

Mahdi and Maitreya (Miroku): Saviors in Islam and Buddhism

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Abstract

In Twelver Imami Shi'ism, the last, 12th Imam is believed to come back before the last day of the world as Mahdi (the rightly guided one, i.e., the savior) to save Muslim people from unjust rule and eliminate oppressors, thereby bringing righteousness and justice to the world. According to the doctrine of Buddhism, on the other hand, Maitreya will come back to this world in the future as a Buddha for people who could not reach enlightenment during the days of Gautama Buddha, and will guide people who have failed to follow Buddhist teachings to enlightenment. Though both of these religions share the belief in the future coming of a savior to save people, there is a difference in the portrayal of the savior between the *hadith* records and the Buddhist *sutras* in Chinese. Mahdi is not hesitant to use armed force if necessary to create a new social order, while Maitreya offers spiritual guidance for people to attain awakening. This difference reflects the characteristics of each of these religions, but in light of the historical backgrounds behind them, it is obvious that Buddhism, like Islam, can be turned into the ideological backbone of social reform movements, in spite of its emphasis on spirituality.

Keywords: Shi'ism, Mahdi, Maitreya, Messianism

In Islam, it is believed that Mahdi will come to this world as a savior before the end of the world to save Muslims from oppressive rule and to create an ideal society. The word *mahdi* is an Arabic word meaning a “rightly guided one.” While Mahdi is also part of the doctrine of Sunni Islam,¹⁾ it is not given much importance in Sunnism. On the other hand, the doctrine of Twelver Imami Shi'ism places a great deal of emphasis on the concept of Mahdi. Not only Twelver Imami Shi'ism but also various other sects of Shi'ism are best characterized by their focus on Imams as successors to the authority of the prophet Muhammad. Mahdi, the topic of this paper, is an Imam with a special status. The concept of Mahdi, which holds an important position in the history of Islamic thought, also affects various historical and political aspects, and can be understood in an extremely wide variety of ways in the Islamic context alone. Instead of exploring the entire picture of Mahdi seen widely across the Islamic world, this paper

will focus on the traditional discourse about Mahdi to compare it with the Buddhist discourse about Maitreya, the savior in the Buddhist doctrine, and will examine the characteristics of Mahdi of Islam and Maitreya of Buddhism, as two specific examples of the religious belief generally known as “Messianism.”

Messianism can be summarized as follows.²⁾ This is a type of thought held by people who anticipate the coming of a savior or a form of social movement started by such people. They believe that the savior will come at the end of this world and save people by eliminating oppressors and creating an ideal society. In ancient Israel, the savior was called *māšīaḥ*, a Hebrew word meaning an “anointed one,” which is the origin of the word “Messianism.” This concept of a savior was applied also to Jesus Christ, the savior of Christianity. The word “Christ” derives from a Greek word *christos*, which is a translation of the Hebrew word *māšīaḥ*. Strictly speaking, Messianism means this type of thought and movement that developed in the framework of Judeo-Christian tradition, but in a broader sense, this concept can be interpreted to encompass eschatological traditions of various other religions that expect the coming of a savior. Mahdism is one of such thoughts that emerged in the Islamic context, and it provides a doctrinal basis for social reform designed to liberate oppressed people from their sufferings.

I. Muslim understanding of Buddhism

It seems that relatively few research attempts have been made on the mutual influence and interrelations between Islam and Buddhism. Muslim researchers are not much interested in the study of religions beyond the monotheistic framework, while Japanese researchers of Buddhism, as well, seem to lack enthusiasm in the study of Islam. It is true that the number of Japanese scholars who study Islam is increasing today, but their academic interest mostly lies in historical and contemporary issues, and the religious aspect of Islam has seldom been focused on as a main research theme. In this light, we may say that these scholars have been unable to arouse sufficient interest in Islam among Buddhist specialists.

Though some researchers have published results of the comparative study of the characteristics of Islam and Buddhism,³⁾ they are only small in number, and a majority of researchers of Buddhism and general Japanese citizens essentially have little interest in Islam, or, even have a negative feeling toward it as a religion that uprooted Buddhism in India, the birthplace of Buddha. Such a negative feeling was further amplified in 2002 when the Taliban Afghanistan government destroyed the statues of Buddha in the Bamiyan Valley, which were built in the 6th century.

Before Islam prevailed in Central Asia, this region had a sizeable population of Buddhists.

Considering that Islam incorporated Persian elements into itself when it spread into the Persian cultural sphere, it is arguably reasonable to conclude that Islam had some Buddhist influence through its encounter with the culture of Central Asia. While our understanding of the process of the acceptance of Buddhist factors by Muslims is still limited, the contact of these two cultures is evidenced by an Islamic literature in which the story of Buddha's life is told. This literature is *Kamāl al-dīn wa-tamām al-ni'ma* about the occultation of the Imam authored by a well-known Shia *hadith* scholar of the 10th century, Ibn Bābūya, in which a lengthy description of Buddha's life is contained as a story of Balawhar wa-Yūdhāsf.⁴⁾

One of the Muslim scholars in the Middle Ages, Shahrastani (d. 548 AH/1153 CE) had a keen interest in the religions of others, and gave a succinct description of Indian Buddhism, which tells us the view of Buddhism held by Muslim intellectuals in his days.⁵⁾ His description of Buddhism can be summarized as follows.

Buddha was an ideal human. He was not born, did not get old, and even did not die. He avoided the pleasure of eating and drinking, and remained celibate all his life. He was a perfect ascetic and an exemplary model for his disciples. Accordingly, a Buddhist can be defined as a seeker of truth, a practitioner of various ascetic works, and a holder of the deepest sense of inner morality. Buddhist ethical practices include having patience, giving alms, renouncing this world, abstaining from greed and worldly pleasure, and showing compassion for all creatures. Thus, a Buddhist is required to live an ethically correct life. In addition to practicing these ascetic disciplines, a Buddhist is encouraged to pursue spiritual perfection. He must enhance his intelligence and seek a higher existence. By doing so, he can liberate himself from this lower world that is destined to decline, live in the eternal world, and eventually be led to the presence of divine beings.

