a whole must therefore rely on supplementation from Irenæus or Hippolytus.

The Basilidian picture from older research has been based for a long time on the writing of Irenæus. Only after the discovery of the *Refutatio* of the Church Father Hippolytus, and its publication in 1851, was there a turning point. Instead of combining Clement’s remarks with those of Irenæus, it has, now, been decided to combine them with those of Hippolytus, considered more authentic. In fact, many particular examples have made it possible to convincingly prove that the correspondences between Clement and Hippolytus are much more numerous than those between Clement and Irenæus.

The consensus in research has only recently been challenged by Winrich A. Löhr. In his monograph *Basilides und seine Schule* [*Basilides and his School*], he has put together the testimonies and fragments of Basilides tradition clearly and critically discussed. He has come to the conclusion that not only Irenæus, but also Hippolytus is a relatively unreliable witness. Thus, Löhr’s Basilides portrait is based more or less exclusively on the notes given by Clement.

A detailed discussion of the correctness or error of one or the other of these standpoints can not be made here. It goes without saying that, according to what has been said, there is a clear tendency to favor Clement. Furthermore, in my opinion, there is much to be said for maintaining the previous consensus and continuing to trust in the reconstruction of the Basilidian system using a combination of the fragments handed down by Hippolytus and Clement. Neither the preference of Irenæus,¹³ which is still represented by individual

¹³ May, *Schöpfung aus dem Nichts* [*Creation out of Nowhere*], 62 ff.

researchers, nor the more or less exclusive limitation to the notes of Clement, with which Löhr has, as it were, trimmed the wings of the Basilidian eagle, seems plausible to me. "It is," as G. May has pointed out, "more likely that the spiritually more significant system goes back to the great teacher himself than to second- or third-generation Basilidians." Also, the likelihood is greater that an originally monistic system would later be dualistically reinterpreted by the disciples of Basilides in the course of a second-century development of wisdom approaches toward a dualistic Gnosis, rather than vice versa.

3. Negative Theology: An Early Christian Theology of Nothingness

"It was when there was nothing¹⁴. . . . There was nothing there, no substance, no simplicity, no compound, no spiritual and no sensible perceptible, no human, no angel, no god and none at all. Things that are called by name or apprehended by sensory perception, or that are mentally perceptible, the non-existent God . . . wanted to create the cosmos."

The sentences with which Hippolytus begins his presentation on the Alexandrian arch-heretic are a theological "bang". At the center of the theology of this remarkable early Christian teacher is the nothing or non-existent God. The radicalism and theological boldness of this statement are hardly exceeded even by later philosophers and theologians. To this day, they are apt to amaze people who have been brought up and raised in the Christian faith, since the Basilidian deity does not want to fit in with the image that we make of the faith of early Christian communities.

With his position, Basilides manifests himself within Western philosophical and theological history, but above all in the history of mysticism, as the representative of a tradition which is called *apophatic*.¹⁵ Apophatic theology teaches, as Marcus S. Torini rightly states, "that one can not prove the Absolute with a name or attribute that is ever

¹⁴ Here I have taken the liberty to deviate from Leisegang. His translation: "Once upon a time, there was nothing there . . ." is not literal and, moreover, it introduces a category that does not fit into the primordial context: "time".

¹⁵ However, in the opinion of G. Scholem, the thought of Basilides has found no continuation. The idea was "in no way systematic and thought out in principle. It represents an exuberant epithet Ormans of its cosmogony." – Gershom Scholem, "Schöpfung aus Nichts und Selbstverschränkung Gottes" [The Unbegottenness and Self-limitation of God], in *Eranos-Jahrbuch*, 1956, 87-119, here 101.

applicable, and that it can only circle in through negation.”¹⁶ It is also possible for Basilides, like later Christian mystics, to conceptualize the Absolute. Against the background of the insight that this is removed from the phenomenal world, he makes use of negative, exclusive statements. This kind of negative-conceptual approach to the Absolute is called *via negationis*. As a pure, absolute nothing, God is not comprehensible conceptually for Basilides. Nevertheless, he is evidently understood not only as a mere negation or as a “shadow of being”, but as a great being above both nonbeing and being. Otherwise it would not be possible for the “Non-Existent” as the creator of the world to become the cause of the creation of the cosmos, admittedly in a very mediated way, not basing the cosmos in itself, but only the *seeds* for its creation (through his word).

Another way of “apophatic speech” is by *via negationis* the so-called *via eminentiæ*. Here, too, the Absolute is circled conceptually, but not by negative, but by “emphatic” determinations. The unutterable is expressed through a series of outrageous statements, not infrequently, as in the case of the mystic writing under the pseudonym of “Dionysius Areopagita,” in an “intoxication . . . heightened superlative”. To this end, phrases such as “the highly-charged *undividedness* of the whole divine unity, in which everything is uniformly brought together and *tightly integrated* and essentially *transcendent*” [*emphases added by HD*], as well as other artificial word creations reaching the limits of grammar and beyond.¹⁷

Occidental philosophy, mysticism, and theology usually oscillate between the two possibilities of apophatic speech, that is, between *via negationis* and *via eminentiæ*. Plotinus prefers negative phrases: “. . . we say what it is not [= the one or the absolute]; what it is, we do not say.”¹⁸ He does not go as far as Basilides, who speaks of the “non-divine God”. Instead, Plotinus calls the One, the Absolute the “not-something”, the “not of all”.¹⁹ On

¹⁶ Marco S. Torini, “Apophatische Theologie und göttliches Nichts: Über Traditionen negativer Begrifflichkeit in der abendländischen und buddhistischen Mystik” [“Apophatic Theology and Divine Non-Existent: On Traditions of Negative Conceptuality in Western and Buddhist Mysticism”], in Christoph Elsas (ed.), *Tradition und Translation. Zum Problem der interkulturellen Übersetzbarkeit religiöser Phänomene* [Tradition and Translation: On the Problem of Intercultural Translatability of Religious Phenomena] (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 1994), 493-520, here 494.

¹⁷ *De Divinis Nominibus*, 13, 3. See Torini, “Apophatische Theologie und göttliches Nichts”, in *Tradition und Translation*, 509.

¹⁸ *Enneads* 5, 3, 14.

¹⁹ *Div. nom.* 1. 5, 593B (116/5 Searchable); Sui Han, *Der Begriff des Nichtseienden bei Plotin* [The Concept of Non-Being in Plotinus] (Research, Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2016).

the other hand, the Plotinian student Porphyry speaks more specifically of the 'Highest Principle' than a $\mu\eta\ \delta\upsilon\nu$, *i.e.*, Non-Being (sentence 26). With Pseudo-Dionysius, the emphatic phrases predominate, but even purely negative formulations abound: the "supernatural" is at the same time the "inalienable," the "super-essential" and the "unknowable", etc. The medieval Mystic Meister Eckehart, in his sermon on the conversion of Paul, calls God a "nothing and a something". For Kern, Eckhart is thus "in the tradition of negative theology, which he radicalizes, yes, even in a certain sense, abolishes" (in the Hegelian sense)."²⁰

It is certainly true that Eckhart is a representative of negative theology, but *after* Basilides there was not much left to "radicalize"; a more radical statement than that of the early Christian arch-heretics about the *God who is "Non-Existent"* is hardly conceivable. Also according to Jacob Böhme, God is

"Neither nature nor creature, what He is, in himself, is neither this nor that, neither high nor deep. "He" is the "Groundless" and the reason of all beings, the Eternal one, since no reason restricts him to "place". *He is nothing to the creature in its own capacity*, and yet He is pervades everything. Nature and Creature is His something, so that "He" is visible, and sensitive, both to eternity and time. . . ."²¹

Mechthild von Magdeburg writes:

"Thou shalt mine *Nicht*
Thou shalt not flee the *Icht*."²²

And the Silesian mystic Angelus Silesius summarizes the sum of his mystical insights in the manner of an Alexandrian verse:

²⁰ Udo Kern, "*Gottes Sein ist mein Leben*", *Philosophische Brocken bei Meister Eckhart* ["God's Being Is My Life", Philosophical Nuggets by Meister Eckhart] (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2012), 148.

