The Fusion of Maitreya and Messiah Symbols in East Asian New Religions: An Examination of Daesoon Jinrihoe in Korea and Caodaism in Vietnam

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Abstract

The research explores the significant cultural and religious exchanges between Western and East Asian cultures initiated by Jesuit missionaries from the 16th century onward. By employing a strategy of "cultural integration," the Jesuits harmonized Christian teachings with Confucian ideals, appealing to East Asian intellectuals. They used Christian messianic symbols and the figure of Jesus Christ to connect with East Asian religious symbols such as Maitreya, the Buddhist Savior, and Shangdi, the Supreme God in Chinese tradition. This integration combined Christian monotheistic ideas with traditional East Asian beliefs. To illustrate this point, the research examines the evolution of messianic symbols in two major East Asian religious movements: Daesoon Jinrihoe in Korea and Caodaism in Vietnam. Both religions merged the symbols of Maitreya and the Messiah to create the concept of a "universal savior," represented as Jeungsan in Daesoon Jinrihoe and Cao Đài Tiên Ông in Caodaism.

Keywords: Fusion; Maitreya; Messiah; Daesoon Jinrihoe; Caodaism; New Religious Movements (NRMs)

Introduction

While Western civilizations had impacted communities of people on several continents prior to the 16th century, surprisingly, it was still wholly alien to East Asians before the Jesuit missions arrived at that time. The remarkable role of Jesuit missionaries in establishing a cultural bridge between the West and East Asia has been exceptionally significant: a period of profound cultural and religious contact leading to the penetration of Christianity into East Asian societies has continued. With the missionary strategy of "cultural integration," Matteo Ricci and Jesuit missionaries introduced Christianity to indigenous people in China in ways that harmonized with Confucian ideals which fostered mutual curiosity between Christianity and the religious traditions of East Asia, including the messianic concept (Ricci 1607). Based on Tianzhu Shiyi (天主實義), the true meaning of the "Lord of Heaven," Ricci and Jesuit missionaries brought the message of Christianity to East Asia to explain to the intellectual class in East Asia that Jesus the Savior of humankind is also a friend (Iesus Hominum Salvator or esum Habemus Socium).[1]

Based on this connection, the meaning of "the Lord of Heaven" and the "Savior of humankind" in Christianity has been applied to the Lord of Tusita Heaven (兜率天) and the Savior of Buddhist followers (Maitreya). Merging the central symbol of the Supreme God in East Asian religions (Shangdi/上帝 in Chinese means "Lord-on-High") with God and God the Father (in Holy Trinity: Father, Son, Holy Spirit) in Christianity, resulted in the united symbol of religions: Messiah - the Savior. This integration of Maitreya and Messiah symbols in East Asian religions, then, is a testament to the deep cultural intertwining between East and West in the 16th century. Consequently, religious life in East Asia underwent fundamental changes and the crucial role of Indigenous missionaries post-Ricci in China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam encouraged many followers of East Asian religions to accept Christian monotheistic ideas. The use of the messianic concept was a key turning point in spiritual life in East Asia with the appearance of Messiah and the united Supreme God - Shangdi, Maitreya - Savior - Messiah.

This research explores and compares how both Maitreya and Messiah are employed in the subsequent new Asian religious movements, such as Daesoon Jinrihoe in Korea and Caodaism in Vietnam, across three main steps: 1) the symbolic evolution of Maitreya and Messiah in religious narratives, 2) the doctrinal and practical amalgamation of these figures in these religions, and 3) social characteristics underpinning this syncretism. Through this approach, the research highlights how new religious movements in East Asia reinterpreted messianic salvation, merging East-West religious concepts to meet the evolving religious needs of the followers.