Buddhism places importance on ascetic disciplines and spiritual endeavor. At the end of this description, Shahrastani states that Buddha in the Buddhist context can be compared to Khaḍīr (Khidr), a legendary Islamic saint whose existence is taken for granted by Muslims.⁶⁾

Shahrastani's description of Buddhism as a religion characterized by the spiritual pursuit of truth by means of ascetic disciplines indicates that he had a fairly correct understanding of the general characteristics of Buddhism as one of the Indian religions, though his description lacks a reference to a concept corresponding to Messianism.

Buddhism does not have a rigid doctrinal system. Rather, this religion is a loose union of various teachings, and each of such teachings appears to show the way to the ultimate salvation and complete liberation from the world of suffering. Any attempts to pursue the path to

liberation from sufferings or to attain the state of *nirvana*, which Gautama Buddha earnestly yearned for and finally reached, deserve to be called Buddhist practices, as long as they are after the same goal as Buddha's. Over the long history of the development of Buddhism in Asian countries, its followers had created various systems of religious doctrines and practices in different time periods and places, in a manner to suit their individual temperaments, spiritual tendencies, linguistic and philosophical traditions, and other personal elements.

II. Maitreya: Is he the Messiah?

The belief in Maitreya Buddha is one of the many Buddhist doctrines. Though the Maitreya belief seems less prevalent today than in the Middle Ages, it enjoyed great popularity in various parts of West Asia and East Asia in the past. Known as one of the disciples of Gautama Buddha, Maitreya is destined to become a Buddha himself in the future to save all people who have failed to follow the teachings of Gautama Buddha in this world. The role given to Maitreya as a future Buddha can be compared with the role of the Messiah in Judaism and Christianity, and further with that of Mahdi in Islam. This paper aims to shed light on the similarities and differences between the concept of Maitreya and that of Mahdi held by these two religious traditions. Though this paper will not discuss the historical contacts and mutual influences between the Maitreya belief and Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian Messianism, the issue of interreligious contacts has drawn substantial interest from researchers and has been widely discussed among them.⁷⁾

The Maitreya belief flourished in the western part of India during the reign of the Kushan Dynasty, which was conquered by the Sassanid Persian Empire later, in the 3rd century.⁸⁾ This belief was also widely accepted in East Asia, extending its influence not only to religious thought, but also to various other fields ranging from social movements to artistic creation. In this section, I will discuss the teachings of the Maitreya belief based on the Chinese translations of the Buddhist *sutras*. Buddhist scriptures include a number of sutras about the Maitreya belief, which were translated into Chinese over a long period of time, from the 2nd century to the 10th century.⁹⁾

The Maitreya belief prevailing in East Asia, as seen in the Chinese *sutras*, has been traditionally understood as consisting of two teachings. One is that Maitreya will descend to this world for people as a savior, and the other is that by worshipping Maitreya, people will ascend to the Tusita heaven where Maitreya preaches sermons to heavenly beings, and later by the miraculous power of Maitreya, will return to this world together with Maitreya to achieve enlightenment. In short, there are two modes of salvation in the Maitreya belief—Maitreya's descent to this world and people's ascent to his heavenly world, though in a sense, the latter

may be understood as a preparatory phase preceding the last stage of salvation, namely the descent of Maitreya to this world. Most of the Maitreya *sutras* emphasize either one of these two modes of salvation, both of which are meant to save people through the worship of Maitreya and his miraculous power. Three *sutras* selected from among a number of *sutras* about Maitreya are traditionally called the “Three Sutras on Maitreya.” They are: the *Sutra on the Contemplation of Maitreya’s Ascent to Tusita Heaven* translated by Juqu Jingsheng; the *Sutra on the Contemplation of Maitreya’s Descent* translated by Dharmaraksa; and the *Sutra on Maitreya’s Great Achievement* translated by Kumarajiva.¹⁰⁾ Among them, the latter two *sutras* describe the descent of Maitreya to this world, which represents the messianic nature of Maitreya. I will summarize the story of Maitreya’s descent to this world based on the *Sutra on Maitreya’s Great Achievement*, which tells this story in the most organized manner among the three *sutras*.

When Gautama Buddha was preaching at Magadha Kingdom, he indicated the coming of a future Buddha and his mystical teachings. His disciples showed a keen interest in the future Buddha and asked Gautama Buddha to speak more about him. Then, he began speaking about Maitreya and his immeasurable merits: Maitreya will be born into the world of the highest morals and the deepest piety. In this world, people tell no lies, willingly give alms, obey the laws of the Buddhist community, and have achieved a high level of wisdom.

All the people have highly flexible minds, which allow them to absorb the teachings of Maitreya. They have overcome their lust, and live a faithful life as Buddhists.

The world of Maitreya is extensive, clean, and filled with beautiful flowers and trees. There, people live pleasantly and comfortably. They are equipped with wisdom, dignity, and five senses (senses of form, sound, smell, taste, and touch), and are free from the unpleasantness caused by coldness, heat, wind, and fire. Their lives span 84,000 years without premature death. They are very tall, almost five meters high. While they enjoy their lives, they have three shortcomings: They have to eat and drink to sustain their lives; they have to excrete bodily wastes; and they grow old. Women marry at the age of 500.

There is a magnificent castle town called Shitomatsu, which is decorated with seven kinds of rare gems. Buildings decorated with such gems rise by themselves without construction work, and on the windows of these buildings sit beautiful women adorned with pearls and jewelries, who sing songs with heavenly voices. The streets are swept clean day and night, and there are many heaps of gold, silver and gems, which brightly illuminate the entire town. Lit by these beautiful lights, people feel happy and develop a strong yearning for enlightenment. When they become frail with age, they go into a forest in a mountain and die a peaceful death

with the belief in Buddha in mind. Most of them will be reborn into a heavenly world or in the presence of the Buddhas. This town is free from disasters of all kinds, including flood, fire, conflict, famine, and damage from poisonous substances. Here, people are elegant and graceful like the children of a heavenly world, which is because they strictly observe the Buddhist rule not to eat meat and thus have peace of mind. The town is filled with a colorful variety of incredibly beautiful flowers, trees, and fruit, abundant clean water, and the chirping of birds. Fields yield rich harvests, while no weeds grow.