²¹ *Theosophische Sendbriefe* [*Theosophical Letters*], Letter 47, 34; Pierre Deghaye, "Jakob Boehme's Theosophy: The Theophany in Eternal Nature", in *Gnosis und Mystik in der Geschichte der Philosophie* [*Gnosis and Mysticism in the History of Philosophy*] (Peter Koslowski, Zurich & Munich: Artemis, *supra*) 151-67, here 155.

²² Mechthild (of Magdeburg), *Offenbarungen der Schwester Mechthild von Magdeburg oder das fließende Licht der Gottheit: aus der einzigen Handschrift des Stiftes Einsiedeln* [*Revelations of the Sister Mechthild of Magdeburg or The Flowing Light of the Deity: From the Only Manuscript of the Stift Einsiedeln*] (Ed. Gallus Morel, Manz, 1869), 24 f. (35).

“Nothing is purer than God, no man grasps in “Him” here or now: the more you try to grasp “Him”, the more “He” evades you.”²³

For all the enjoyment of paradoxes and negatives, the confession of occidental philosophers, mystics, and theologians to Non-Being or a non-existent God sounds, in comparison to Basilides, still somewhat tentative and less radical. Apparently they could not quite overcome the “*horror vacui*” that Western people experience with the thought of “Nothingness”. Western philosophers, as Torini correctly states, usually have “not much of an inclination toward negativity.”²⁴ Nothingness is “rejected in a tacit, deliberate manner”.²⁵ According to the religious scholar Karl Kerényi, such “non-beings” (the non-existent God and the non-existent Creation) is “pure madness for Greek-philosophical thinking.”²⁶

The situation is different in Eastern thought. *Śūnyatā*, i.e., “The Empty” or “Emptiness” plays an important role there, and is a central pillar of Eastern spirituality. The word is not, as in the West, negatively conceived, but has a positive sound and is associated with freedom, independence, infinity, etc.²⁷

The closeness of these Basilidean statements to Buddhism has long been noted. Already in 1856, immediately after the discovery of the *Refutatio* or *Philosophumena*, E. Gundert drew attention to the Buddhist parallels.²⁸ And, of course, the representatives of the

²³ Angelus Silesius, *Des Angelus Silesius Cherubinischer Wandersmann nach der Ausgabe letzter Hand von 1675, vollständig herausgegeben und mit einer Studie “Über den Wert der Mystik für unsere Zeit”* [Des Angelus Silesius Cherubinischer Wandersmann after the last issue of 1675, completely published and with a study “On the Value of Mysticism for Our Time”] (Ed. Wilhelm Bölsche, Jena: Diederichs, 1905), 4 (25).

²⁴ Torini, “Apophatische Theologie und göttliches Nichts” [“Apophatic Theology and Divine Non-Being”], in *Tradition und Translation*, 497.

²⁵ Torini, “Apophatische Theologie und göttliches Nichts” [“Apophatic Theology and Divine Non-Being”], in *Tradition und Translation*, 496.

²⁶ Karl Kerényi, “Das Nichts als Same und Schoß” [“The Nothingness as Seed and Womb”], in *Weltrevolution der Seele* [World Revolution of the Soul] (Gütersloh: Artemis & Winkler, 1991), here II, 788.

²⁷ G. W. Nishijima and Yudo J. Seggelke, *Das Herz des Zen-Buddhismus: Geist, Materie, Handeln, Wirklichkeit, Leben und Zen-Meditation* [The Heart of Zen Buddhism: Spirit, Matter, Acting, Reality, Life, and Zen Meditation] (Berlin, 2015), 15. From the latter: 1. “Lust consists in unlimitedness (Size *bhūman*): in the limited (little) is no desire; only boundlessness is pleasure. Unbundledness (*bhūman*) must therefore be sought to know” *Chāndogya Upanishad* 7, 23, 1.

²⁸ “Buddha thus preached of the wonderful essence of the non-Dadaist: . . . as the Buddha seeks

Theosophical Society also had an early eye on the parallels. George Mead noted that Basilides, in his doctrine of God, “soared beyond even the ideal world of Plato, and ascended to the untranscendable intuition of the Orient. . . .”²⁹ A similar intuition C. G. Jung must have had when he wrote his *Septem Sermones ad Mortuos*, which he wrote in the name of “Basilides in Alexandria”, “the city where the East touches the West.”³⁰ Kennedy, as already mentioned, had picked up this trail and was intent on establishing the systematic evidence which would prove that Basilides thought was connected to Buddhist traditions. Strangely enough, though he has treated central issues in the theology of Basilides, he has neglected some details of Buddhist parallels which could have been used. More recently, Carsten Colpe (“Syncretism and Secularization”, *History of Religions* 17 [Nov. 1977]) and Torini, among others, have studied the relationship between negative theology and Buddhism. Torini writes of Basilides: “Seine Affinität zum Buddhismus ist erstaunlich und schon früh erkannt worden.” [“His affinity to Buddhism is astounding and early on recognized.”]³¹ However, Torini does not give an independent justification for it, but rather refers back to the 1902 essay by Kennedy.

In view of these and other issues, one would expect that theologians, meanwhile, would have examined the connections between Basilides and Buddhism more closely.

That, however, has not happened. At least in Germany, the academic theologian’s guild, tired of maintaining honor, has effectively blocked such insights – or rather, they have not even allowed such issues to be raised. A Platonic origin is said to be the source of the Basilidian tradition. A single quotation may serve to illustrate their justification of the

to explain the creation of the world only from an inconceivable necessity in the chain of causes and effects, since the worship of a divine Creator of the World is in contradiction with a religion which, in the world, sees only misery and vanity. So, for Basilides, it is not the Creator of the concrete world who is the one to be worshiped, but the ‘Non-Existent’, only the non-existent World-Seed, which is without Will – reason and meaning being created from the Non-Existent (following the Buddha: from the *Śūnyatā*.” E. Gundert, “Das System des Gnostikers Basilides”, *Zeitschrift für die gesammte lutherische Theologie und Kirche*, 3rd Quarter Bulletin (1856) 443-485, here 448.

²⁹ G. R. S. Mead, *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten: Some Short Sketches among the Gnostics Mainly of the First Two Centuries – A Contribution to the Study of Christian Origins Based on the Most Recently Recovered Materials* (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1906), 257.

³⁰ Carl G Jung, *Erinnerungen, Träume, Gedanken [Memories, Dreams, Reflections]*, ed. Aniela Jaffé (Ostfildern: Patmos, 2016 [1961]), 389.

³¹ Torini, “Apophatische Theologie und göttliches Nichts” [“Apophatic Theology and Divine Non-Being”], in *Tradition und Translation*, 505.

relationship of the Basilidian statements about the non-existent God with Platonism. It is the short passage quoted by Löhr from the solar equation of the *Republic* (509b):

“The sun, I presume you will say, lends to things visible not only their ability to be seen, but also their generation, growth, and nurture, notwithstanding the fact that the sun, itself, is not generation.” “Of course not.” “In like manner, then, you can say that the objects of knowledge not only receive from the presence of the Good their being known, but also their very existence and essence – though the Good, itself, is not ‘essence’, but still transcends ‘essence’ in dignity and surpassing power” (after P. Shorey, *Plato* [HUP 1937] – ml).