Daesoon Jinrihoe (대순진리회/大巡眞理會) was founded in April 1969 by Park Han Gyeong (박한경 / 朴漢慶, 1917–1996), who is known by the honorfic name Wudang (우당 / 牛堂). This is the most significant movement of Kang Jeungsan (Gang Il-Sun, 1871–1909), believed by his followers to be the incarnated Supreme God, Kangseong

Sangje (姜聖上帝), the Supreme God of the Ninth Heaven, the Originator with Whom All Beings Resonate. According to "Daesoon Jinrihoe: The Fellowship of Daesoon Truth," Gucheon Sangje "stopped in this eastern land of Korea; he spiritually entered the statue of Golden Maitreya Buddha in the Geumsansa Temple at Moak Mountain in Jeolla Province, where He stayed for thirty years" (Daesoon Jinrihoe 2017, 15). As Rigal-Cellard explained, Sangje, standing for the Supreme God in Christianity, "incarnated in his son, Jesus Christ, who allowed for the radical transformation of the condition of man through his physical sacrifice. Daesoon differs in that Sangje did not offer himself as a sacrifice when he came on earth but reorganized the world and taught how to apply benevolence to establish the Earthly Paradise" (Rigal-Cellard 2022, 61). This is how Daesoon Thought merged the Messiah of Christianity, Jesus Christ, with the Maitreya symbol to create a messianic symbol of Daesoon Jinrihoe in Korea. According to Donald L. Baker, Daesoon Jinrihoe "shows less Christian influence than other Korean new religious movements.... This means Daesoon Jinrihoe is more in tune with traditional East Asian Anthropocentrism than Western theocentrism" (Kim 2020, xv).

Similarly, Caodaism, officially named *Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ* (Great Way of the Third Period of Salvation), is a syncretic religion founded in 1926 in Tây Ninh province, Vietnam. Caodaists worship Cao Đài Tiên Ông as their Shangdi (上帝), the High God, Lord On High, Celestial Lord, or the Supreme God. According to Cao Dai Manifesto,

> the universalist syncretism of the *Three teachings*; and the three-phase eschatology (Tam Kỳ Mạt Kiếp/sān qí mò jié 三期末劫) with the first dispensation associated with Moses and Fúxī (伏羲), the second associated with Buddha, Confucius, Lǎozǐ (老子), and Jesus, and the third to be ushered in by Maitreya. The initial name of Cao Đài – Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ or the "Great Đạo of the Third Cycle of Universal Salvation (Jammes and Trương 2023, 260).

In this way, Shangdi in Daesoon Jinrihoe, as well as in Caodaism, stands for a meaning similar to the Deus symbols in Indo-European religions (e.g., Zeus, Jupiter, Tiwaz) or the God of Jews, Christians, and Muslims when He merges with the symbol of Messiah or Maitreya, He becomes a "united savior," "global messiah," or "universal savior."

In reality, East Asian religions before the 16th century, such as Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and various folk religions, were devoid of monotheism. The only way to unite religious ideas was the concept of "Dao"; by "aligning oneself with Dao, creating harmony and a sense of participation in it… (this would) create a state of overall goodness and well-being-in cosmos, nature, society, and the human body" (Kohn 2001, 4). These traditions shaped people's cultural, social, and spiritual lives in East Asia without the need for monotheist symbols. After Ricci's time, some East Asian religious branches evolved to adapt aspects of Christian thought, particularly the messianic symbol.

In Daesoon Jinrihoe in Korea and Caodaism in Vietnam, this fusion of Maitreya and Messiah fosters a synthesis of universal salvation ideas framed through four main aspects:

1) The influence of Christian culture on East Asian religions;
2) Transformation of the messianic concept;
3) Role of Maitreya and Messiah in new religious movements; and
4) Distinctive fusion of these symbols in the new ideas or thoughts.

By analyzing the transformation of the above-mentioned symbols with reference to these four ideas, this research examines how cultural exchange has historically fostered new forms of religious expression, blending traditional East Asian beliefs with Christian symbols. This transformation exemplifies the adaptability of religious beliefs and cross-cultural exchanges between East and West. Such exchange fosters new interpretations to meet contemporary religious demands while honoring traditional symbols and doctrines that formed new religions.