This town is ruled by a wheel-turning sage king (Chakravartin) called Jyokyo, who governs the entire territory without using armed forces. He has a thousand sons, who are brave and courageous and can easily defeat enemies when attacked. In his territory, the king possesses four large treasure houses in which he keeps an enormous amount of precious objects without guards. As people have no lust and material desire, these treasures, including gold and silver, are as worthless as waste, dust, pebbles, and wood chips for them, and they do not even entertain the idea of stealing them.

In this town, Maitreya will be born into a noble family. He knows that human beings are trapped in the endless cycle of birth and death due to their strong attachment to material possessions in this world. He does not enjoy worldly life at all. Even a beautiful stand decorated with gems given by the ruler of this town cannot please him—he gives the stand to Brahmins as alms, who break the stand into small pieces and share the pieces among them before his eyes. This incident only convinces him that nothing will last forever. Maitreya eventually renounces this world and engages in ascetic disciplines under a Nagapushpa tree (dragon flower tree), and on the very night of the day when he renounces the world, he attains the ultimate enlightenment. Thus, Maitreya becomes a Buddha.

When people know of Maitreya's enlightenment, they come to the conviction that taking pleasure in the material world, even if it lasts millions of years, will never liberate them from the suffering of being reborn in the Three Evil Paths¹¹⁾ again and again, and that their attachment to wife, children, and material possessions is of no worth, as no one can sustain lives eternally. This conviction encourages them to enter an ascetic life following the teachings of Buddha.

The ruler of the town, Jyokyo, also renounces the world together with his 999 sons, following the teachings of Maitreya Buddha. Maitreya preaches Buddha's teachings in three assemblies and guides more than three billion people to enlightenment, or the state of *arhat*.¹²⁾ His teachings include the Four Noble Truths and the Twelve Links (the continuum of 12 phases that lead to suffering).¹³⁾

The world in which Gautama Buddha diligently worked to spread his teachings was, in a sense, an evil world, when people had no wisdom, constantly experienced conflict, told lies, had no compassion for others, killed each other, ate meat, drank blood, and showed no respect or gratitude to the elderly. While Gautama Buddha made noteworthy achievements in the context of his time, some people were so stubborn that they never listened to his words. As a result, he could not save everyone during his lifetime. Yet, the efforts of Gautama Buddha to spread his teachings made his followers prepared to embark on various meaningful Buddhist practices, and as a result, many people have been guided to the presence of Maitreya Buddha. It is simply the past achievements of Gautama Buddha that have enabled so many people to follow the teachings of Maitreya Buddha and attain enlightenment.

Upon awakening from a deep meditation, Mahakasyapa, one of the disciples of Gautama Buddha, hands over the robe of Gautama Buddha to Maitreya, following the will of the Buddha. Maitreya Buddha guides and saves people for a fabulously long period of six trillion years and then passes away, and after his passing, the sage king collects his ashes and builds pagodas to contain the ashes. The *sutra* ends with the last words that Gautama Buddha gave to his disciples: “If you follow the right doctrine, purify your mind, and act on the good deeds, then you will undoubtedly see Maitreya Buddha, the light of the world.”

This is a summary of the description of the *sutra* about Maitreya Buddha who is believed to come to this world for the people that Gautama Buddha could not save in his lifetime. The life of Maitreya described here bears a close similarity to that of Gautama Buddha. Like Gautama Buddha, Maitreya was born into a noble family, abandoned his wealth and status, which he saw as unnecessary for true happiness, and chose to live an ascetic life. Eventually, he attained enlightenment and began working to save people. As shown by this similarity between these two Buddhas, Maitreya is expected to play the role of Gautama Buddha as if he were Gautama Buddha himself on his second coming to this world, which is explicitly indicated by the episode of the robe of Gautama Buddha given to Maitreya.

In the story of Maitreya, the description that he will be born into the world of the highest morals and the deepest piety bears special importance, as this means that the appearance of Maitreya is an indication that outstanding virtue and excellence is already in place in that world. The birthplace of Maitreya is not the world where people suffer severe oppression and desperately yearn for liberation from their sufferings. Instead, it is the world where people have already been ready for attaining enlightenment and expect the final push to be given by Maitreya.

On the other hand, a different picture becomes visible if we explore the teachings of

Maitreya in association of the Buddhist concept of *kalpa*, though the Maitreya *sutras* seem to have no direct references to this concept. The term *kalpa* means an “unimaginably long period of time.” Our cosmic world continues a circular process eternally, which is divided into four stages: formation, existence, destruction, and nothingness. Each stage is equivalent to 20 small *kalpas*, while one small *kalpa* lasts more than eight million years. The world is created in the formation stage, continues to exist peacefully in the existence stage, is destroyed in the destruction stage, and vanishes completely in the last nothingness stage. After the nothingness stage, the world resumes the process again from the formation stage. In the concept of *kalpa*, Gautama Buddha came to this world during the ninth small *kalpa* on the existence stage, while Maitreya Buddha is believed to appear during the 10th small *kalpa* on the same stage.¹⁴⁾ According to a conventional calculation, there is a time span of 5,670,000,000 years between the time of Gautama Buddha and that of Maitreya Buddha.

The spiritual and moral status of the human world is within the slow process of two eternal motions heading toward opposing directions; one ascending to virtuous society and the other descending to evil society on a cosmic scale. Maitreya’s appearance takes place in the middle of the ascending process of the cosmos, while Gautama Buddha was alive while the world was in the descending process. This means that the world has been in a long downward process toward religious and moral deterioration since the passing away of Gautama Buddha until now and into the future.