Gerhard May also recognizes in the statements of Basilides “a conscious connection to the well-known statement of Plato in the solar equation of the *Republic*”.³² According to Löhr, an “extreme negative theology . . . can be read as the reception of the relevant Plato passages. . . .”³³

Can that be done?

Probably not. The view that “the ‘Idea of the Good’ extends beyond the being of dignity and power” belongs, strictly speaking, to emphatic speech, not to *via negationis*. This must also be allowed by May: in a footnote he notes: “However, it was not until Plotinus unambiguously formulated the idea that the supreme divine Being, the One, insofar as it is overreaching, is non-existent (Cf. *Enneads* V, 5, 6, 5 ff.; VI 9, 3, 37-39)”. True, but Plotinus is not Plato; The passages from the work of the Neo-Platonists are therefore, apart from the chronological impossibility, also not suitable to substantiate the thesis of a Platonic influence. The same applies to Philo, who knows a number of negative divine predications. Radical exaggerations *à la* Basilides are being sought in vain.³⁴

Still less will one associate the idea first expressed in the *Book of Maccabees* (2 *Macc.* 7:28) that God “did not create everything out of what already exists”, in connection with a “classical formulation of the *creatio ex nihilo*”, the creation out of nothingness, and want to bring it into the present context. In the case of Basilides, the world is not created out of

³² May, *Schöpfung aus dem Nichts* [Creation out of Nowhere], 68.

³³ Winrich Alfried Löhr, *Basilides und seine Schule: Eine Studie zur Theologie- und Kirchengeschichte des zweiten Jahrhunderts* [Basilides and His School: A Study on Theology and Church History of the Second Century] (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 307, A. 83.

³⁴ Torini et al. call the terms (unaccounted), ἀφθαρτος (imperishable), ἀτρεπτος (immutable), ἀόρατος (invisible), ἀπερίγραφος (unlimited), Torini, “Apophatische Theologie und göttliches Nichts” [“Apophatic Theology and Divine Non-Being”], in *Tradition und Translation*, 502.

nothing by the Almighty Creator God, revealing himself in the history of Israel, but the Non-Being God has created a Non-Being Creation.

In fact, the idea in this escalation *before* Basilides can only be found in Hinduism or Buddhism.³⁵ True, in the earliest Upanishad texts the Primeval Being, that is to say Brahman, is described as neither being (*sad*) nor non-being (*asad*) (*na asad, na u sad*). But in later texts the weight shifts in favor of the latter.³⁶ Thus we read in the *Taittirīya-Upanishad*: “Non-being was at the beginning of this world; out of this it is created” (2:7),³⁷ similarly it says in the *Chāndogya-Upanishad* of *Sāmaveda*: “This world was at first non-existent, this [non-existent] became the reality” (3, 19, 1).³⁸

The Buddhist idea of “nothingness” or emptiness, of course, overlaps with that of *nirvāṇa*, except that the line of sight is slightly different. While the nothingness in the first case is considered more from the point of view of primordality, in the second it is more from the point of view of eschatological completion, as seen in the following section, a classical text of negative theology:

“It is, monks, that kingdom, where Earth is still not water, not fire nor air, not infinite space, where it is still the infinite realm of consciousness, not the realm of non-earthliness, nor the realm of perception and non-perception, not this world nor any other world. That, monks, I call neither coming nor going nor standing nor passing nor arising. Without base, without beginning, without foundation is that; that is the end of suffering.”³⁹

³⁵ However, other Gnostic texts (before, during, or after Basilides?) also know a negative theology, e.g., the Sethian *Apocryphon of John*: “He is not something that exists at all, but he is something superior to them, not because he is superior, but (p. 25) in that he is himself” (p. 25), *Bhagavad-Gītā*, 2, see. Nag Hammadi Codex] II, 1; III, 1; IV, 1 – Hans-Martin Schenke, Ursula Ulrike Kaiser, and Hans-Gebhard Bethge, eds., Nag Hammadi German: Studienausgabe; NHC I-XIII, Codex Berolinensis 1 and 4, Codex Tchacos 3 and 4, 3rd ed. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013), 80.

³⁶ Besides, *Rigveda* 10, 72, 2-3; *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, 6, 1, 1; and *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa*, 2, 2, 9

³⁷ Paul Deussen, *Sechzig Upanishad's des Veda: Aus dem Sanskrit übersetzt und mit Einleitungen und Anmerkungen versehen* [Sixty Upanishads of the Veda: Translated from Sanskrit with Introductions and Annotations] (3rd edition, Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1921), 231.

³⁸ Deussen, *Sechzig Upanishad's des Veda* [Sixty Upanishads of the Veda], 116.

³⁹ *Udāna* VIII, 17, Seidenstücker, 1, *Pāli-Buddhismus* (Leipzig 1911/1923), 129, Gustav Mensching, *Buddhistische Geisteswelt* [Buddhist Spiritual World] (Lizenzausg., Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Lesering, 1955), 210.

Against tendencies to put the non-existent at the beginning and to identify it with Brahman, the commentator turns with a polemical swipe:

“Being only, O dearer, this was at the beginning, one only and without second. To be sure, some say that not having been this in the beginning, one only and without second; out of this non-being, beings were born. But how could it be so, O dear one? How could beings be born out of non-beings? Therefore, rather, O dear one, was this at the beginning, one only and without second.”⁴⁰

The teachings (which seemingly contradict the Buddhist renunciation of deciding metaphysical questions) are nevertheless considered by later authors to be genuinely Buddhist. For the Indian philosopher Vācaspatimiśra it is clear: “According to the view of the Buddhists, the entity emerges from the non-existent. . . .”⁴¹

We do not need to continue the list of parallel passages. The idea of the absolute as a non-existent is undoubtedly of Indian origin. As far as I know, this has never been contested by anyone. It seems all the more strange that from today’s Basilides researchers no one has yet felt obliged to pursue the decisive reference to a connection between the Buddhist theory and the views of the Alexandrian arch-heretic.

Along with the previous considerations, there is another important observation which should not go unmentioned. The advance of the idea of a “non-existent” Absolute, in the metaphysics and mysticism of the West, typical of certain eastern schools of thought, is closely related to the history of the number zero. It is known that this also comes from India and was unknown in Europe for a long time, until it was introduced to Western mathematics, in the 12th century, by the Italian Leonardo Fibonacci.

Previously, the Arabs, who conquered India on their way to the East, had already become acquainted with the Indian numerical system and found it so good that they accepted it without further ado. The falsely so-called “Arabic” numerals, which were in truth derived from the Indian language, belonged to it – and to it belonged the zero, which until then had been as unknown in the Oriental world as in Greece and Rome.⁴²

⁴⁰ *Indische Philosophie: Die Geheimlehre des Veda Indian Philosophy [The Secret Doctrine of the Veda]*, 97.

⁴¹ Richard Garbe, *Die Sāṃkhya-Philosophie: Eine Darstellung des indischen Rationalismus [The Sāṃkhya Philosophy: A Representation of Indian Rationalism]* (Leipzig: Haessel Verlag, 1917), 24, 263 f.

⁴² Possibly, with the exception of Egypt, which has always had closer ties with India. In the hieroglyph [. . .] (“nothing”) found on a second-century temple inscription, there is an indication that the zero, in Egypt, was not unknown.

In Europe, the resistance to the introduction of the new numbering system was initially considerable. That the church in the 17th century had the coffin of Pope Sylvester II open to see if the coffin of the pope, who was supposed to be one of the first Europeans to be initiated into the secrets of the number zero, was the devil is probably a legend. It is true, however, that the church was facing the new number with great distrust. Zero was the symbol of nothingness, and that thought was as dangerous as the mysteriously connected thought of infinity. Speculation about cosmic “voids”, about an infinite universe, and a multitude of worlds, as represented by some of the philosophers and theologians of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, was resisted by the Church and rigorously rejected.