Therefore, this research utilizes an integrated framework that offers a comprehensive lens to examine how symbols function in Daesoon Jinrihoe and Caodaism to explore the fusion of Maitreya and Messiah symbols in East Asian new religions. Clifford Geertz's interpretive systems of meaning are incorporated with Robert Weller's theories of religious syncretism to create a framework for analysis. This framework also relies on additional themes of eschatology, which provide a structure for explaining death, and on aspects of modernization theory to explain how Daesoon Jinrihoe and Caodaism have adapted traditional symbols for contemporary relevance. In this way, the symbolic value of Maitreya and Messiah is revealed.

Geertz's concept of religion is "a system of symbols" within a cultural system. According to Geertz, religious symbols shape human motivation by constructing conceptions of reality that feel uniquely authentic and emotionally resonant (Geertz 1973). This theoretical framework explains the navigation and resolution researchers must elaborate on regarding these modern challenges. Further, studying religious change in East Asian contexts involves exploring syncretism, showing how blending distinct religious elements forms coherent belief structures. On the other hand, syncretism, as an aspect of secularism, has always had a profound impact on every society or prevalent religion. Robert Weller explained, "This opening up of popular religion under the modern state also suggests generalizations about the dialectic between social formation and religion" (Weller 1994, 162).

Together with Geertz and Weller's concepts, the research also draws on the eschatological concept, which refers metaphorically to the end of permanent reality and to union with the Divine and is consequently "concerned" with death, judgment, heaven, and hell. In many religions, eschatology is taught as a future event prophesied in sacred scriptures. Eschatology may include concepts such as the Messiah, Messianic times, the end of time, and the last days (Joseph 1988).

Above all, these eschatological symbols comfort and guide followers, embodying hopes for spiritual renewal as they face an uncertain destiny. Therefore, symbols like Maitreya and Messiah are symbols of hope in an increasingly insecure world. Thus, the

theoretical framework above enables the researcher to examine how Daesoon Jinrihoe and Caodaism reinterpret Maitreya and the Messiah to create inclusive and adaptive ideas of salvation through eschatology in their religious lives. Through this lens, these movements represent continuity with traditional beliefs while adapting to the new cultural contexts, demonstrating how the fusion of Maitreya and Messiah symbols continues to shape new East Asian religions.

An Examination of the Fusion of Maitreya and Messiah Symbols in East Asian Culture

Over the past two decades, my research has focused predominantly on the Maitreya symbol in the Asian cultural context, particularly in East Asia (Dinh 2024a). This process has allowed me to uncover significant transformations in the Maitreya symbol across different times and places. For example, from a prototype of the Indian god of wealth named Kubera, the Chinese formed a new Maitreya symbol in China with the image of Milefo 彌勒佛, (also called Budai Heshang 布袋和尚 or Qieci 契此) at Lingyin Pagoda, Hangzhou, China in the Southern Song (1127—1280). This famous Maitreya symbol, or "Laughing Buddha," later spread throughout East Asia. When this symbol entered Vietnamese culture, it was integrated with indigenous Vietnamese beliefs to form "Maitreya - God of Wealth," a new religious movement in Vietnam (Dinh 2024b). Such transformations are so complex that most people in China and Vietnam cannot distinguish Maitreya from Buddha, Bodhisattva, or God of Wealth. My recent research clarified how these symbols developed in East Asian cultures and religions, explaining these distinctions and the transformations (Dinh 2024a, 60–72).

This renewed focus on researching global catastrophes that followed the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a heightened engagement with Apocalypse and Messiah theories, making them increasingly relevant in academic discourse and conferences. In the international conference, *Can Religions Help the World Solve Its Civilizational Crises?* on October 4–10, 2023, at Daejin University, Korea, I presented a paper entitled "Messianism in Civilizational History: The Transformation of the Buddhist Messiah via Maitreya" (Dinh 2024b). During the conference, engaging dialogues among scholars, especially Livia Kohn, David Kim, and Michael Wesch, underscored the profound transformations that East Asian religions have undergone over the past centuries. These insights motivated me to delve deeper by investigating new religious movements in East Asia.

