



## Manichaean Views of Buddhism

David A. Scott

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*David A. Scott*

MANICHAEAN  
VIEWS OF  
BUDDHISM

My religion is of that kind that it will be manifest in every country  
and in all languages and it will be taught in far away countries.<sup>1</sup>

With these fine words Mani proclaimed his message to be one destined to be carried to all corners of the known world, and historically this proved to be true. From its Mesopotamian hearth at Babylon, Manichaeism spread westward into the Roman Empire as far as Spain, while also spreading eastward over the Iranian plateau into Central Asia and from there still further eastward to the very shores of the South China Sea. The story of Manichaeism in the West is fairly well known, with a prominent feature being the Manichaean usage of Christian concepts to spread its own message and the consequent strenuous efforts of Christianity to eradicate this new rival. That story, though, does not concern us here. Instead, our eyes turn to the East where, throughout Central Asia and China, Manichaeism faced the older well-established Buddhist tradition to which it had to respond

<sup>1</sup> Middle Persian M5794, trans. in J. Asmussen, *Manichaean Literature* (New York, 1975), p. 12. This work by Asmussen is an important repository for Middle Persian and Parthian material. Recent general studies of Manichaeism by M. Tardieu, *Le Manichéisme* (Paris, 1983); and, scheduled for 1985, an English work by S. Lieu for Manchester University Press.

over several centuries. What we will try to do is to ascertain whether there was any particular pattern behind the ensuing Manichaean responses to Buddhism.

The earliest Manichaean responses came from Mani himself (216–77). Following his early upbringing and eventual breakaway from the Gnostic-Baptist community that he had belonged to in Mesopotamia,<sup>2</sup> he had very quickly traveled by sea to the Indus Valley (then under Sasanian control). According to Manichaean missionary sources, like the Coptic *Kephalaia*, he spent some two years there (240–42), enjoying some local success and setting up a local Manichaean community.<sup>3</sup> Buddhism as such was not mentioned in the context of the Indus Valley sojourn, although in fact that period was one where Buddhism was at the height of its strength in India, with established Sarvastavadin and vibrant new Mahayana strands prominent in northwest India. It is quite possible that Mani's acceptance of rebirth, nonkilling of animals, and monasticism owed something to this early contact with Buddhism. Following the accession of Shapur to the Sasanian throne (242–72), Mani chose to return overland to Iran through the kingdom of Turan (present-day Baluchistan), which was also under Sasanian sway. According to Manichaean missionary sources, Mani managed to convert the local ruler away from his previous Buddhist beliefs.<sup>4</sup> Thus it was that Mani returned to Sasanian Iran with firsthand personal knowledge of Buddhism to set alongside his earlier knowledge of Christianity and Zoroastrianism. The fortunes of Mani in the Sasanian Empire do not concern us directly in this study. It suffices to note that the generally benevolent attitude of Shapur enabled Mani to travel around the empire setting up various Manichaean groups, but that after his death the developing Zoroastrian hostility and ascendancy at the Sasanian court of Bahram I (274–77) brought about Mani's imprisonment and death in 276–77.

This study is concerned with the attitude Mani took toward Buddhism—no mere academic question. I have already mentioned Mani's own personal encounter with Buddhism. Although Mani himself did not return to those fledgling communities set up in the Buddhist-dominated areas of the Indus Valley and Turan, his attention

<sup>2</sup> Indications by the Muslim historian al-Nadim, writing in his *Kitab al-Fihrist* (tenth century A.D.), were graphically confirmed in the Manichaean biography of Mani's life, *The Cologne Mani Codex*, trans. R. Cameron and A. Dewey (Missoula, Mont., 1979).

<sup>3</sup> W. Sundermann, "Mani in India," in *Proceedings of the International Conference on the History and Culture of Central Asia in the Kushan Period, Dushanbe, September 27–October 6, 1968* (Moscow, 1975), 2:153–57, and "Mani, India, and the Manichean Religion" (paper delivered at The Society for South Asian Studies, London, October 19, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> Parthian M8286, M481, M1306 II, M5911, M1307 pieces, in Asmussen, pp. 18–19.

continued to turn eastward. The Manichaean M4575 fragment states how, on his return from India, Mani immediately sent out his father, Patteg, and brother, John, to take over the care of those Manichaean groups established there by him.<sup>5</sup> (Unfortunately we have no further material describing subsequent Manichaean fortunes in that area, except for al-Nadim's mention in his *Kitab-al-Fihrist* of an *Epistle to the Indians* that had been composed by Mani, but which is not extant.) As significant perhaps was Mani's sending of his close disciple, Mar Ammo, to the east Iranian border zones of the empire to spread the Manichaean message further in an increasingly Buddhist-dominated environment. Of particular interest are Manichaean sources like the M2 and M216 fragments, which have him entering the Kushan lands around the Oxus, long a Buddhist stronghold, which politically had been recently subjugated by the Sasanians and enjoying some success.<sup>6</sup> What were the earliest Manichaean attitudes toward Buddhism, as formulated by Mani himself?