Nicholas of Kues (Cusanus), influenced by Meister Eckehart and the Neoplatonists, escaped the Inquisition only because he had become unassailable due to his high ecclesiastical position.

The basic reason for the Church’s rejection of the number zero was due to the fact that the doctrine of the church had been developing a close connection with the (rediscovered) philosophy of Aristotle. In his philosophy, however, zero was only a “nothingness” or “emptiness”. The Aristotelian cosmos knew no vacuum: “*Natura abhorat vacuum*” (“Nature abhors a vacuum”). This sentence, which had originally referred to the rejection of the Epicurean atomic doctrine, had become a dogma of the Church, from which it has only liberated itself in modern times.

Aristotle was by no means the only Greek philosopher who could not reconcile himself to the idea of pure “nothingness” or “emptiness”. The idea did not fit in with Greek thought, which, unlike that of the Indians, was less of a processual than of a substantial-substance category and had found its mathematical equivalent in geometry, so to speak.⁴³ Significantly, Plato, as we have already noted, also used the Designation of the absolute not negative, but only emphatic speech.

⁴³ A classic expression of this can also be found in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, whose Hellenistic colored mysticism has not overcome the substantial thinking: “For the non-being he [God] beyond did not allow, but everything arises from the being and not the non-existent. For the non-being does not have the nature of being able to become something, but only of not being able to become, and on the contrary, beings do not have the nature of never being” (*Corp.* 2:13). – Charles Soife: “The Greek universe, created by Pythagoras, Aristotle, and Ptolemy, survived long after the collapse of Greek civilization. In that universe there is no such thing as nothing. There is no zero” – a quotation from Soife’s book, *Zero: The Biography of a Dangerous Idea* (Penguin Books, 2000), 25.

Unlike in the West, zero has a long history in Indian mathematics, which, as we know today, dates back to 300 BC. Perhaps even further back.⁴⁴ There is a natural connection between Eastern philosophy and zero. Conceptually, both belonged together. The sign of the number zero, the empty circle, is at the same time the Indian symbol of the void (*śūnya*). Ultimately, the decision on whether to start the series with a one or with the invisible zero was a philosophical or metaphysical one. Where, through philosophical contemplation, one had realized the fullness in the emptiness, the origin in the nothingness, one could dare to accept the mathematical step before the one, and set the beginning with the nothing, the zero, the emptiness:

“The word ‘*śūnya*’, which means emptiness as a Buddhist term, also means zero in the mathematical domain. Although this is not a ‘size’, it has multiple crucial functions in mathematical operations. This is how the term ‘emptiness’ functions in the realm of existence.”⁴⁵

Back to the “non-existent God” of Basilides. For metaphysics and mysticism, οὐκ ὄν θεός means nothing other than zero for mathematics. The metaphysical nothing and the mathematical zero belong together like Siamese twins. Both have grown on the same spiritual ground. Both are non-Greek and thus “non-occidental”, they are Indian.⁴⁶

Ideas like these were common in the world outside of India. One could meet them where there were Hindu or Buddhist Diaspora communities, e.g. in the cosmopolitan milieu of Alexandria, “where the East touches the West”. We may assume that the Alexandrian arch-heretic met his οὐκ ὄν θεός here.

All that remains to be noted is that similar ideas occur in other Gnostics, though not in the same way as in Basilides. The Gnostic Markos refers to the “father who has no father”, corresponding to the Basilidian οὐκ ὄν θεός, as ἀνοῦσιος (Irenæus *Adversus Hæreses*

⁴⁴ Norbert Lossau, “Die Zahl Null ist älter als gedacht” [“The Number Zero is Older than Expected”], *Welt: Digital Zeitung* [*Welt: Digital Newspaper*], September 16, 2017.

⁴⁵ Shizuteru Ueda, “Emptiness and Abundance. Shūnyatā in Mahāyāna Buddhism”, in *Unity and Diversity* (eds. Adolf Portmann and Rudolf Ritsema, Brill, 1980) 135-63, here 163.

⁴⁶ Still worth considering are Spengler’s remarks on the “meaning of the numbers”: Only in India could “the great conception of Nothing emerge as a real number, the zero”, “and as Indian zero, for the essential and essentially without externality Designations are.” Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes: Umriss einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte* [*The Downfall of the Occident: Outlines of a Morphology of World History*] (Unabridged Special Edition in one Vol.; Beck’s Special Editions, Munich: C. H. Beck, 1980), 89.

14.1).⁴⁷ Norbert Brox has translated that to “the Unbecoming”, but it is equally possible, of course Jacobi’s translation “the non-existent”.⁴⁸ Ernst Kuhn was rightly reminded of “Indian speculations about om and similar things.”⁴⁹ Irenæus links Gnostic speculation to Epicurean atomic doctrine (Iren. *Hær.* 2: 14, 3).

The Fathers of the Church may be forgiven for recourse to classical Greek philosophy; they did not know any better. In today’s theologians, the one-sided fixation on Greek philosophy as the sole key to explanation is simply unforgivable.

4. The non-existent Cosmos

“Basilides says there is a non-existent God who has made a non-existent World out of non-beings.”

One might be tempted to put the quoted sentence on the Hippolytus account and see in it a caricature with which the church father wanted to expose the alleged nonsense of the Alexandrian arch-heretics. However, as May has shown, the proposition could also be understood without such an assumption, namely, if the term “non-existent” is understood to mean the “potentiality of the not yet realized”⁵⁰ – in contrast to (so-called because of its “being transcendence”) “non-existent” God.⁵¹

But there is another explanation: for Basilides, this World is non-existent. Not in the sense that it is the supreme God who – here May is right – is called “non-existent” because of his “transcendence of being”, but in the same sense as Buddhism this world is called “Illusion” and considered mere “Appearance”, *Māyā*.⁵² Vedic literature, too, contains countless passages in which the cosmos is qualified as an illusionary “reality”.

⁴⁷ “Ὁ ἀνευνόητος καὶ ἀνούσιος, ὁ μήτε ἄρρην μήτε θῆλυ.”

⁴⁸ Justus Ludwig Jacobi, “Gnosis”, in *Real-Enzyklopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche* (eds. Johann Jakob Herzog, Vol. 5, 2nd ed., Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1879) 204-247, here 228. Jacobi speaks of the “The most abstract name of the non-existent (ἀνούσιος)”.

⁴⁹ Albrecht Weber, *Guru Pūjā Kaumudī* (Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1896), 118, note 3.

⁵⁰ Through the word, only the “world-seed” is created.

⁵¹ “. . . a caricature claim of Hippolytus or his original” – May, *Schöpfung aus dem Nichts: Die Entstehung der Lehre von der Creatio ex Nihilo* [Creation out of Nothing: The Emergence of the Doctrine of Creatio ex Nihilo], 72.

⁵² This was recognized early, see e.g. Bernhard Joseph Hilgers, *Kritische Darstellung der Häresen und der orthodoxen dogmatischen Hauptrichtungen in ihrer genetischen Bildung und Entwicklung, vom Standpunkte des Katholicismus aus* [Critical Presentation of the Heresies and Orthodox Dogmatic

5. Double negation

Upon the “theological bang”, the determination of nothingness that was at the beginning, the Alexandrian arch-heretic lets follow an impressive intellectual “drum roll”:

“But when I uttered the word ‘It was,’ I do not mean ‘it was there,’ but I speak so to express what I want to make clear, that there was absolutely nothing there. For it is not simply inexpressible what is called that – we call it unutterable, but it is not unutterable; but what is not unspeakable, may not even be called ineffable, but it is sublime about any naming with a name.”

