

SHORT PAPER

Mithra in Light of Buddhism and Manichaeism: Savior Figure

Moein Azimi^a

^aImage Processing Expert, PhD, Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland Dublin, Ireland

ARTICLE HISTORY

Compiled September 26, 2023

ABSTRACT

Throughout the annals of human history, various religious traditions have featured savior figures, divine beings whose purpose is to guide, inspire, and offer salvation to their followers. In Manichaeism, Mithra, sometimes referred to as "Mihr," was considered one of the divine beings who played a significant role in the salvation of souls. Manichaeans believed in a dualistic cosmology with the struggle between light and darkness, and Mithra was associated with the forces of light. On the other hand, in the vast tapestry of Buddhist beliefs and prophecies, one figure stands out as a beacon of hope for the future - Maitreya, the Buddha of loving-kindness and compassion. Revered across various Buddhist traditions, Maitreya is believed to be the fifth and future Buddha who will come to guide humanity toward enlightenment when the teachings of Gautama Buddha have faded into obscurity. The connections and adaptations between figures like Maitreya and Mithra demonstrate the complex nature of religious and cultural exchanges throughout history. This study proposes that Maitreya and Mithra are the same figure, based on historical and linguistic similarities.

KEYWORDS

Mithraism; Mithras; Sun; Equality; Liberty; Fraternity

1. Introduction

Mithraic rituals and symbolism often included the slaying of a bull, representing the triumph of light (Mithra) over darkness [1]. This act had spiritual significance, signifying initiation and ascent toward spiritual enlightenment. Mithra's role in Manichaeism [2] aligned with the broader dualistic cosmology of light versus darkness. He was associated with guiding souls on their journey from darkness to light. In the Manichaean framework, Mithra played a part in assisting souls in leaving the domain of darkness and impurity and returning to the realm of light. This faith in Mithra as a savior-figure was consistent with the larger story of spiritual emancipation presented by Manichaeism. In both Mithraism and Manichaeism, Mithra held a significant position as a savior figure, guiding believers on a spiritual path towards enlightenment and liberation. While their specific beliefs and rituals differed, the concept of Mithra as a symbol of light and salvation was a common thread in both religious traditions. The concept of Maitreya has a long history in Buddhist sutras and scriptures, with allusions appearing in the oldest Buddhist writings. "Maitreya" means "loving-kindness" in Sanskrit, indicating the fundamental quality of this future Buddha. However, it

also has a presence in Theravada and Tibetan Buddhism. The belief in Maitreya is particularly prevalent in Mahayana Buddhism.

2. Maitreya: The Future Buddha of Compassion

Maitreya is often depicted as a bodhisattva, an enlightened being who postpones his own Buddhahood to help all sentient beings attain enlightenment. His primary role is to teach the Dharma (Buddhist teachings) anew, revitalizing the path to awakening. Maitreya's arrival is seen as a time of renewal, a spiritual renaissance that follows a period of spiritual decline [3]. Maitreya is part of the pantheon of Five Dhyani Buddhas in Vajrayana Buddhism, each embodying different aspects of enlightenment. He represents the aspect of loving-kindness and is associated with the color orange or red. In Buddhist art and iconography, Maitreya is often depicted as a benevolent and youthful figure, seated in a relaxed posture with one leg pendant. He typically holds a dharma-chakra (wheel of the Dharma) and a vase, symbolizing the transmission of teachings and compassion, respectively. This imagery reflects his role as a compassionate guide for humanity. Buddhist scriptures contain prophecies regarding Maitreya's arrival. It is foretold that he will appear when the world has fallen into a state of moral and spiritual decline. At that time, his teachings will resonate with those who are ready for the path of enlightenment, leading them towards liberation from suffering. While Maitreya is celebrated in various Buddhist traditions, interpretations of his role and nature can differ. Some view him as a celestial being, while others see him as a human who will attain Buddhahood in the future. Despite these differences, the core message of compassion and the renewal of Buddhist teachings remain central to his prophesied mission.