An immediate mention of Buddhism comes in his *Shahburkhan* text, which he presented as his first written piece of scripture to Shapur in 225. According to Mani: "Wisdom and deeds have always from time to time been brought to mankind by Messengers of God. So in one age they have been brought by the messenger called Buddha to India. . . . Thereupon this revelation has come down, this prophecy in this last age, through me, Mani."<sup>7</sup> Here we have Mani accepting the Buddha (as he did also Zoroaster and Christ) as a previous "Messenger of Light" who had preached the same doctrine as was later brought by Mani. The problem then arose that the continuing Buddhist tradition (as also the Zoroastrian and Christian ones) was in Mani's own time teaching various views that were often the very antithesis of Manichaean doctrine. How was Mani to explain this apparent contradiction? Mani's resolution of these doctrinal differences can be seen interspersed throughout many of his teachings. For example, in the Middle Persian M5794 piece, he described how the earlier traditions had been limited in scope geographically for "the primeval religions were in one country and one language," in contrast to his own universal message.<sup>8</sup> The Coptic *Kephalaia* reported similar comments by Mani: "He [Jesus] who has his church in the West, he and his church have not reached the East; the choice of him who has chosen his church in the East has not

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 21–23.

<sup>7</sup> As recorded by Abu'l-Rayhān Muhammad al-Biruni, *The Chronicle of Ancient Nations*, trans. E. Sachau (London, 1879), p. 190. The original Manichaean text is no longer extant.

<sup>8</sup> Asmussen, p. 12.

come to the West. . . . But my hope, mine will go towards the West, and she will also go to the East. And they shall hear the voice of her message in all languages, and shall proclaim her in all cities. My church is superior in this first part to all previous churches, for these previous churches were chosen in particular countries and in particular cities. My church, mine shall spread in all cities and my Gospel shall touch every country.”<sup>9</sup> Again the contrast was made with Mani’s work, which had spread his message during his own lifetime into both East and West, in contrast (in Mani’s eyes) to the Buddha whose work had remained in his lifetime to the East (India). Such comments by Mani about the geographical limitations of earlier revelations curiously evoke similar comments made in Baha’i literature during the past hundred years.<sup>10</sup>

However, the question still remained to be resolved why, even with such geographical limitations, the Buddha, despite being a previous Messenger of Light (like Mani), had given rise to a Buddhist tradition that did not preach the same message as that of Mani. Mani’s answer was to claim that such divergences were a result of later misunderstandings and corruptions creeping into primeval religions like Buddhism (and also Zoroastrianism and Christianity). By such an approach Mani could split the figure of the Buddha away from the later Buddhist tradition that rivaled Manichaeism. The Middle Persian M5794 piece made this point at a general level: “The former religions existed as long as they had the pure leaders, but when the leaders had been led upwards [died] then their religions fell into disorder and became negligent in commandments and works.”<sup>11</sup> By way of contrast that same Manichaean piece proclaimed that Mani’s message would never become corrupted on account of the care which he had personally taken in his lifetime to write out his doctrines (the “living books,” nine in all, which, coupled with his reformation of the Middle Persian language, transformed Iranian literary development). However, the Buddha (as was also the case with other primeval messengers) had not taken this precaution. As the *Kephalaia* 7.23 noted: “He selected and complemented his community [*ekklesia*] and revealed his hopes to them. But he did not write down his wisdom in books. His disciples who came after him recalled the *bit* of wisdom they had gleaned from the Buddha and

<sup>9</sup> *Kephalaia* 154, trans. in S. Lieu, *The Religion of Light: An Introduction to the History of Manichaeism in China* (Hong Kong, 1979), p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> A separate study will be made about these similar Manichaean and Baha’i treatment of earlier revelations. Suffice to note the similar Baha’i comments about the writing of the Buddhist scriptures after the Buddha and the identification of Baha’ullah with Maitreya.

<sup>11</sup> Asmussen, p. 12.

committed it to writing."<sup>12</sup> As a result of such views Mani was indeed able to reconcile the earlier appearance of Shakyamuni Buddha as a Messenger of Light with his own arrival as the last such messenger. For Mani there was no difference between the message originally brought by the Buddha and his own. Rather, the difference lay between the Buddha's original message and the later Buddhist tradition, which had retained only an incomplete record of the Buddha's teaching and which had fallen prey to corrupting influences. It was not Mani who was out of step with the Buddha, it was instead the Buddhist tradition that was so out of step through its misunderstanding.

On the one hand, then, Mani did accept the figure of the Buddha as a previous Messenger of Light, like himself. Yet, on the other hand, it was a somewhat qualified acceptance, given his criticism of the existing Buddhist tradition. Given the geographical limitation of the Buddha's ministry and the incomplete understanding of his message by the later Buddhist community, Mani felt quite able to interpret the Buddha's original wisdom as he saw fit. Mani's own revelation gave him a secure foundation. As he himself claimed in the Middle Persian M5794: "This revelation of mine of the two principles and my living books, my wisdom and knowledge are above and better than those of the previous religions."<sup>13</sup> Mani, and his later followers down the centuries, could use whatever *bit* of Buddhist wisdom they thought appropriate, secure in the knowledge that the full vessel of wisdom had been given and recorded by Mani.