Obviously, Basilides wants to dispel a misunderstanding that might mislead his thesis that in the beginning it was nothingness. He wants to correct the idea that usually arises at the thought of nothingness. Ἦν . . . ποτὲ ὅτε ἦν οὐδὲν is by no means to mean, according to Basilides, that this nothingness was “there”, just as any being could have “been there” if it had only existed. If it were the nothing that the reader, accustomed to the categories of substantial thinking, understands by it, *i.e.*, the mere absence of something, this nothingness would still not be what Basilides meant. The “nothing” of which Basilides speaks can not be “there”.

By excluding, even verbally, every (negative) substantial idea of nothingness, Basilides makes use of the thought-figure of the *double negation* which is often used by the representatives of apophatic speech. Hans Leisegang speaks of the “method of the true mystic who, by negating all the qualities resulting from the sense-perceptible world, tries to penetrate to the opposite pole of the phenomenal world, to God himself, until he silently stops before the pure, unsubstantiated and nameless nothing.”⁵³

I would like to say that this is still a method practiced by representatives of Buddhism to this day. The double negation is the Japanese philosopher Shizuteru Ueda:

“Now Buddhist nothingness, a nothingness that dissolves all substance thinking, must not be recorded as nothingness, not for a kind of substance, for minus substance so to speak, *i.e.*, to be held for a nihilum. It is about the dematerializing movement of absolute nothingness, about the nothingness of nothingness, or in a philosophical term about the negation of negation, and indeed about a pure movement of nothing in a coherent double direction. Namely, first, as a negation of negation in the sense of

Main Directions in their Genetic Formation and Development, from the Point of View of Catholicism] (Habicht, 1837), 90.

⁵³ Leisegang, *The Gnosis*, 213

the further negation of negation, without reversing to affirmation, far into the infinitely open nothingness, and secondly, as the negation of negation in the sense of conversion to affirmation without any trace of mediation. . . So happens in this nothingness as the nothingness of nothingness, a basic purpose and a complete conversion like in, die and/or, 'death and resurrection'."

With his statements, Basilides proves to be a highly reflective theologian and equipped with extreme language sensitivity. One can only regret that his writings were almost completely destroyed by the thorough work of the church inquisitors. The surviving writings of the so-called Apostolic Fathers or Church Fathers of the 2.-3. Century are a miserable replacement. They document the miserable state of a church theology which, if not for historical reasons, let alone theological ones, would have been gladly dispensed with. One would gladly exchange one hundred pages of Justin for a single authentic page of the Alexandrian arch-heretics.

6. "Without will, without thinking, without feeling"

Basilides gives another taste of his reflective abilities:

"Since there was nothing there, . . . the non-existent God . . . who wants without thought, without feeling, without will, without determination, without suffering, and without desire, creates a cosmos. The words are, 'he wants' but I only spout out to have any expression at all; in fact, it happens without will, without thought, without feeling."

The whole process of creation took place according to the expressions of Basilides, that is, "without will, without thought, without feeling", but – and here lies a certain contradiction⁵⁴ – through the "word". "Thus, the non-existent God created a not yet existing Cosmos. . . ."

Noteworthy are two things. At one point, the theological system of Basilides – in contrast to the portrayal of Irenæus – proves at this point to be a thoroughly monistic one, which is particularly evident in the fact that nowhere is there talk of matter as a wicked, God-opposed power.

On the other hand, the decided denial of the existence of a divine Creative Will must be noticed. The expression "he wanted", ἠθέλησε, according to Basilides is only for the sake

⁵⁴ Werner Foerster, "Das System des Basilides", *New Testament Studies* 9/3 (1963) 233-55, here 237.

of comprehension, or to “give a sign” (σημασίας χάρις), and is thus, as in the case of non-beings, used only in an improper sense, since it is apparently not possible, according to Basilides’ opinion, to attribute a will to the non-being in the act of creation. This pattern of reasoning corresponds to another statement quoted by Clement, according to which Basilides is said to have spoken of the will of God only with reservation as a “so-called” will.⁵⁵

The fact that this thought was obviously very important to Basilides is also evident from the fact that he immediately repeats it. In total, 8 (!) times. Adverbs are needed to exclude a conscious creative action on the part of the “non-heir”: the cosmos emerged rather “without thought (ἀνοήτως), without feeling (ἀναισθητήτως), without counsel (ἀβουλήτως), without plan (ἀπροαιρέτως), without passion (ἀπαθῶς), without desire (ἀνεπιθυμήτως) “and” without will (ἀθελήτως), without thought (ἀνοήτως), without feeling (ἀναισθητήτως)”.

Basilides does not give an explicit explanation for why he excludes a conscious divine action. From related views, which resulted from the idea of the transcendence and immutability of God and finally led to the assumption of a “creative mediator” (Philo of Alexandria), those of Basilides differ once again by their radicality. In such a pointed way, God’s willful act of creation – at least in Greek philosophy – has not yet been denied to Basilides.

There is a difference in Indian philosophy, in the Sāṃkhya school. In the *Sāṃkhyakārikā*, the oldest extant writing of that school, which is attributed to its founder Kapila, the following illustration, already quoted in the first part of the essay, can be found:

“Just as the emanation (*pravṛtti*) of the unconscious milk is the cause of the growth of the calf, so the activity (*pravṛtti*) of matter is the motive for the salvation of the souls.”

The passage is intended to justify why unconscious matter, through its movement, has become the cause of both creation and redemption, while the mind takes on an entirely passive, static role. In a later commentary by the Indian philosopher Vācaspatimiśra (10th c.), The author goes into more detail about what the image of the milk flowing from the udder means with regard to the participation or non-participation of a divine creative spirit: any conscious action, according to the philosopher Vācaspatimiśra, is invariably conditioned either by a selfish purpose or by kindness.” But since, on Basilides’ view, these two motives were excluded in the creation of the world, their exclusion also made it impossible to assume that the creation of the world was based on conscious action. A

⁵⁵ Clement Alex., *Stromata*, IV 86, 1.

God whose wishes are all fulfilled could have had no interest in the creation of the world. But not only the possibility of a selfish purpose, God's goodness too is excluded as the cause of creation. If humankind had been created, a benevolent God would have spared them suffering.⁵⁶

As we have already seen, in Sāṃkhya, the mind (Puruṣa) is exclusively considered a non-acting "observer", all activity is based on matter (Prakṛti). As a result, creation can not be traced back to a conscious act of creation, especially since egoism or goodness are eliminated as a motive for creation.

Because of his determined denial of the will to create, it can be surmised that Basilides reacts to the contrary assertion, that is, against the assumption that the *Logos*, = *Vāc*, was created because of the divine desire, that creation is therefore based on a defect in God. This position was also represented in Vedic literature.⁵⁷

Later philosophy and mysticism did not always capture the peculiar idea of the cosmos that emerged out of the nothingness of the Deity, "thoughtlessly", "unfeelingly", "without will", etc. Especially in German mysticism, there prevailed a more voluntaristic view. For Jacob Böhme, the absolute, *i.e.*, the "Ungrund" (= the Basilidian "Non-Existent"), "the Nothing and All, and is a certain Will, because of which the world and the whole creation exist."⁵⁸

For Arthur Schopenhauer, who was a major representative of voluntaristic metaphysics, the blind, unknowing will is known to be a cosmic principle. At the same time, however, Schopenhauer could also say: "All will springs from necessity, that is, from want, that is, from suffering." The question of how the will arises from the depths of a needless unconsciousness remains unclear here.

Relatively authentically, the Jewish Kabbalah preserved the idea suggested by Basilides of the world-creation not intended by God or the Non-Existent. According to the view of

⁵⁶ Garbe, *The Sāṃkhya Philosophy*, 254 f. Richard Garbe, *The Moonlight of the Sāṃkhya Truth, Vācaspati-miçra's Sāṃkhya-tattva-hardlyudī: in German translation, together with an introduction to the age and origin of the Sāṃkhya Philosophy* (Verlag der Akademie: Munich, 1891), 100 f.