In an ever-changing world, the idea of a future Buddha returning to guide humanity towards compassion and enlightenment offers solace and optimism and the concept of Maitreya remains a source of inspiration for Buddhists worldwide. Maitreya, the future Buddha of loving-kindness, embodies the compassionate essence of Buddhism. His anticipated arrival symbolizes the timeless hope for spiritual renewal and the eternal pursuit of awakening from suffering. In a world filled with challenges, the concept of Maitreya continues to shine as a beacon of compassion and enlightenment, reminding Buddhists of the enduring power of loving-kindness on the path to ultimate liberation.

3. Mithra as a Savior-Figure in Manichaeism

Manichaeism, a syncretic religion founded by Mani in the 3rd century CE, blended elements from various religious traditions, including Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Christianity, and more. Within the tapestry of Manichaean beliefs, the figure of Mithra (also referred to as Mihr) held a significant role as a savior-figure, guiding souls on their journey towards spiritual salvation. This paper explores the interpretation of Mithra as a savior in the context of Manichaeism.

Manichaeism emerged as a unique religious movement that sought to harmonize and synthesize various religious ideas and beliefs. It incorporated dualistic elements, such as the struggle between light and darkness, and presented a cosmology where the material world was seen as a prison for trapped souls. The ultimate goal was the liberation of these souls from the material realm and their return to the realm of light and purity. In Manichaeism, Mithra was interpreted as a savior-figure, embodying the

forces of light in the cosmic battle against darkness. Several key aspects of Mithra's role in Manichaeism highlight her status as a savior.

Manichaeism's core dualistic belief centered around the conflict between light and darkness. Mithra was seen as a divine being representing the forces of light, aiding the souls trapped in darkness to find their way back to the realm of light. Additionally, Mithra's role in the cosmic struggle symbolized the spiritual journey of Manichaean believers. Her guidance and protection were crucial for those seeking liberation from the entanglements of the material world.

Manichaeans believed that Mithra played a pivotal role in the salvation of souls. Her influence was considered essential for individuals seeking to overcome the obstacles of the material realm and achieve spiritual enlightenment.

Manichaean rituals often involved the invocation of Mithra and the use of symbolic elements to represent the struggle between light and darkness. These rituals reinforced the belief in Mithra as a savior and served as a means for believers to connect with the divine.

In the complex tapestry of Manichaeism, Mithra emerges as a central figure representing light, salvation, and the eternal struggle against darkness. As a savior-figure, Mithra played a vital role in guiding Manichaean believers toward spiritual liberation and the ultimate goal of returning to the realm of light. The interpretation of Mithra as a savior in Manichaeism exemplifies the religion's syncretic nature, drawing on diverse traditions to create a unique path to spiritual salvation.

4. Shared Concepts and Spiritual Parallels: Buddhism and Mithraism

While Buddhism and Mithraism have distinct origins and belief systems, they share some spiritual themes and concepts, such as the dualistic struggle, spiritual transformation, communal rituals, and the pursuit of salvation or enlightenment. These shared elements highlight the universal human quest for spiritual understanding and growth across different cultural and historical contexts. In Mithraism, one of the central themes is the dualistic struggle between light (represented by Mithra) and darkness. This cosmic battle symbolizes the eternal conflict between good and evil. While Buddhism doesn't feature dualism in the same way as Mithraism, it does acknowledge the duality of suffering and enlightenment. The core teachings of Buddhism revolve around overcoming suffering (dukkha) and attaining enlightenment (nirvana). Mithraism involves rituals, including the symbolic slaying of a bull. This act represents a form of sacrifice and is associated with spiritual transformation, purification, and ascent. Buddhism emphasizes the transformation of the individual through moral and ethical practices, meditation, and mindfulness. The concept of sacrifice is not central, but the idea of personal transformation and spiritual growth is fundamental.