Thus, we may say that the theory of *kalpa* is behind the pessimistic Buddhist doctrine, which includes the belief that the passing away of Gautama Buddha is followed by three periods: the Former Day of the Law, the Middle Day of the Law, and finally the Latter Day of the Law, during which Buddhist teachings will decline and eventually be completely lost.¹⁵⁾ The Latter Day of the Law is believed to come 2,000 years after the death of Gautama Buddha, when people can no longer practice Buddhist teachings, unable to conduct ascetic practices rightly and attain enlightenment through the practices, and when Buddhism is reduced to an empty shell. In the Buddhist sphere in East Asia, the Latter Day of the Law was thought to begin in the 11th century. People in this period of decline are supposed to seek the salvation of Maitreya, whose coming was promised by Gautama Buddha,¹⁶⁾ though the return of Maitreya is expected to take place in an unimaginably distant future after Gautama Buddha’s teachings are lost. Political corruptions, rebellions, increases in burglaries and robberies, and moral degeneration—the phenomena commonly seen everywhere during a period of decline—make people yearn for the coming of Maitreya even more desperately.

If we understand Messianism to mean a doctrine about a savior who is expected to come to this world to save people from their suffering, when the threat to them, whether it be from

an attack by an enemy or the corruption of society, reaches its peak, then we may have to conclude that the teachings of Maitreya Buddha written in the abovementioned *sutras* are too calm and peaceful to be called Messianism. That is to say, the Maitreya Buddha depicted in the *sutras* lacks the characteristics that would make him a Messiah. However, we can see certain messianic characteristics in Maitreya when we place him in the context of the period of decline, the Latter Day of the Law. In Chinese history, for example, a number of revolutionary and rebellious movements arose, which called for a new social order in anticipation of Maitreya's descent to this world.¹⁷⁾ These movements include the rebellion of Xiang Haiming at the end of the Sui Dynasty (613 CE), the rebellion of Wang Ze during the reign of the Northern Song Dynasty (1047 CE), and the uprising of Bang Hu during the reign of the Yuan Dynasty (1337 CE). In addition, the White Lotus Society (Bailian Jiao), which originated from a religious organization that worshipped Amitabha Buddha, founded by Huiyuan in 402 during the reign of the Eastern Jin Dynasty, adopted the belief in the descent of Maitreya Buddha during the Yuan Dynasty, and led a number of uprisings and rebellious movements until suppressed by the Qing Dynasty in the 19th century.

These Chinese cases show that when Buddhism was on the decline, oppressed people more intensely yearned for the coming of Maitreya as a true savior who would free them from suffering. On the other hand, the *sutras* have no reference to people under oppression as the object of the salvation of Maitreya Buddha. Rather, the role of Maitreya is described as guiding to the ultimate enlightenment those who have already reached a higher state of mind.

III. Mahdi in Twelver Imami Shi'ism

We may say that the Shia doctrine about Mahdi is one of the typical examples of Messianism seen in various world religions. This section will discuss the doctrine of Shia Mahdi, mainly based on *Kitāb al-Irshād* authored by al-Shaykh al-Mufīd (d.413 AH/1022 CE),¹⁸⁾ in order to compare it with Buddhist Messianism.

In Twelver Imami Shi'ism, the identity of Mahdi is clearly defined. His name is Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan, and he is the last, 12th of the Imams who are successors to the supreme religious and political authority of Muhammad, the Messenger of God. He has had two occultations (*ghayba*): the Minor Occultation that lasted from 260 to 329AH (874 to 941CE) and the Major Occultation that commenced in 329AH (941CE) and continues still now. During the period of the Minor Occultation, people were indirectly given teachings of this Twelfth Imam through four agents (*safīr*; *bāb*). However, there has been no agent since the last, fourth agent, Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Samarri, died in 329AH (941CE), when the Major Occultation began. During the period of this second occultation, Muslims cannot receive the teachings of

the Imam due to the absence of the agent. This period is believed to last until sometime in the future when the Imam returns to this world as Mahdi or Messiah.¹⁹⁾ Upon the return of Mahdi, the injustice and immorality that prevails in the world is supposed to be completely replaced by righteousness and justice.

Hadiths, or reports of statements of the prophet Muhammad and Imams, give us various signs that foretell the coming of Mahdi. The following is a quotation of a whole *hadith* that gives us a comprehensive picture of such signs.²⁰⁾

Muḥammad ibn Muslim al-Thaqafī²¹⁾ said: I heard Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī al-Bāqir (the fifth Imām Muḥammad al-Bāqir) - peace be upon both of them - (d.ca.115AH/733CE) saying (the following): Qā’im (Mahdī) among us is helped by fright and supported by victory. The earth will be folded up for him, and hidden treasures will appear before him. His rule will cover both the east and the west. God, the Mightiest and the Highest, shows through him His judgment on the whole religion even though polytheists do not like it. Without (oppressors’) previous prosperity, there is no destruction of their state. The Spirit of God, ‘Īsā ibn Maryam (Jesus) - peace be upon him - comes down and prays behind him.²²⁾

He (al-Thaqafī) said: I asked him (Muḥammad al-Bāqir): O, Son of the Apostle of God! When does your Qā’im appear? He answered: When men resemble women and women do men; men satisfy themselves with men, and women do with women; those with vulvae ride (men’s) loins; false testimonies are accepted, and just ones are rejected; people do not take seriously homicide, committing adultery, or taking interest; evil men are respected just because people fear their words; The Sufyānī come out in revolt in Syria, and the Yamanī do in Yemen; a collapse takes place in Bayḍā’; a young man of the family of the Prophet - God bless him and his family - , whose name is Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan the Pure Soul, is killed between a corner (of the Ka‘ba) and the Station (of Ibrahim); and from the heaven comes down a cry that the Truth is with him and with his party (*shī‘a*), then finally our Qā’im (Mahdī) will appear. When he appears, he stands leaning his back on the Ka‘ba, and three hundred and thirteen men gather around him. What he pronounces first is this verse (of the Qur’ān) “God’s remainder (*baqīyat Allāh*) is better for you, if you are believers.” (Q.11:86) And then he says, “I am God’s remainder on the earth, His deputy and His proof on you. No one salutes him without saying “Peace be upon you, O, God’s remainder on the earth.” When he collects ten thousand of men, he goes out to fight. There remains on the earth no object of worship such as idols or others but God, and a fire takes place therein, and they are burned up. That happens after a long occultation (*ghayba ṭawila*) for the purpose that God should know who obeys, and believes in, Him in (his) absence.