Within Mani's own lifetime his commitment to send his disciples out in all directions meant a continuing Manichaean encounter with Buddhism. From the east Iranian areas like Merv and Bactria that were the focus of Manichaean missionary efforts (led by the Parthian disciple, Mar Ammo), Manichaeism started gradually to penetrate further eastward into Central Asia. For these first centuries Parthian was the official language used in Manichaean circles of east Iran/Central Asia. What is immediately clear from such Manichaean literature (as compared with their Coptic and Middle Persian texts) is the strong Buddhist environment within which the Manichaean writers were having to express their own beliefs. The Parthian M8286 piece shows this in its description of Mani's successful conversion of the previously Buddhist ruler of Turan, in which that ruler paid homage to Mani: "You are the Buddha, and we are sinful men."<sup>14</sup> Since

<sup>12</sup> *Kephalaia* 7.23, trans. in H. Klimkeit, *Manichaean Art and Calligraphy* (Leiden, 1982), p. 1 (my emphasis).

<sup>13</sup> Asmussen, p. 12.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

the literal meaning of the Buddha was “Enlightened One,” the Manichaean writers were applying an audacious (but from their own perspective quite appropriate) functional adoption from Buddhism. A further twist in these Parthian circles was to identify Mani with Maitreya, the future Buddha foretold to appear after Shakyamuni. In the M42 we read the words of the imprisoned Light (i.e., the soul): “The complaints went off from me for help at the time when Shakyamuni Buddha . . . me. He opened the door of salvation to the fortunate souls that he redeemed among the Indians.” To which the reply given to the imprisoned Light was: “Because of the arts and wisdom that you received from Buddha, Dibat, the great virgin, envied you. When he [Buddha] went into Nirvana, he told you ‘Await Maitreya here.’”<sup>15</sup> Not surprisingly the Manichaeans then claimed that Maitreya, in the person of Mani, had come. According to the Parthian M801: “From paradise the gate was opened, and it was happiness to us: The commander Maitreya has come, Mar Mani, to a new throne . . . Buddha Maitreya has come, Mar Mani the Apostle, he brought victory.”<sup>16</sup> As Maitreya, sitting on that new throne, Mani was in an even stronger position to announce the correct laws applicable for those later times. Armed with this extra piece of Buddhist legitimacy, the Manichaean missionaries could proceed yet further with selective use of Buddhist themes.

The whole trend within Parthian Manichaean literature was to respond more and more to Buddhist terminology and forms. Mar Ammo, the great apostle to the East, had already started this in Mani’s own lifetime, for in the *Huwīdagmān* and *Angad Rōshnān* hymns attributed to him he uses Indian loanwords like *krm* (“action,” Sanskrit *karma*), *mrn* (“death,” Sanskrit *marāṇa*), and *nrh* (Sanskrit *naraka*).<sup>17</sup> One particular term from Buddhism adopted by Parthian circles was *prnybr’n*, used to denote the Sanskrit *parinirvāṇa* (literally, “complete nirvana,” that is to say, death and passing away), which gave rise to a whole cycle of hymns mourning the *parinirvāṇa* of Mani. An early example of this comes from the Parthian M5, which can be dated to 386: “It was a day of pain and a time of sorrow

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>17</sup> These two hymns by Mar Ammo are trans. by M. Boyce, *The Manichaean Hymn Cycles in Parthian* (London, 1954); see glossary for examples mentioned in this study of words borrowed from Buddhism. Most of the Sanskrit words appearing in Parthian Manichaean texts seem to have come via the intermediary of the Gandhari Prakrit used by Buddhism in northwest India and parts of Central Asia. General survey of Manichaean Parthian literature by A. Ghilain, *Essai sur la Langue Parthe, son système verbal d’après les textes manichéens du turkestan oriental* (Louvain, 1939). Sogdian came to replace Parthian in Manichaean usage by the seventh century.

when the Apostle of Light went into Parinirvana [prnybr'n]."<sup>18</sup> Later on in the Parthian M1202, composed during the sixth century in or around Balkh, further Buddhist usages can be seen within Manichaeism. The text enumerates the hours of the day and their particular *yakṣa* ("guardian"). That term is Indian, following the already established Buddhist *yakṣa* catalogs such as the *Mahamayuri* that were popular in Buddhist circles from the fourth century onward; and the figures are borrowed from the Buddhist lists (e.g., Bis-parṇ of Peshawar is none other than the Buddhist figure of Visvapani).<sup>19</sup> Within the later Parthian literature that continued to be used in the Tarim basin until the sixth/seventh centuries, a further range of Buddhist terms was taken over by Manichaean writers. Consequently in Manichaean circles we have terms like *byxš* ("to beg," Sanskrit *bhikṣate*), *šmn* ("wanderer," Sanskrit *śramaṇa*), *lwg* ("level of reality," Sanskrit *loka*), *mwxš* ("deliverance," Sanskrit *mokṣa*), *sms'r* ("shifting material world," Sanskrit *samsāra*), *pwn* ("accumulated merit by deeds," Sanskrit *punya*), or, in a more mythological vein, *Zmbwdyg* (Sanskrit *Jambudvīpa*) and *Smyr* (Sanskrit *Sumeru*).<sup>20</sup>

The effect of all this can be seen in a Manichaean piece reminiscent of Buddhist literature. The M5815 states: "Now the devout one should consider himself as high as the Sumeru mountains. . . . The pure devout must sit down in pious meditation and he should turn away from sin and increase what is pious. In this samsara there is nothing except only the merit and pious deeds that men having knowledge do." Not surprisingly this Buddhist-like piece is given its Manichaean anchorage as it continues: "Those who follow me Mar Mani . . . and want the pure and just Elect as leaders, they are the ones that are saved and find salvation from this samsara and reach eternal redemption."<sup>21</sup> Superficially Buddhist modes of spiritual practice were all right, as long as they were conducted within the official safeguards and correct interpretation of Mani and his later hierarchical successors.