⁵⁷ Bṛhadāraṇyaka Up. I.2.4: "But he [Ātman] had no joy; as one has no joy when he is alone. He coveted a second one." See N. Kazanas, "Greek *Logos* and Vedic *Vāc*: creative power", *Scribd, supra*, 6, < <https://www.scribd.com/document/269296367/Greek-Logos-and-Vedic-Vac> >. – Hilgers, *Kritische Darstellung der Häresen . . .* [*Critical Presentation of the Heresies . . .*], 90.

⁵⁸ G. W. 1: 3; see. Christian Steineck, *Grundstrukturen mystischen Denkens* [*Basic Structures of Mystical Thought*] (Königshausen & Neumann, 2000), 155.

the Jewish Kabbalist Azriel of Gerona, which was referred to by Graetz, that “*God neither wills, nor intends, nor thinks, nor acts [emphasis added]* is settled: . . . God could not have wanted or intended the creation of the world; for wanting betrays the imperfection of wanting. . . .”⁵⁹

So, since the will of an imperfection of wanting arises – whereas God is perfect – he can not have wanted the creation. In other words, this is the same idea we have already met in the Indian commentary of Vācaspatimiśra.

Graetz, of course, does not seek the source for this elevated view of God in medieval Kabbalism from Sāṃkhya philosophy or from Alexandrian Gnosticism, but rather in the Neoplatonic philosophy of Plotinus, in which “*God is himself above Being, the power of the Spirit, and is beyond knowledge*”. In fact, at the beginning of the Fifth Ennead, Plotinus argues that there is no direct contact between God and matter, as it is completely unjustifiable that God could desire or do anything – because he is perfect and at rest. Creation does not spring from an act of will, but from God’s overabundance, his overflowing nature.

Reference to Plotinus, of course, was always close to the ancient philologists of the 19th and 20th centuries. But apart from the fact that the agreement is only very general, one would have to ask what sources Plotinus was basing his conception on. Certain kinship relations between the teachings of the native Egyptian Neoplatonism and Indian philosophy have always been observed.⁶⁰ It is quite possible – even probable – that both Plotinus and Basilides, received substantial input to their doctrines from the Indo-Buddhist communities in Alexandria.

In general, there are a number of striking parallels between the Kabbalistic and Indian Buddhist worlds of ideas. What is nothingness or emptiness in the latter is for the Kabbalist the *Ein-Sof*, i.e., that which is “*an infinite, unlimited, absolutely identical with itself, in itself absolutely identical, in itself self-attributeless being, without will, intention, desire, thought, word, and deed*” [emphasis added]⁶¹ Literally, the Hebrew term “no end”,

⁵⁹ Heinrich Graetz, ed., *Geschichte der Juden: von den ältesten Zeiten bis zur Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts* [*History of the Jews: from the earliest times to the middle of the 19th century*] (Electronic Resource, Digitale Bibliothek 44, Berlin: Directmedia Publ, 2002), 7, 393.

⁶⁰ See also the first part of the essay.

⁶¹ Adolph Jellinek, *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Kabbala* [*Contributions to the History of Kabbalah*] (Leipzig: Fritzsche, 1852), 62.

that is, the limitless, the infinite,⁶² means an aspect that can also be attributed to the Indian concept of *Śūnyatā*. As with the Buddhists and Basilides, creation in the Kabbalah arises out of primordial nothingness (*Ajin Gamur*). The creative forces acting as mediators between the *Ur-Non-Being* (*'Ajin Gamur'*) and the Cosmos are called *Sefirot*. Unlike Basilides (after the portrayal of Hippolytus), the cosmos or its germ, according to the Kabbalists, is not created by the word, but by emanations.

Although the relationships between Buddhism and Kabbalah are common, they have been treated by researchers so far in a very stepmotherly fashion. Even with the well-known Kabbalan researcher Gershom Scholem, his references to Indian Buddhist sources are rare. Of course, one could also explain the parallels by the fact that expressions of mysticism are similar in all times and cultures. In this case, however, there are nameable sources and distinct relationships. This form of mysticism has a concrete origin – and that lies in India.

7. Magnet and Indian Naphtha

With the denial of a divine creative *will*, Basilides drew the most radical consequence from his conception of the completely attribute-free, absolutely transcendent, non-existent God. The negative determinations arose casually from a system in whose cosmos everything develops from *the bottom to the top*, and in which all movement is the *upward movement* of creation striving for the supra-cosmic God, freed from the shackles of creatureliness and attachments of matter (7.25.5.1). By contrast, the supra-cosmic God remains passive during the process of creation or restitution. There is no divine will involved in creation. And salvation, too, basically happens without direct divine intervention. Wherever he does happen, Basilides uses paradoxical phrases for this. An assertion just made is immediately revised again in the aftermath. From the arrival of the Gospel it says: “It really came – although nothing came down from above” (ἦλθε δὲ οὐτως, καίπερ οὐδὲν κατήλθεν ἄνωθεν). The blessed sons did not divorce themselves from the unbelievable and blessed, non-existent God, but instead the forces “like the Indian Naphtha”, which attracts the fire from far away, have climbed up from the formless heap to the sonship.

⁶² סוף אין = *ēyn sōf*

A similar idea is also based on the description of Saint Pneuma, which, “like the ointment on the head”, “flows down into the beard of Aaron” (*Psalm 132:2*).⁶³

“The ointment is the fragrance that descended from the Holy Spirit above to our shapelessness and our far distance, from where sonship ascended, as though carried on the wings of an eagle and on its back. Everything strives from the bottom to the height, from the worse to the better; nothing that is in the better things is so foolish that it descends.”

Whether fragrance or naphtha, both – also used by other Gnostics – pictures are meant to express that the supra-cosmic divine forces by their mere being in the forces below the “festivals” trigger an upward movement, without getting themselves into motion. On the one hand, their attraction initiates the process of creation, on the other hand it sets in motion the *segregation* that is decisive for salvation. The Absolute itself remains free, according to Hölderlin, “in silent eternal clarity”. It resembles the self-contained being of Parmenides or even the unmoved mover of Aristotle.⁶⁴

Basilides, however, did not extract Parmenides from the individual motives for this concept, nor did he, despite Hippolytus, claim this – Aristotle, but quite obviously the Indian *Sāṃkhya*, whose basic principles were not unknown to the Alexandrian arch-heretic, as we have already demonstrated in the first part of the essay. Just as in *Sāṃkhya* the process of creation is triggered by the imbalance of the various *Guṇas*: *Sattva*, *Rajas* and *Tamas*, even in Basilides the real world – after the foundation of the universal name – first arises through “expansion and separation” (7.21.2) of the various cosmic ones and cosmic powers (= the three sonships) who are not (yet) in their intended places. As the three *Guṇas* are distinguished by their subtle quality – *Sattva* embodies purity and clarity, *Rajas* movement, energy, passion, *Tamas* laziness, darkness, heaviness – even with Basilides the three sonships are different: “Part of this tripartite sonship was very light, the other heavy, the third in need of purification” (7.22). Just as the world process in the *Sāṃkhya* system has come to its equilibrium and thus its end by the reabsorption of the *Guṇas*, according to Basilides, the unruly strivings of nature have only ended when the

⁶³ The fragrance / ointment motif is found frequently in Gnostic texts, see *Hipp* 5:19 (Sethianer), *EV* [*Evangelium Veritatis*] (Nag-Hammadi-Codex I / 3) p. 34: 1 *et seq*; *TractTrip* [*Tractatus Tripartitus*] (NHC I/3) p. 72:1; *EvPhil* [*Evangelium Philippi*] (NHC II/3) p. 1:111; *Dial* [*Dialog des Erlösers*] (NHC III / 5) p. 133: 1; *ParSem* [*Paraphrase des Sêem*] (NHC VII / 1) 25:1; 35:1.