While it is difficult to clearly classify the signs of the coming of Mahdi described in the above *hadith*, they can be roughly divided into four categories, namely, (1) natural disasters, (2) strange phenomena, (3) war, unrest, social and political disturbance, and (4) increases in misconduct. Shaykh Mufid gives a summary of the incidents that fall under each of these four categories prior to the quotation of each relevant *hadith* in his book, *Irshād*,²³⁾ which goes:

(1) Natural disasters

The Euphrates will flood (*bathaqa*)²⁴⁾ so that the water comes into the alleys of Kūfa; the bridge next to Karkh in the city of Baghdād will be established²⁵⁾; a black wind (*riḥ sawdā'*) will raise it at the beginning of the day and then an earthquake (*zalzala*) will occur so that much of it will be swallowed up; swift death (*mawt dhari'*)²⁶⁾ will occur there (in Iraq) and there will be a loss of property, lives and harvests; locusts (*jarād*) will appear at their usual times and at times not usual so that they attack agricultural land and crops and there will be little harvest (*qillat al-ray'*) for what the people planted.

(2) Strange phenomena

There will be an eclipse (*kusūf*) of the sun in the middle of the month of Ramaḍān; there will be an eclipse (*khusūf*) of the moon at the end of that month in contrast to ordinary happenings; the land will be swallowed up (*khasf*) at Bayḍā'; it will be swallowed in the east; it will be swallowed up in the west; the star will appear (*turū' al-najm*) in the east giving light just like the moon giving light; then (the new moon) will bend until its two tips almost meet; red color (*humra*) will appear in the sky and spread to its horizons; a fire will appear for a long time in the east remaining in the air for three or seven days; a group of heretics (*ahl al-bida'*) will transform themselves until they become monkeys and pigs²⁷⁾; a cry (*nidā'*) will come from the sky (in such a way) that all the people will hear it in their own languages; a face and a chest will appear in the sky before the people in the center of the sun; the dead will arise from their graves so that they will return to this world and they will recognize one another and visit one another.

(3) War, unrest, social and political disturbance

The Sufyānī will come out in revolt; the Ḥasanid will be killed; the 'Abbāsids will dispute over worldly kingdom (*al-mulk al-dunyāwī*); black banners (*rāyāt sūd*) will advance from Khurāsān; the Yamanī will come out in revolt; the Maghribī will appear in Egypt and take possession of it from Syria; the Turk will occupy the region of al-Jazīra (the region between Tigris and Euphrates rivers); the Byzantines will occupy Ramla (a city north west of Jerusalem); the people of Egypt will kill their ruler and destroy Syria; and three banners will dispute over it (Syria); the banners of Qays and the Arabs will come among the people of Egypt; the banners of Kinda will go Khurāsān; horses will come from the west until they

are stable in Ḥira; two kinds of foreigners (*al-‘ajam*) will dispute and much blood will be shed in their quarrel; slaves will rebel against obedience to their masters and kill their masters (*mawālī*); slaves will conquer the land of their masters.

(4) Increases in misconduct

A pure soul (*nafs zakīya*) will be killed in the outskirts of Kūfa with seventy righteous men; a Hāshimite will be slaughtered between the corner (of the Ka‘ba) and the station (of Ibrāhīm); the wall of the mosque of Kūfa will be destroyed; sixty liars will come forward, all of them claiming prophethood, and twelve will come forward from the family of Abū Ṭālib, all of them claiming the Imamate; a man of important rank of the supporters of the ‘Abbāsids will be burnt between Jalūla’ and Khāniqīn.

The rule of Mahdi is believed to last seven years (or 19 years according to another *hadith*). However, a year in Mahdi’s count is equivalent to 10 years on earth, which means his reign will span 70 years in our count.²⁸⁾ Mahdi will rule the world with justice. During his reign, injustice is nowhere to be seen and the streets are safe to walk. The Earth yields its bounties, and any rights are returned to their legitimate owners. Believers in any other religions cannot survive in this world unless they are introduced to Islam and confess their faith in it. Mahdi judges people with the law (*ḥukm*) of Dāwūd (David) and that of Muhammad. The Earth reveals (hidden) treasures and gives its blessings. As wealth is distributed to all Muslims,²⁹⁾ there is no need to give alms and present generous gifts such as money and valuables. On the other hand, Mahdi takes a stern attitude toward his opponents. For example, when some 10,000 people attacked him on his way to Kūfa from Makkah, he stabbed every one of them to death with his sword, and in Kūfa, he killed all the hypocrites who doubted him and he destroyed their fortresses.³⁰⁾

According to Mufid,³¹⁾ most *hadith* reports state that Mahdi will not pass away earlier than 40 days prior to the day of resurrection. Upon his resurrection, peace will prevail on Earth, the dead will rise from their graves, and people will be subjected to recompense and punishment. The appearance of Mahdi is predicted to take place immediately before the end of this world, and therefore, it is regarded as one of a series of eschatological events.

After emerging from his occultation, the Imam Mahdi will rule the world in a perfectly righteous and fair manner for seven or 19 years before his death and resurrection. During his reign, he will bring justice to the world while resorting to armed forces if necessary to establish order in the community. His reappearance will be preceded by various signs, which include phenomena that are unaccountable by natural laws and disasters that occur in natural environments. However, the most conspicuous of them are, definitely, the phenomena stemming from the corruption and degradation of human nature and human society. In

corrupted society, persons with power are struggling to put others under their control using armed forces or tricks. Killing people in violation of religious and moral codes, requesting the status of a prophet or Imam by using lies, and attempting to put social order in confusion—these are some of the signs that can precede the reappearance of Mahdi,³²⁾ who is supposed to stand against such evil practices and put an end to them to restore correct order in the community.