<sup>18</sup> Asmussen, p. 57. R. Ort, *Mani: A Religio-Historical Description of His Personality* (Leiden, 1967), pp. 238–43, for this type of *parinirvāna* literature in Manichaeism.

<sup>19</sup> W. Henning, trans., "Two Manichaean Magical Texts," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 12 (1947): 47–57, p. 50, sees this piece as composed in or near Balkh.

<sup>20</sup> Most recent studies by N. Sims-Williams, "Indian Elements in Parthian and Sogdian," in *Sprachen des Buddhismus in Zentralasien*, ed. K. Rohrborn and W. Veenker (Wiesbaden, 1983), pp. 132–41; H. Klimkeit, "Gottes- und Selbsterfahrung in der gnostisch-buddhistischen Religionsbegegnung Zentralasiens," *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 35, no. 3 (1983): 236–47. The latter talks about the "Buddhisierung" of Manichaean language.

<sup>21</sup> Asmussen, p. 58.

This process of adoption and adaptation of suitable Buddhist themes was even more clearly shown in China, where Manichaeism was formally introduced at the imperial court in 694, only to be forcibly repressed afterward in the Confucian reaction of 845.<sup>22</sup> From this open period for Manichaeism in China comes the *Compendium of the Doctrines and Styles of the Teaching of Mani, the Buddha of Light*, which, with its praising of Mani as the “Buddha of Light,” strikes a forthright note and which was composed in 731 on the order of the emperor. In it we find Mani presented in Buddhistic attire: “He because of his great compassion opposing the demonic forces and personally receiving the pure instructions from the venerable Lord of Light became incarnate and is therefore called the Apostle of Light. Being most sincere, profoundly intelligent, devoted and firm and strong in argument, He is called the King of Law of Perfect Wisdom. Through emptiness responding to spirituality and holiness, through ‘bodhi’ beholding the Ultimate. He is called Mani, the Buddha of Light.”<sup>23</sup> All the great Mahayana themes are being bandied about, like compassion (*karuṇā*), law (*dharma*), perfect wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*), emptiness (*śūnyatā*), and insight (*bodhi*). Indeed the Manichaeans managed to turn the Mahayana key concept of *upāya* (“skillful means”) to their advantage by describing in this tract how Mani had been “for sixty years teaching skillful means.”<sup>24</sup> Naturally a lot of Manichaeism adoptions were easy to use for their purposes, since in themselves the terms were neutral in meaning. Thus *prajñā* (“wisdom”) and *bodhi* (“insight”) could be bandied about by both Buddhists and Manichaeans, while meaning different things for each tradition. Ecclesiastical titles used by the Buddhist hierarchy could be used quite easily by the incoming Manichaeans.<sup>25</sup> At a more doctrinal level the various Buddha fields (*Buddha-kṣētras*) could be used in connection with the Manichaeism views on the various Emanations of Light, in almost a kind of flexible number game. Using the *Compendium* text we have such a description about Mani: “Being clad in a white robe symbolizes the four pure dharmakayas. His occupying the white throne depicts the five vajra-lands.”<sup>26</sup> Thus the

<sup>22</sup> Lieu, *The Religion of Light*.

<sup>23</sup> “The Compendium of the Doctrines and Styles of the Teachings of Mani, the Buddha of Light,” trans. W. Haloun and W. Henning, *Asia Major* 3 (1952): 184–212, p. 190.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 190–91. See M. Pye, *Skillful Means: A Concept in Mahayana* (London, 1978) for its Buddhist context.

<sup>25</sup> R. Gauthiot, “Quelques termes techniques Bouddhiques et Manichéens,” *Journal Asiatique* (1911), pp. 49–67.

<sup>26</sup> *The Compendium* . . . , p. 194. For respective Buddhist and Manichaeism models, see B. Sangharakshita, *A Survey of Buddhism*, 4th ed. (Bangalore, 1976), pp. 265–81;

four *kāyas* (“bodies”) of the Buddha were assimilated to the Manichaeic fourfold Godhead.

One of the most salient features of Manichaeism was its use of light symbolism, for indeed it was the “Religion of Light,” to use its common Chinese title; and so Mani’s depiction as the “Buddha of Light” is highly appropriate according to Manichaeic values. It is not surprising therefore to find the Manichaeans keen to find analogous light symbolism in Buddhism. That was not difficult to do. The Pali *Sutta Nipāta* 442 painted a very poetic picture of the Buddha being a bringer of light to dispel the darkness of ignorance. In the Mahayana texts this luminous terminology is even more prominent. The Lotus Sutra (chap. 25) so described Avalokiteśvara/Kuan-Yin, while the *Suvarṇa-bhasottama Sūtra* translates in fact as “The Sutra of Golden Light.” Particularly appropriate for Manichaeic adaptation was the popular Pure Land tradition within Buddhism. This tradition centered around the figure of Amitabha Buddha, total devotion to whom dissolved the selfish ego. Amitabha’s name was in fact formed from the epithets *amita* (“infinite”) and *bha* (“light”); thus it is quite natural that light symbolism was used frequently for the description of Amitabha’s realm of Sukhavati (literally “Pure Land”) in Pure Land core texts like the longer and shorter versions of the *Sukhāvāti-vyūha Sūtra* and the *Amitayur-dhyāna Sūtra*. A comparison of the descriptions of the Buddhist realm of Amitabha and the Manichaeic realm of light (as, e.g., in the *Huwīdagmān* attributed to Mar Ammo) shows close similarities in style. This is not to suppose that these two lands of light fulfilled the same roles. The Buddhist realm, while easy and restful, was designed so that one could press forward without any strain to the further goal of Enlightenment; whereas the Manichaeic realm was where all the liberated souls (particles of light) were reunited with the Father of Light. The Buddhist realm was at heart but an interim, though very enjoyable, stage; while the Manichaeic realm was the final and proper destination.