⁶⁴ Also in the case of the Perataë, a clear distinction is made between the “immovable father” and the moving son, the Logos-serpent, *Hipp Ref* 5:17.

sons have reached their goal and the powers of the cosmos which are theirs have found a suitable place.

It is also always about keeping the Absolute (here the “Non-Existent”, there the individual souls) out of the movement of the cosmos and limiting its role to that of the mere initiator, which is almost saying too much. The *Puruṣa* is, as we have noted in the first part of the essay, merely the “soul witness, isolated, neutral, onlooker, and non-actor”; Garbe states: “. . . this stimulation [is] not conscious” – or, as one might add, it is “without thought, without sensation, without counsel, without plan, without passion, without desire, without will, without feeling” –, “but a mechanical one that is more often compared to the influence of the magnet on the iron it attracts.”⁶⁵

Apart from the comparison with the magnet quoted by Garbe, the philosophers of *Sāṃkhya* used a number of other images to illustrate their conception of the relation of mind to matter or vice versa; some have already been mentioned: the image of the unconscious outflow of milk from the udder, as well as the reference to a Lord-servant relationship, or the dancer who shows that all movement proceeds from matter (= *Prakṛti*), not from the mind (= *Puruṣa*) whose “activity” is limited to attracting matter through its mere existence.

The comparison with the Indian ‘*Naphtha*’ used by Basilides also says otherwise: “Just as the Indian *naphtha* (νάφθαν τὸν Ἰνδικόν) draws fire from far away, from below the formless heap penetrates the forces to the sonship.” An example of the image chosen by Basilides can be clearly seen in the structural proximity of his conception of *Sāṃkhya*.

Incidentally, the same comparison is also found in Hippolytus’ paper on the Sethians (5.20) and Peratae (5.17), where he is used there in one breath the image of the *magnet*, which is well known from *Sāṃkhya* philosophy. From the Logos, the serpent, which according to the Peratae is located between the cosmic and supra-cosmic world and turns to the immobile (!) Father, sometimes to the moving (!) Matter, is said to “bring over” the souls awakened from sleep”,

namely “how the *naphtha* attracts the fire from all sides, and even more, how the magnet [attracts] the iron and nothing else, or how the beak of the sea eagle [extracts] the gold and nothing else, or as the chaff is attracted to amber, the serpent appropriates the distinct, perfect, consubstantial lineage of the world, but nothing else than that which was brought down from it.”

The relationship between this conception and that of *Sāṃkhya* is evident.

⁶⁵ Garbe, *Die Sāṃkhya-Philosophie*, 287.

The crucial differences between Basilides and Sāṃkhya are also clearly evident. For one thing, the Absolute in Basilides is not the sum of individual souls, but the “Non-Existent”. On the other hand, Basilides thinks monistically and, unlike the Sāṃkhya philosophy, does not proceed from two ever-existing, opposing dualities. As a result, a certain ambiguity or inconsistency comes into his paradigm. While the world process in Sāṃkhya comes about only through the force of attraction of a supra-cosmic force and the resulting shock and movement of the three *Guṇas*, Basilides can not but postulate a kind of “prelude”: the Word that emerges from the Non-Existent. The question of how the “Word” became the cause of the universal name without the conscious will and intention of the Non-Existent remains unexplained.

The differences between the Basilidian system and that of Valentinus are also clear. In his cosmology, Valentinus, within the framework of the Emanation model, thinks of a gradual “outflow” of lower entities from the higher, resulting in a movement from top to bottom. On the other hand, as we have seen, the Basilidian cosmos is characterized by a marked upward movement of the higher forces that are moving upwards from the seed mixture.

But this is also what has escaped Löhr, May, and other proponents of a Platonic background, the essential difference [of Basilidianism] to Platonism and Neo-Platonism. The Emanation doctrine of Valentinus is much closer to Neoplatonism than the conception of Basilides, which is based on Indian Sāṃkhya. The reason why Plotinus excludes God’s willing action in the creative process – God’s overflowing nature, his overabundance – could also stand with Valentinus. It’s impossible with Basilides.

8. Peacock, World-Egg, Nyagrodha tree and mustard

“Like the egg of a colorful bird, *e.g.*, of the peacock or of one much more multicolored, though it is only one, yet has the foundations of multiform, multicolored, and multiple substances, the Non-Existent Seed produced by the Non-Existent God has in itself the multiform and manifold total Seed of the World.”

If it were legitimate to deduce the origin of a thinker’s system from its accompanying linguistic cues, the question of the origin of the Basilidian system could be quickly decided. In addition to the Indian *naphtha*, the peacock, which is known to have its original homeland also in India, comes to mind. But, perhaps, this may be only marginal.

In addition to the peacock, mentioned by Basilides, there are World-titles, this image merges with that of the World-Seed. The myth of the World-Egg is widespread in ancient

cultures and, in the West, is associated mainly with the Orphics. However, the motif has its origin once again in India, as evidenced by the Vedic literature. In the context of speculation about the onset non-existent beginning, *i.e.*, in the same context as Basilides, we encounter the image of the egg from which the world originated:

“This world was at first non-existent; this [non-existent] was the existent. The same was born. As an egg developed. That was there as long as a year. It split; the two egg shells were, one of silver, the other of gold.”

There is a parallel to the argument of Basilides in the Vedic literature, which may have been before the eyes of the local theologian from Alexandria. The *Chāndogya-Upanishad* 6:11 describes the emergence of differences from the undifferentiated. “Just as the great Nyagrodha tree emerges from the apparently undifferentiated content of the seed, so the variegatedness of the entire universe springs from the Undifferentiated Entity.”

This thought corresponds to that of Basilides, except that the ‘Nyagrodha tree’ was replaced by a ‘peacock’. In the tenth book of Hippolytus’ *Refutatio*, we find, in addition to the peacock, the image of the mustard shrub, from whose seed, κόκκον σινάπεως grows:⁶⁶

“Basilides says that there is a ‘non-existent’ God who has created a non-existent World from non-being; he threw down a seed that was non-seedy, like the seed of the mustard-seed, which contains in itself the trunk, the leaves, the branches, the fruit; or like the peacock-egg, which has in itself many different colors – *that* is the seed of the world out of which everything originated.”

Obviously, Basilides composed his system for different motives or – to make a more adequate picture – woven like an Indian rug made of different threads. Elements from Sāṃkhya, Buddhism and Vedānta were put together to an original new conception and placed under Christian auspices.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Compare Mark 4:31; Matt 13:31; Luke 13:19; see William Benjamin Smith – *Der vorchristliche Jesus: Nebst weiteren Vorstudien zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Urchristentums* [William Benjamin Smith – *The pre-Christian Jesus: in addition to further preliminary studies on the genesis of early Christianity*], ed. Paul Wilhelm Schmiedel (Giessen: Töpelmann, 1906), 107-135. [For the English original, see Smith’s article, “The pre-Christian Jesus”, in *The American Journal of Theology*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Apr., 1911), pp. 259-265.]

⁶⁷ See *Pseudoclementinen*, Hom. VI, 5-12: “Just as the color of the egg in the nest of the peacock seems to be only one color, though it has the potential of bringing myriads of colors into existence, so does the ‘Egg of Life’, born of infinite matter (Löhr, *Basilides and His School*, 286, n. 7.) In the following (VI, 6 ff.), the *Guṇa* doctrine with the three attributes (*dravyāṇi*) – *Sattva*,

The motif of the world surname (Panspermia) is today usually attributed to the Stoa.⁶⁸This is not impossible. However, as the picture fits coherently into the rest of the above context, an Indian origin is more likely.