IV. Conclusion

This paper has discussed Maitreya and Mahdi in their respective religious contexts. Basically, they share the same characteristic in that both are believed to return to this world in the future to save people; though, of course, there are some differences between them. To be specific, Maitreya's activities are limited to offering spiritual teachings by words instead of taking direct action toward the outer world. On the other hand, Mahdi is portrayed as a man who has a will to change the world into a completely new one where righteousness and justice governs, and who without hesitation resorts to armed forces if necessary to expel enemies. This marks a sharp contrast to Maitreya noted for a tranquil and peaceful nature, who engaged only in ascetic practices and preaching, just like Gautama Buddha, his master in the previous life.

However, it is interesting to note that the descent of Maitreya, which is described in the original *sutras* simply as a peaceful and blissful event, was adopted as a slogan of a number of anti-establishment social movements started by oppressed people. If we pay attention to the ability inherent in the teachings of Maitreya to influence society, we can see a closer connection between the nature of Maitreya and that of Mahdi. Another point of interest is the role of the wheel-turning sage king (Chakravartin) known as the "Just Ruler," though he is only a minor character in the story of Maitreya. He is an ideal king who governed the entire world without using armed forces. Born into this world before Maitreya, he may be credited with setting the stage for Maitreya to embark on activities to guide people to salvation and enlightenment. Given that the culture of India attaches greater importance to spiritual activities than practical, worldly pursuits, it is quite natural that Maitreya is held in much higher regard than the wheel-turning sage king.

On the other hand, Muslims believe that this real world, too, is the creation of God and thus cannot easily dismiss it as illusory and worthless. It is true that they place greater importance on the next life than this life, but they cannot be simply indifferent to worldly affairs because their wellbeing in the next life is dependent on how they live this life. In light of such an Islamic thought, we may conclude that Mahdi assumes a role as both Maitreya and the wheel-turning sage king. It is meaningless to discuss who is more excellent, Mahdi or

Maitreya—all we can say is that both of them embody the ideal images of perfect leaders, developed in their respective religious contexts. The concept of Mahdi and that of Maitreya are rooted, respectively, in the Islamic and Buddhist traditions. Therefore, comparison of the images of Islamic and Buddhist saviors will bring us to a deeper understanding of the characteristics of these two religions behind these images.

Notes

- 1) The *hadith* collection compiled by Abu Dawud, which is one of the six canonical *hadith* collections of Sunni Islam, has a chapter (*kitāb*) titled “Mahdi,” in which 11 *hadith* accounts are contained. The following is a quotation from the *hadith* of Jabir ibn Samrah. The Prophet said “This religion will remain strong until twelve Caliphs (Imams) have ruled over you, and the whole community will agree on each of them.” Then, he said something that I (Jabir) could not follow. I asked my father what he said, and my father said, “All of them will be from the Quraysh.” Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziya, *‘Awn al-ma’būd sharḥ Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, al-Qāhira, 1388AH/1968CE, vol.11, pp.361-363, No.4259. Also, the statement of the Prophet narrated by Ali goes: “If you have only one day left, God will send a man from my family (*ahl baytī*) and fill (the Earth) with justice as it is (currently) filled with injustice.” *Ibid.*, vol.11, pp.372-373, No.4263.
- 2) Shigeru Kamada, “Messiah/Messianism,” *Shukyogaku Jiten (Encyclopedia of Religious Studies)*, eds. by Eiki Hoshino, et.al., Maruzen, 2010, pp.316-317.
- 3) Kojiro Nakamura, “A Structural Analysis of *Dhikr* and *Nembutsu*,” *Orient*, vol.7(1971), pp.75-96; Rikyu Kono, *Islam no Kokoro Shinshu no Kokoro (The Heart of Islam and the Heart of Shinshu Sect of Buddhism)*, Hozokan, 2004, pp.36-44. These works discuss the similarities between the worship of God in Islam and that of Amitabha in the Sinshu sect of Buddhism.
- 4) al-Shaykh al-Ṣadūq Ibn Bābūya al-Qummī, *Kamāl al-dīn wa-tamām al-ni’ma*, ed. by ‘Alī Akbar al-Ghaffārī, Qumm, 1405AH/1367AHs, pp.577-638. Also see the Introduction in: S. M. Stern and Sofie Walzer, *Three Unknown Buddhist Stories in an Arabic Version*, Oxford, 1971.
- 5) al-Shahraṣṭānī, *Kitāb al-Milal wa al-niḥal*, ed. by Muḥammad Sayyid Kaylānī, Bayrūt, n.d., vol.2, pp.252-253. For the translation of this description and commentaries, see Shahraṣṭani, *Livre des Religions et des Sectes II*, tr. by Daniel Gimaret & Guy Monnot, [Leuven] : Peeters, ca 1986, pp.530-533. This description is also discussed in Kazuko Shiojiri, *Islam no Ningenkan, Sekaikan: Shukyo Shiso no Shin'en he (View of Men and View of the World: Into the Depth of Religious Thought)*, University of Tsukuba Press, 2008, pp. 293-295. One of Japan’s earliest papers on Shahraṣṭani is Tomonobu Ishibashi, “Sekaide Ichiban Furui ‘Sekai Shukyoshi’ – Arabia no Gakusho, al-Shahraṣṭani no Chosaku” (The World’s Oldest ‘History of World Religions’ – Works of al-Shahraṣṭani, an Arabian Scholar), *Shukyogaku Ronko*, Aoyama Shoin, 1948, pp.