Nevertheless these independent, yet so similar, descriptions were noticed by the Manichaeans. Given that they considered the revelation of Mani to be the fullest and best-preserved one, they could as always appropriate as much as they wanted of the Buddhist Pure Land tradition without the slightest qualms. This is indeed what happened in the *Mo ni chiao hsia pu tsan* hymns, where a superior Manichaeic understanding is implied about the Pure Land: “I also petition the clean, pure and wonderful Radiance, the *new* Pure Land . . . all

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A. Jackson, “The Fourfold Aspect of the Supreme Being in Manichaeism,” *Bulletin of the Linguistic Society of India* 5 (1935): 287–96.

the Buddhas and Lohans (Arahants) in the *past* have all established wonderful Laws for the five lights. *Now* the brave and resolute Mani, the venerable Lord, has shown and revealed *all* about them."<sup>27</sup> As can be seen, the emphasis was on the superiority of the Manichaeian message, which was both a renewal of older concepts and also one more suitable for the present time.

One might be led to think that it was still a rather wholesale and indiscriminate attitude of adoption that the Manichaeians followed toward Buddhist material. This would be false, though, for in fact the Manichaeians were actually very selective in what they chose to use from the Buddhist tradition, although once they decided to use something they had no hesitation in exploiting it to the full. But as can be shown it was a very selective utilization. On the one hand, the Manichaeians were quite happy to incorporate and emphasize Mahayana themes like *sūnyatā* and *prajñāpāramitā* that were the central plank of Nagarjuna's Madhyamika school of thought, which through that very theme of *sūnyatā* claimed to demonstrate the falsity of any fundamental differences between *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra*. Although the Manichaeians were happy to take those Madhyamika tools, they did not want to take the nondiscriminatory conclusions that struck against the very heart of the Manichaeian dualism. In this case the Manichaeians ignored these uncomfortable Buddhist conclusions and, purloining Buddhist clothes, left behind the Buddhist body.

Faced with uncomfortable Mahayana Buddhist conclusions, the Manichaeians were quite ready to use the Hinayana parts for their own purposes. This is not too surprising since the Hinayana traditions (more accurately the Theravada and Sarvastavadin strands) tended to take a more negative stance vis-à-vis matter, the body, and the world than did the Mahayana. In consequence a dualistic ring came to be heard in those Hinayana circles, with *samsāra* virtually coming to be contrasted and opposed to nirvana at a deep quasi-absolute level of reality.<sup>28</sup> Thematically the disgust expressed in Mar Ammo's *Huvīdagmān* (4b, 6a) and the *Mo ni chiao hsia pu tsan* (19.27) about the body bring to mind similar-sounding comments in such Buddhist works as the *Vinaya Piṭaka* (1.6), *Samyutta Nikāya* (3.66), *Dīgha-Nikāya* (2.314–15), and *Dhammapada* (147–48). There remained within those Theravada texts the proviso that such negative

<sup>27</sup> *Mo Ni Chiao Hsia Pu Tsan: The Lower (Second) Section of the Manichaeian Hymns*, trans. Tsui Chi, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 11 (1943): 174–219, pp. 179, 198 for quote. See J. Pas, "The Meaning of Nien-fo in the Three Pure Land Sutras," *Studies in Religion* 7 (1978): 403–13, for a Buddhist perspective.

<sup>28</sup> Sangharakshita, pp. 231–43.

descriptions were not so much absolute truth but, rather, that they pertained to method; that is, the easiest way to break down attachments to the selfish physical ego was through viewing the body as foul in such meditative exercises, although in truth the body was not something to be either clung to or rejected in the light of the Buddhist Middle Way. Such Buddhist provisos were not to restrict the Manichaeans. Explicit confirmation of this selective approach to Buddhist material comes in the Manichaean adaptation of Sarvastavadin elements. Buddhist theory had been that the body was impermanent (*anicca*), being made up of five shifting aggregates called *skandhas* (literally, “heaps”). Within the Hinayana an extended *Abhidharma* system had evolved that had broken these five *skandhas* into yet smaller and smaller little shifting elements. The practical aim was to reduce attachments to the body and the selfish ego by showing the body to be a series of shifting, interdependent forces. A tendency toward overscholastic analysis had crept in, it seems, with the smallest elements (*dharmas*) being considered more or less as static pictures of ultimate reality, which fostered at times a somewhat discriminative approach, the dangers of which were felt by the Mahayana schools. Among those Hinayana groups, the Sarvastavadin school had made the most detailed *Abhidharma* schemata.