9. The spider in the net

“What, then, is it necessary to produce [προβολή], to what does the assumption of matter mean that God makes the world as the spider does its web, or does mortal man take ore or wood or other material to work?”

The rhetorical question, as May correctly assumed, is directed against the doctrine of emanation in general, and thus presumably against the Alexandrian “rival” of Basilides, Valentinus in particular.⁶⁹

It has already been pointed out that Basilides rejects the model of emanation with its gradual “outflow” from higher to lower beings and instead makes the material world work through the Word of God. The emanation doctrine would presuppose some sort of divine “substance” (ὑλης υπόθεσις), which, however, is excluded in Basilides already by the determination of the Absolute as “Non-Existent”. Basilides understands creation not as a coming out of God [προβολή], but as being effected by God’s Word.

The conception of Basilides is interpreted by May and others as an anticipation of the orthodox doctrine of the “*creatio ex nihilo*”; May assumes this has evolved “out of the specific approach of his system”. But it was “hardly to be doubted that Basilides had attached to the traditional Judeo-Christian statements about God’s work, the non-existent”.⁷⁰

Rajas, and *Tamas* – becomes transmuted into: Pluto (the heaviness), Poseidon (water), and Zeus (fire, “the purest and most sublime”).

⁶⁸ Cf. May, *Schöpfung aus dem Nichts* [*Creation from Nowhere*], 73. May’s claim that God created the cosmos according to Basilides “by virtue of a decision of the will” is, however, inaccurate. The existence of a divine creative will, as we have seen, is explicitly excluded.

⁶⁹ To προβολή as an emanation, in contrast to Valentinus – cf. Clement Alex., *Stromata* III, 1-3 (Stählin-Früchtel-Treu II 195, 3-196, 16)

⁷⁰ May, *Schöpfung aus dem Nichts* [*Creation from Nothing*], 78, 183 f. See Robert MacQueen Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 143.

If he had continued to follow the spider's succinct image of the thread used by Basilides to defend his position, May would have had to come to a different conclusion. The parable is quite uncommon in the ecclesiastical sphere and does not come from the teaching of Hellenistic philosophy. But we encounter him in a conspicuous concentration where we have already discovered the other elements of the Basilidian system: in Indian literature and philosophy. Already in the old Vedic literature there is the idea of an emergence of the material world from the Atman or the Brahman. The "Imperishable":

"As a spider emits and feeds [the thread],
As on earth, the plants sprout,
As on the head and body of the man who lives, the hair,
So from the imperishable, all that is here."

Or:

"Just as the spider goes out through the thread, as the tiny little thing springs from the fire, so all the spirits of life, all the worlds, all the gods, all spring from this ether."

Or:

"Who, as the only god, like a spider with the threads derived from the original, envelops himself according to his nature, give us the eternal Brahman."

These and other passages show that in the Indian philosophical tradition the spider-parable has become a kind of topos and as such Basilides was probably also known. It served to illustrate a (naive) emanation doctrine, which was decisively rejected by the Alexandrian arch-heretics.

10. Logos and Vāc

"But Basilides says, 'He spoke and it was', and the Word in Moses, 'Let there be light, and it has become light', signifies the same as those persons spoke. Where did the light come from? From nowhere. It is not written, wherefrom. But only so much: from the voice of the speaker; but the speaker did not exist and does not exist. The Non-Existent became the World-Name, the Word that was spoken: 'Let there be light,' and the Gospels speak of it, 'He was the true Light that enlightens every man who comes into this world'."

Basilides identifies the World-Seed with the idea of the Word of Creation and of Light. His remarks are essentially an interpretation of *Genesis* and *Johannesevangelium* (7.22.4).

According to May, it can be seen “that the Basilidians, in a strict exegesis of *Genesis*’ verse, tried to prove that the World-Name could only have been created out of nothing.”⁷¹

That may be true. It should also be remembered, however, that the motifs mentioned by Basilides, that is creation from nothingness, worldsame, (creation) word or speech, light, already occur in some Vedic creation myths and speculations, where they often form an organic context. The *Śaunaka Upaniṣad* (X) calls them in one breath: “The Power, the Seed, the Light, the Imperishable, the Flawless, all this is the echo [of the Creation-word or *Ōm*-sound].”

The decisive point, however, is that ‘Speech’ (*Vāc*) is already understood in the Vedas as metaphysically great, just as with the Basilidian / Christian *Logos*. In the *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* it is said:

“The immense Speech made of finite things into which the gods have placed their pleasures, the monosyllabic, the two- and six-figure. From the Speech alive in all the gods, from the speech of Gandharvas, animals and men; All creatures are based on Speech; this goddess *Vāc*, whose husband Indra is, is to hear our call. The speech is the incorruptible, it is the First Born of the Eternal Law, the Mother of the Vedas, the Mist of Immortality” (2, 8, 8, 4).⁷²

In the *Tāṇḍya-Brahmaṇaḥ* of the Sāma-Veda, we read:

“Prajāpati [in Vedic mythology the “Lord of creatures”] was in this world quite alone. His only possession was *Vāc* [Goddess of Speech], Speech was his companion. He said, ‘I wish to release Speech, she will unfold this Universe.’ He let go of speech, then she went and unfolded herself as this Universe’ (*Tāṇḍya-Brāhmaṇa* 20, 14, 2).⁷³

Incidentally, the Indian goddess *Vāc* hardly differs from the Old Testament’s *Hokhmāh*. In between the 2nd-1st centuries BC, it is referred to in the *Wisdom Book of Sirach*, or *Ecclesiasticus*, or *The Book of Wisdom (Liber Sapientiae)*, which originated in Alexandria, and is there described as “the breath arising out of the mouth of the Most High, enveloping the earth like mist” (*Sirach* 24:4-5 or 6-7); she is still the consort and lover of God (*Wisdom* 8:3; 9:4), much as the female companion of Prajāpati’s, often personified as the goddess *Sarasvati*.

⁷¹ May, *Schöpfung aus dem Nichts* [Creation from Nothing], 79.

⁷² Wilhelm Grube, et al., *Religionsgeschichtliches Lesebuch* [Book of Readings in History of Religions], ed. Alfred Bertholet (Tübingen: Mohr, 1908), 125.

⁷³ Grube, et al., *Religionsgeschichtliches Lesebuch* [Book of Readings in History of Religions], 166.

Bernhard Hilgers believed that he was able to distinguish two main cosmogonies in the Vedas: “the one where the material world is called forth by the Word of God, the other by a more concrete Emanation.”⁷⁴ This is a somewhat coarse categorization, but it is not too misleading today, and points to a connection that is unknown to many theologians. It can be shown that the Jewish ‘Wisdom’ literature has been inspired by the motifs of earlier Indian philosophy, as well as by more recent Gnosis systems, which already contained in their DNA the dichotomy that is suggested by the contrast between Basilides and Valentinus’ views – with the former, the Creation-Word, with the latter, Emanation theology. While Valentinus represented the Emanation doctrine, Basilides apparently decided deliberately on a theology of the (Creation) Word.

The parallelism in the conceptions concerning the meaning of the Word of Creation dealt with here is also attested by Clement, who lived in Alexandria. Concerning the Brahmins he writes:

“They say that God is Light, not the visible kind, like the sun or fire, but God is *Logos* [Word], not the articulated kind, but the Word of knowledge through which the wise see the secrets of nature” (Irenæus, *Haer.* 1, 24).

To be continued.

⁷⁴ Hilgers, *Kritische Darstellung der Häresen . . .* [Critical Presentation of the Heresies . . .], 89