- 189-196. The following book discusses how Indian religions in general, including Buddhism, were understood by Shahrastani and other Muslim intellectuals. Bruce B. Lawrence, *Shahrastānī on the Indian Religions*, The Hague, 1976.
- 6) Khadir is identified with the character described in the verses 65-82 in Chapter 18 (The Cave) of the Quran, in which he is portrayed as a person who has more wisdom than even Moses. His wisdom is said to be beyond human understanding.
 - 7) For example: Ryusho Hikata, "Messiah Shiso to Miraibutsu Miroku no Shinkoni Tsuite (On Messianism and Belief in Meitreyā, a Future Buddha)," *Proceedings of the Japan Academy*, vol. 31, No. 1 (1973), pp. 35-43; Chusei Suzuki, "Part 1 Soron: Sennen Okokuundo no Sekaishiteki Tenkai (Part 1: General: Development of Millenarian Movements in World History)," *Sennen Okokuteki Minshuundo no Kenkyu – Chugoku, Tonan Asia ni Okeru (Study on Civil Millenarian Movements in China and Southeast Asia)* ed. by Chusei Suzuki, University of Tokyo Press, 1983(82), pp.3-106; Jan Nattier, "The Meanings of the Maitreya Myth - A Typological Analysis," *Maitreya, the Future Buddha*, eds. by Alan Sponberg and Helen Hardacre, Cambridge, 2010 (1988), pp.23-47; Ronald E. Emmerick, "Buddhism," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, London, 1990, vol.4, p.494. As for a historical survey of Buddhism in Central Asia including Maitreya belief there, see Komei Nara & Kosei Ishii (eds.) *Shin Asia Bukkyoshi 5 (Chuo Asia) The Crossroads of Civilization and Culture*, Kosei Shuppansha, 2010.
 - 8) Ronald E. Emmerick, "Buddhism," vol.4, p.494.
 - 9) Bunzaburo Matsumoto, *Miroku Jodo-ron, Gokuraku Jodo-ron (On Maitreya Pure Land and Amitabha Pure Land)*, Heibonsha (Toyo Bunko 747), 2006, pp. 107-109; originally published in 1910, this is a pioneering work on the Maitreya belief in the modern Buddhist studies. This book discusses the development of Chinese translations of several Maitreya *sutras* from historical and philological perspectives, and argues that the completion of *sutras* on Maitreya's descent preceded that of *sutras* of Maitreya's ascent, and the latter *sutras* were developed in a manner to incorporate the former.
 - 10) The Chinese texts of the *Three Sutras on Maitreya* are contained in *Taisho Shinshu Daizo-kyo (Taisho Tripitaka)* vol. 14, pp. 418-420 (No. 452), pp. 421-423 (No. 453), and pp. 428-434 (No. 456), respectively. I also referred to their Japanese translations contained in *Kokuyaku Issaikyo Indosenjutsubu* (Kyoshu 2), Daito Publishing, 1974 (1919), pp. 1-50 and the commentaries on the *Three Sutras on Maitreya* by Genmyo Ono attached to this literature. For recent studies on these *sutras*, I referred to Hajime Nakamura, *Kokuyaku Issaikyo Indosenjutsubu* (revised version) *Kyoshubu Kaisetsu*, Daito Publishing, 1976, pp. 8-9. There are three *sutras* in which the titles are almost identical to the *Sutra on the Contemplation of Maitreya's Descent*, one of the *Three Sutras on Maitreya*. Some argue that they correspond to the *Sutra on Maitreya's Descent and Great Achievement* translated by Kumarajiva. See *Daizokyo Zenkaisetsu Daijiten*, eds. by Shigeo Kamata, et al., Yuzankaku Shuppan, 1998, p. 133 and the commentaries on the *Three Sutras on Maitreya* in *Kokuyaku Issaikyo*, pp. 2-9.
 - 11) Three evil paths mean hell, the world of hungry spirits, and the world of animals.

- 12) Arhat is a saint who has freed himself from earthly desires and the cycle of reincarnation. The state of “arhat” is the highest state that a Buddhist monk can attain. From the viewpoint of Mahayana Buddhism, which gives preference to the salvation of others, however, *arhats* are regarded as “less important” saints because they are dedicated exclusively to the salvation of themselves following the teachings of Theravada Buddhism.
- 13) Four Noble Truths (the truth of suffering, the truth of the cause of suffering, the truth of the end of suffering, and the truth of the path that frees us from suffering) and the Twelve Links are both basic Buddhist teachings. From the viewpoint of the Bodhisattva of Mahayana Buddhism, however, both Four Noble Truths along with the Noble Eightfold Path (that constitutes the truth of the path) and the Twelve Links have been regarded as inferior teachings, as the former is for “voice hearers” who practice Buddhist teachings for the good of themselves only, and the latter is for self-enlightenment. The Maitreya belief (especially the belief in Maitreya’s ascent) was in a sort of competition with the Amitabha belief, and eventually it was overshadowed by the latter. This may be because of the Theravada doctrine inherent in the Maitreya belief. Genshin states in *Ojo Yoshu* that while both Mahayana Buddhism and Theravada Buddhism can guide people to the Tusita heaven, only Mahayana Buddhism can guarantee rebirth in a Pure Land, and therefore Mahayana Buddhism is superior to Theravada Buddhism. See “Genshin,” commentary by Mizumaro Ishida, *Nihon Shiso Taikei (A Collection of Philosophical Thoughts in Japan)* 6, Iwanami Shoten, 1974 (70), pp. 81-84 and Tasuku Hayami, *Miroku Shinko – Mouhitotsu no Jodoshinko (Maitreya Belief: Another Pure Land Belief)*, Hyoronsha, 1971, pp. 116-117. To learn more about the competition between the Amitabha belief and the Maitreya belief in Japan, refer to the following work, which discusses many cases of such competition; Jokai Hiraoka, *Nihon Mirokujodoshiso tenkaishi no kenkyu (Study on the History of the Thought of Maitreya’s Pure Land in Japan)*, Daizo Shuppan, 1977.
- 14) Chusei Suzuki, *Chugokushi ni okeru kakumei to shukyo (Revolutions and Religions in Chinese History)*, University of Tokyo Press, 1974, pp. 60-62.
- 15) The following paper presents a unique view by discussing the Islamic view of history such that the world has been declining toward its end since the days of prophet Muhammad, in comparison with the Buddhist belief in the Latter Day of the Law; Ko Nakata, “Mappo no hogaku - Juwaini no hometsuron” (Jurisprudence of Mappo - Al-Juwaini on Extinction of Shari’a), *Orient*, vol. 39, No. 2 (1996), pp. 66-82.
- 16) The *Sutra on Decline of Law (Taisho Tripitaka* vol. 12, No. 396, pp. 1118-1119) gives a description of the latter days of the world when the Buddhist teachings are lost, natural catastrophes frequently occur, and people are corrupted. At its end, the *sutra* states that Maitreya will come to this world to save people tens of millions years later. Unlike the Maitreya *sutras*, this description bears a similarity to the coming of Mahdi. The original text of this *sutra* is quoted almost entirely in Chapter 34: Description of the State of Decline of Buddha’s Law (quoting *the Sutra on Decline of Law*) (*Taisho Tripitaka*, vol. 50, No. 2040, pp. 83-84) which is contained in *Shijiapu (Genealogy of*