The Manichaean *Compendium* did claim support from Buddhist texts: “The teaching [*dharma*] expounds the principle of Light thus removing the delusion [*avidyā*] of Darkness; the doctrine explains the two natures taking discrimination [between them] for its particular method. Thus the Buddhist sutras say ‘If a man foresakes discrimination he destroys every law’ . . . and again ‘The birds turn to the air, game turns to forest and marsh, truth turns to discrimination, the Enlightened turns to Nirvana’. Unless one ascertains the principles and roots whereto can one turn?”<sup>29</sup> These Buddhist sutra verses quoted in support of the Manichaean dualistic (two natures) analysis can be traced to the *Abhidharma-jñāna-prasthāna*, a Sarvastavadin work that was brought back by the famous pilgrim Hsuan-tsang to China in 645. What this shows is Manichaeism ignoring the diverse Mahayana sutras that warned against discriminative quasi-dualistic approaches and turning where need be to the more scholarly Sarvastavadin texts, which employed a more discriminatory approach in their analysis of the bodily constituents. Even so the Manichaeans continued to stretch the acquired Buddhist concepts further away from their original nuances. Discrimination, in its qualified Buddhist sense of “choosing” between erroneous and correct views and training, was replaced by

<sup>29</sup> *The Compendium* . . . , p. 193, insertions by translator.

the Manichaeian use of discrimination to imply dualistic analysis between totally opposed aspects, that is, the two principles or natures of light/darkness manifested, as well as spirit/matter or soul/body. As with previous examples the Manichaeians used the existing Buddhist material extensively and imaginatively, yet without losing sight of the Manichaeian message that was to be conveyed.

In all of these regions, from India through the east Iranian zones of Central Asia to China itself, Manichaeians were always an incoming minority responding to a larger well-established Buddhist tradition that over the centuries had often enjoyed favored treatment from local rulers. However, the relative positions of power, Buddhist and Manichaeian, were dramatically changed in the eighth century. Sogdian merchants and missionaries had spread the Manichaeian message during the late seventh century, not only into China but also farther afield in the Altaic areas of Central Asia that were coming to be dominated by Turkish groups. Among these groups the Uighurs were prominent, establishing a powerful empire from their capital Ordu Baliq (in present-day northern Mongolia). A signal event took place in 762 when the Uighur emperor, suppressing on behalf of the T'ang emperor a revolt at Lo-yang in northern China, met some Manichaeian missionaries and was converted to that faith by them. On his return to Ordu Baliq he took four Manichaeian officials back with him and proclaimed Manichaeism to be the official religion of his empire, which dominated Central Asia. For the first (and only) time, under the Uighurs, the Manichaeians were to be the favored official religion. Although the Uighur empire based in Mongolia was to be shattered in 840 by the Kirghiz nomads, some of the Uighur managed to reconstitute a kingdom around Turfan (north Tarim basin) that lasted until the thirteenth century and that provided a continuing sympathetic milieu for the Manichaeians. In these Turkish areas Buddhism was a well-established tradition, and so it is interesting to consider how (from its position of "power") Manichaeism responded to Buddhism in that Uighur setting. Some of this process of response is illuminated by Manichaeian artistic material from the ninth to the twelfth centuries found in the Turfan oasis. This supplements and amplifies the indications found in Manichaeian texts.

An early source for discerning Manichaeian responses to Buddhism, in this slightly different Turkish setting, comes from the well-known inscription from Kara-balghasun that was composed around 815 (in Turkish, Chinese, and Sogdian) and that told the story of the introduction of Manichaeism into the Uighur Empire. The words of Bogu Khan, the Uighur emperor who was converted in 762, are particularly striking in the inscription: "Formerly I was unknowing and I called

the demons 'Buddha', now I have understood the true [law] and can no longer serve [these false gods]. . . . All images of demons, sculptures and paintings should be destroyed by fire; all those who venerate genii and fall down before them should [repent] and the Religion of Light be accepted."<sup>30</sup> If we read this at face value, Manichaeism when given its chance was displaying the same intolerance as it had suffered in the Roman and Sasanian Empires. It remains an open question how far this initial order by Bogu Khan was actually put into effect and whether it was taken on his own initiative (for political reasons?) or at the urgings of the now-established Manichaean hierarchy at court. Concerning Buddhism, the Manichaeans could claim that although Shakyamuni Buddha had indeed been a previous Messenger of Light, later Buddhists had corrupted and/or misunderstood his message and so were in need of correction (forcibly if the chance arose?) by the later Manichaeans. The paradoxical situation could arise, and is perhaps being described above, in which Buddhist "Buddhas" could be rejected as demonic, tainted idols and only assimilated Manichaean "Buddhas" accepted.

Unfortunately, there is not very much information on internal religious relations within the Uighur Empire. A greater range of material has come from the Turfan area, where the somewhat chastened Uighur remnants maintained their kingdom following the collapse of the empire in 840. Buddhism was even more well established in the Tarim basin than it had been in the former Uighur heartland in Mongolia. Consequently, the need for Manichaeans to come to some sort of terms was even greater. Many of the responses to Buddhism followed patterns similar to those already seen in Parthian, Sogdian, and Chinese circles, with adoptions and adaptations being made of suitable Buddhist material. It is no surprise to read Uighur texts talking about "my father Mani, the Buddha (*burxan*)" or about "the father of our souls, divine Mani Buddha."<sup>31</sup> For this reason it is difficult to know whether figures in the art found at Turfan portray Shakyamuni or another Buddha from the Buddhist tradition, or Mani, the most recent "Buddha of Light" from the Manichaean tradition.<sup>32</sup> The preexisting Buddhist terminology was maintained but changed into Manichaean usage (e.g., the Manichaean "law" in the *Khvastvanift* 4.B). This sort

<sup>30</sup> Translated in H. Klimkeit, "Manichaean Kingship: Gnosis at Home in the World," *Numen* 29 (1982): 17–32, p. 21. See also U. Marazzi, "Alcuni problemi relativi alla diffusione del Manicheismo presso i Turchi nei secoli VIII–IX," *Annali dell'Istituto Orientale di Napoli* 39 (1979): 239–52.