5. Maitreya and Mithra: Savior Figures

Maitreya, often referred to as the "Buddha of the Future," occupies a prominent place in Buddhist traditions, particularly in Mahayana Buddhism. The concept of Maitreya can be traced back to early Buddhist texts, where he is prophesied to be the fifth and future Buddha of this world age. His name, "Maitreya," translates to "loving-kindness," underscoring his core attribute. Maitreya is considered a bodhisattva, an enlightened being who postpones Buddhahood to assist all sentient beings on their

journey to enlightenment. His primary mission is to rekindle the teachings of Gautama Buddha when they have waned or been forgotten. Maitreya's arrival is envisioned as a time of renewal and spiritual revival, leading humanity toward liberation from suffering. In Buddhist art and iconography, Maitreya is often depicted as a compassionate, youthful figure, radiating hope and love. He embodies the qualities of empathy and understanding, symbolizing the path of loving-kindness and compassion that all Buddhists aspire to follow. The depictions of Maitreya in Buddhist art and iconography typically include him wearing a crown resembling Mithra. Maitreya is commonly depicted as a youthful and compassionate figure, often seated in meditation or teaching posture, wearing traditional Buddhist monastic robes. Mithra is always associated with a specific type of headgear called a "Phrygian cap", which is a distinctive hat with a pointed tip. This cap is part of the iconography of Mithra, reflecting his connection to Persian and Roman sun deities.

Mithra, is venerated in Mithraism, an ancient mystery religion that thrived in the Roman Empire from the 1st to the 4th century CE. Mithraism's roots can be traced to Persia, where Mithra was a deity associated with the sun and light. In the Roman context, Mithraism developed its distinct beliefs.

Mithraism featured a complex system of initiation rituals and symbolism. Mithra, in this tradition, was considered a solar deity and a mediator between the physical and spiritual realms. Initiates would undergo a series of trials and ceremonies, aiming for spiritual ascent and eventual union with Mithra in the afterlife.

One of the central motifs in Mithraism was the symbolic slaying of a bull by Mithra, representing the triumph of light over darkness. Mithraic rituals, including a communal meal, featured red wine and symbolic food elements as part of their symbolism, signifying aspects of regeneration and spiritual purification.

While Maitreya and Mithra originate from different religious traditions and historical contexts, they share common elements as savior figures:

Both figures are associated with renewal and the potential for spiritual rebirth. Maitreya's arrival heralds the rekindling of Buddhist teachings, while Mithraism offered initiates the promise of spiritual ascent and eventual union with Mithra. Symbolism is integral to both traditions. Maitreya embodies compassion and empathy, serving as a symbol of the path to enlightenment. The ritual slaying of the bull by Mithra is one of the central and iconic scenes in Mithraic art and symbolism. The bull's sacrifice represented the victory of light (Mithra) over darkness (the bull), and its consumption during the banquet could be seen as a symbolic act, although interpretations may vary. These symbolic elements, including the red wine and beef, were integral to the Mithraic rituals and contributed to the broader themes of the religion, such as the triumph of light and the spiritual journey of initiates. Red wine was often associated with the concept of regeneration and spiritual purification in Mithraism. It symbolized the transition from darkness to light and was an essential element of the Mithraic banquet.

Both Maitreya and Mithra offer spiritual guidance to their followers. Maitreya guides individuals toward enlightenment and liberation, while Mithra aids initiates in their quest for spiritual ascent and union with the divine.

6. Conclusion

Maitreya and Mithra, as savior figures in their respective religious traditions, exemplify the universal human yearning for spiritual guidance, renewal, and salvation. While

their origins and contexts differ significantly, their roles as compassionate guides illuminate the enduring human quest for enlightenment, compassion, and the triumph of light over darkness on the path to spiritual liberation. These figures continue to resonate with believers and spiritual seekers, offering hope and inspiration across diverse cultural and historical landscapes. On the basis of historical and linguistic parallels, this study suggests that Maitreya and Mithra are the same person.

7. references

References

- [1] Franz Cumont. *The Mysteries of Mithra*. Health Research Books, 1996.
- [2] Samuel Lieu. *Manichaeism in Central Asia and China*, volume 45. Brill, 2020.
- [3] Alan Sponberg and Helen Hardacre. *Maitreya, the Future Buddha*. CUP Archive, 1988.