- the Buddha*) vol. 5, compiled by Sengyou (445-518), a Buddhist monk from the Liang Dynasty.
- 17) See Chusei Suzuki, *Chugokushi ni okeru Kakumei to Shukyo (Revolutions and Religions in Chinese History)*, University of Tokyo Press, 1974.
 - 18) al-Shaykh al-Mufid, *al-Irshād*, Bayrūt, 1399AH/1979CE. I also referred to the English translation of this book. I. K.A. Howard (tr.), *Kitāb al-Irshād - The Book of Guidance into the Lives of the Twelve Imams*, London, 1981.
 - 19) For the jurisprudential meaning of occultation, see Shigeru Kamada, “Islam niokeru Ken’i no Kozo” (Structure of Authority in Islam), *Gendai Shukyogaku*, vol. 4 (Structure and Destruction of Authority), ed. by Tsuneya Wakimoto, Keiichi Yanagawa, University of Tokyo Press, 1992, pp. 115-136.
 - 20) al-Shaykh al-Ṣadūq Ibn Bābūya al-Qummī, *Kamāl al-dīn wa-tamām al-ni’ma*, pp.330-331. The description about the reporter is omitted. This *hadith* is contained in the following work, though there are some minor discrepancies in the description. Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār: al-Jāmi’a li-durar akhbār al-a’imma al-aṭḥār*, Bayrūt, 1403AH/1983, vol.52, pp.191-192.
 - 21) Abū Ja’far Muḥammad ibn Muslim al-Thaqafī (d.150AH/767-8). This *hadith* was reported by three successive Imams, Baqir, Sadiq, and Kazim. See Abū Ja’far Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī, *Rijāl al-Ṭūsī*, al-Najaf, 1380AH/1961, pp.135, 300, 358; Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī al-Ardabilī al-Gharawī al-Ḥā’irī, *Jāmi’ al-ruwāt*, Qumm, 1403AH, vol.2, pp.193-200.
 - 22) Jesus appears also in the Quran and in *hadiths*. While a Sunni *hadith* about Mahdi is referred to in note (1) above, the *hadiths* of Sunni Islam often attribute the role of Messiah to Jesus. One of them states that a false Messiah named Dajjal appears during the last days of the world and receives worship from the people. Then, Jesus comes and captures him to kill him, and restores peaceful life for the people. Eventually, a blast of wind brings death to all believers on Earth, and the “last time” comes to the evil men who have survived. Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, al-Qāhira, 1421AH/2000, vol.2, pp.1234-1236 (No.7560)/*Nichiyaku Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim (Japanese translation of Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim)* vol. 3, tr. by Sadamoto Isozaki, Kasuke Iimori, Yoshiharu Ogasawara, Japan-Saudi Arabia Society, 1989, pp. 766-769 and vol. 1, p. 77 (Nos. 406-408)/vol. 1, pp. 114-115. For the understanding of Jesus by Shia Muslims, see Mahdi Muntazir Qaim/ Muhammad Legenhausen (tr.), *Jesus peace be with him Through Qur’an and Shi’te Narrations*, New York, 2005.
 - 23) *Irshād*, pp.356-358/ Eng. pp.541-542.
 - 24) The word “thabaqa” in the original text (p. 357) is read as “bathaqa.”
 - 25) While the Karkh district in the western part of Baghdad prospered with canal transportation, the district had a huge population of Shia Muslims, who often had conflicts with Sunni Muslims in the adjacent district during the reign of the Buwayhid Dynasty. In this light, this description can be interpreted to mean that a new bridge allows for the invasion of enemies and causes damage to this district.
 - 26) This description is based on the remarks of Ali about “red death” (*mawt ahmar*), “white

- death” (*mawt abyad*) and “locust damage” (*Irshād*, p.359/ Eng. p.544). Ali states that the “red death” is brought by the sword and the “white death” by plague (*tā’ūn*). Accordingly, the “swift death” (*mawt dhari*) can also mean “death by plague.”
- 27) See *Qur’ān*, 5:60.
- 28) *Irshād*, p.363/ Eng. p.550. This is the saying of the 6th Imam, Ja’far al-Ṣādiq (d.148AH/ 765CE).
- 29) *Irshād*, pp.364f./ Eng. pp.552f. This is the saying of Ja’far al-Ṣādiq.
- 30) *Irshād*, p.364/ Eng. p.552. This is the saying of Ja’far al-Ṣādiq.
- 31) *Irshād*, p.366/ Eng. p.554.
- 32) This paper is preceded by my oral presentation titled “Mahdism and Maitreya Buddhism” at the 7th International Conference on Mahdism Doctrine (Tehran, Tir 24, 1390AHs/ July 15, 2011). At this conference, a participant indicated that, today, Mahdism doctrine pays little heed to the use of armed forces by Mahdi upon his coming. The classical view on the coming of Mahdi, which is discussed in this paper, is based on the assumption that Shia Muslims are oppressed people. However, in reality, the principle of submission to the authority of Mahdi in occultation is at the basis of the current Iranian regime, and under this regime, the exercise of armed forces is no longer necessary upon the appearance of Mahdi. This discovery made me realize, anew, that Shia Islam is a living religion.