<sup>31</sup> Translated, respectively, in Klimkeit, *Manichaean Art and Calligraphy* (n. 12 above), p. 40; Asmussen (n. 1 above), p. 51.

<sup>32</sup> Klimkeit, *Manichaean Art and Calligraphy*, p. 40, fig. 30.

of linguistic adoption, which has already been dealt with in connection with the Parthian and Chinese material, need not delay us further. However, artistically the Manichaean material found at Turfan complements this established linguistic pattern. Particular motifs make their way from the Buddhist world into that of the Manichaeans. Manichaean high *electi* appear seated on lotus thrones or, as in other pictures, with hands in the specific *vitarka mudra* teaching position employed by established Buddhist artists.<sup>33</sup> However, the teaching being given by the *electi* was that of Mani! Despite these clear artistic and literary adoptions from Buddhism, Manichaeism did not lose its own particular thrust. It seems probable that the popular confessional texts used by Manichaeans in Central Asia were indeed taken from the earlier existing Buddhist genre.<sup>34</sup> But, as the *Khvastvanift* shows, they were used to teach “the two principles . . . the light principle . . . the dark principle” (8.A) that was at the core of Manichaeism.<sup>35</sup>

A Manichaean text from Koco, dated from the ninth century, even mentions a false and a true Maitreya: “Maitreya on the earth [*Mitrii yir uza*]. The sign and vehicle of this son of demons will be a bull. He will be capable of every kind of trickery, ruse and magic. But Maitreya Buddha [*Mitrii burxan*], the son of God, will come and say, ‘I am the true son of God.’ On that occasion, there will be a *dintar*, an *élu* [i.e., high electus]. This *élu* will believe in the holy buddha and his salvation; the false Maitreya, the son of demons, will then speak to that *élu*.”<sup>36</sup> As always it was Mani and his successors, the high *electi*

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp. 34, 35, illustrations 21, 22.

<sup>34</sup> As demonstrated by J. Asmussen, *X<sup>v</sup>astvanift: Studies in Manichaeism* (Copenhagen, 1965), pp. 253–58. Ironically, later Manichaean influences have been traced in Buddhist confessional literature and other texts like the *Sakiz Yukmak* and *Maitrisimit* from Uighir Buddhist circles in eighth and ninth centuries; see H. Klimkeit, “Manichäische und buddhistische Beichtformeln aus Turfan,” *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 29, no. 3 (1977): 193–228, and *Manichaean Art and Calligraphy*, p. 33, for *Sakiz Yukmak* sutra. Manichaean artistic themes also seem to have entered Buddhism. See H. Klimkeit, “Vairocana und das Lichtkreuz: Manichäische Elemente in der Kunst von Alchi [West Tibet],” *Zentralasiatische Studien* 13 (1979): 357–99, and *Manichaean Art and Calligraphy*, pp. 32–33, illustrations 16 (from Kizil) and 17–20 (from Alchi). Interesting résumé of research on Buddhist-Manichaean interactions by J. Ries, “Bouddhisme et Manichéisme: Les Etapes d’une recherche,” in *Indianisme et Bouddhisme: Mélanges offerts à Mgr. Etienne Lamotte* (Louvain, 1980), pp. 281–95.

<sup>35</sup> Translated by J. Asmussen, *Manichaean Literature* (n. 1 above), p. 73.

<sup>36</sup> Translated by W. Baruch, “Maitreya d’après les sources de Serinde,” *Revue de l’histoire des religions* 132 (1948): 67–92, 77–78. It must be said that this is a somewhat curious text, for *Mitrii*’s sign and the vehicle of the bull evoke the Iranian god Mithra who was integrated into Manichaeism, rather than the Buddhist Maitreya who was also used as we have already seen by Manichaeans. Nevertheless, this figure is called *Mitrii burxan*, i.e., *Mitrii* the Buddha, which is why Baruch takes him to be Maitreya. The important point is the fact that the Manichaeans felt able to discriminate between a true (Manichaean interpreted) and false (non-Manichaean interpreted?) figure of

of the Manichaean church, who were the ones capable of distinguishing between the true and the false. Did this attitude just express itself through Manichaean literature, through its selective adoptions and adaptations; or was it also translated into direct physical action against other traditions that maintained their independence outside the Manichaean tradition, as seems to be indicated by the inscription from Kara-balghasun that was discussed earlier? The indications available to us seem to suggest the former. In 982 an envoy, Yang yen-te, sent by the Chinese court to the Uighur ruler Arslan, noticed at the Uighur center of Turfan some fifty Buddhist convents dating from the time of the T'ang dynasty together with a library of Chinese Buddhist texts. He also described a shrine to Mani (*Ma-ni-ssu*) "attended by Persian priests who carefully observe their particular regulations and declare the Buddhist books as heretical."<sup>37</sup> Yang yen-te's observations show that, after a century and a half of Manichaean dominance in Uighur political circles, Buddhism was still numerically strong. This suggests that there had indeed been no direct Manichaean persecution of its Buddhist rival. Furthermore Yang yen-te's brief words are important for showing current Manichaean attitudes toward Buddhism, which were that Buddhism had indeed some truth but that through misunderstanding and corruptions it had then diverged from the path taught by Shakyamuni Buddha, the Messenger of Light, and so had lapsed into heresy, unable to accept thereafter the renewal offered by Mani. As usual it was the Manichaean *electi* who were able to sort the wheat from the chaff in the various traditions encountered. From a Manichaean perspective the Buddhists were indeed tinged with heresy, for they had diverged and lapsed from the previously pure message brought by Shakyamuni Buddha, which was the same as that later one brought by the equally enlightened Mani.

Manichaeans continued to live alongside Buddhists in Central Asia until the coming of Islam, and their own internal decline resulted in a Manichaean disappearance by the thirteenth or fourteenth century. In China, Manichaeans and Buddhists had both been proscribed in 845. Whereas this situation lasted only a few years for Buddhism, for the

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*Mitrii*, a discrimination that could be applied to any encountered figure and that recalls the true and false Buddhas mentioned on the Uighur Manichaean inscription of Kara-balghasun.

<sup>37</sup> Translated by M. A. Stein, *Innermost Asia* (Oxford, 1926), p. 582, though some scholars like Pelliot have given this piece the sense that it was the Buddhists who considered the Manichaeans to be heretical. Be that as it may, both religions in their outward appearances would have appeared very similar due to the extensive Manichaean usages from Buddhism.

next centuries this was to be the continuing fate for the now hard-pressed Manichaeism community, which, although uprooted from northern China, did manage to maintain itself semiclandestinely in southern China.<sup>38</sup> The Manichaeism propensity selectively to adopt suitable Buddhist themes was also maintained. The coming of the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1260–1368) may have eased the pressures on the surviving Manichaeism cells in southern China, and it is from the Yuan period that a Manichaeism temple survived at Ch'uan-couch (medieval Zaiton) on the Fukien coast. Its outside was like an ordinary Buddhist temple, but the Buddha statue was un-Buddhist in its iconography. Its identity is clear, though, by the revealing dedicatory inscription in stone that was later placed at the entrance to the temple:

Mani, the Buddha of Light,  
the most pure light,  
the great and powerful wisdom,  
the highest and unsurpassable truth,  
Inscribed in the ninth month of the Chih-ch'ou  
year of the Cheng-tung period [1445].<sup>39</sup>

Such language is the type used by early Manichaeism in China, as we have most clearly seen in the *Compendium* of 731. After 700 years alongside their more numerous Buddhist neighbors in China, the Manichaeism were still following this selective, adoptive approach. By this time the political climate had turned against the Manichaeism again, and under the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) they were proscribed once more. Nevertheless, there are indications that the Manichaeism temple continued to function until the early seventeenth century.<sup>40</sup> By this late stage, with the ecclesiastical hierarchy more and more attenuated, the Manichaeism message did start to be affected at its core by Buddhist and especially Taoist concepts. So it was that Manichaeism finally disappeared from China, merging with some of the messianic secret societies that flourished in the seventeenth century, such as the Red Turban sect that preached the return of the Prince of Light (the *ming wang*).<sup>41</sup> Ironically the Manichaeism temple at Ch'uan-couch passed into its present Buddhist usage.

<sup>38</sup> S. Lieu, "Polemics against Manichaeism as a Subversive Cult in Sung China (A.D. c. 960–c. 1200)," *Bulletin of the John Rowlands University Library of Manchester* 62, no. 1 (1979): 132–67.

<sup>39</sup> S. Lieu, "Nestorians and Manichaeism on the South China Coast," *Vigilae Christianae* 34, no. 1 (1980): 71–88, 81, for inscription.

<sup>40</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 87–88, for a translation of the account by Ho Chiao-Yuan in the early seventeenth century.

<sup>41</sup> J. Langlois and S. K'o-K'uan, "Three Teachings Syncreticism and the Thought of Ming T'ai-tsu," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 43, no. 1 (1983): 97–139.

What has been shown in this long chronological span is that over the centuries, in east Iranian, Chinese, and Turkish circles, Manichaeism had been able to maintain its distinctive message, while at the same time making maximum use of the external Buddhist trappings that were available. Unity within the far-flung Manichaean community was maintained, with Mani's own composition of the seven canonical "living books" being the cohesive and authoritative doctrinal bond for these Manichaean groups spread from the shores of the Atlantic to the shores of the South China Sea. The simple yet forceful dualistic analysis was preserved, although it was presented in rich detail according to the preexisting cultural and religious background of local areas. Consequently the Manichaeans were able to present their own spiritual message through a Buddhist medium, secure in their own minds that they had the fullest revelation as given by Mani. To use the already quoted *Kaphalaia*, "bits" of recorded Buddhist wisdom could be used without scruple within the superior "totality" of Manichaean wisdom. Shakyamuni Buddha could be, and was, accepted without having to accept actual Buddhist doctrine that did not agree with Mani's analysis. Such a policy was outrageous for Buddhism, as can be seen in its literature, but according to Manichaean premises it was quite proper.

*Christ Church College of Higher Education*