Some new religions in Korea and Vietnam have been formed by merging the concept of Maitreya with Messiah to move towards a new practice that formed new religions such as Daesoon Jinrihoe in Korea and Caodaism in Vietnam. This merging of highly different ideas of Eastern and Western religions is not easy, even in the post-Ricci period. However, the founders of new religions in East Asia have a "key" to solving this problem, which is to merge the symbols of saviors (such as Maitreya and Messiah) into a "united savior,"

"global savior," or "universal messiah." This is the fusion of Maitreya and Messiah symbols in East Asian faiths from the post-Ricci time to the present. Examining Daesoon Jinrihoe in Korea and Caodaism in Vietnam is an initial step to delve deeper into these changes in culture and religion in East Asia because it reflects a unique interplay of religious syncretism, cultural adaptation, and doctrinal evolution.

There are three fundamentals of sources as foundations for this research: 1) The historical context of religions in East Asia and the influence of Western culture and religion on East Asia via Jesuit missionaries; 2) The symbolism of Maitreya in Buddhism and Messiah in Christianity; and 3) Expressions of Maitreya and Messiah Symbols in New Religions (Daesoon Jinrihoe and Caodaism).

Firstly, as Weller and Shahar mentioned,

> representations of the power of various supernatural entities are sustained and perpetuated by enabling productive activities in several domains (individual construction of religious autobiographical narratives, community construction of local identity, self-legitimation of the state through ritual) to draw upon the same symbols in what I term rhetorics of mutual authentication. (Weller and Shahar 1996, 155)

Over the centuries, this syncretic approach has allowed East Asian religions to remain adaptable, integrating new influences and fostering belief systems that are not only multifaceted but also resilient in the face of change (Menegon and Cogan 2015).

In China, the interplay of what is known as the "Three Teachings" (San Jiao 三教) allowed for differing beliefs to coexist, fostering a societal framework where diverse spiritual identities could flourish without conflict (Clayre 1985). In Japan, the intricate relationship between Shinto, the indigenous beliefs, and Buddhism, which was introduced from the continent, is epitomized by the concept of Shinbutsu-shūgō (神仏習合), or the "fusion of Kami and Buddhas" (Josephson 2012). In Korea, the San Jiao coexist with Shamanistic traditions. As Choi Geeongchun pointed out,

> Because of this long-standing battle between shamanism (Satan and his angels) and Christianity, some Christians have lowered their guard and become confused as to whether or not shamanism is an enemy or a friend. One thing is certain people who are affected by shamanism are to be our friends, and they need Christ" (Choi 2013).

Meanwhile, in Vietnam, the term "worship and you will be blessed, abstain and you will be safe" (có thờ có thiêng, có kiêng có lành) showed that San Jiao in Vietnam has been woven with indigenous beliefs.

When Westerners like Marco Polo and his companions arrived in China in the 13th century, they encountered significant cultural conflicts. This situation changed with the arrival of Matteo Ricci and the Jesuit missionaries in the 16th century. This period marked

a pivotal turning point in the religious development of East Asia. The Jesuit missionaries were not only religious figures; they were also scientists and experts in various fields, including notable individuals such as Francis Xavier (1506–1552), Melchior Nunes Barreto (c. 1519–1571), Luís Fróis (1532–1597), Michele Ruggieri (1543–1607), Adam Schall von Bell, and Ferdinand Verbiest. They introduced Western religious, scientific, and philosophical ideas to the region.

After a period of sublimation, the successors of early Jesuit missionaries encountered significant opposition during the "Chinese Rites Controversy," which ultimately led to the suppression of Christianity under the Qing dynasty (1644–1912). Similarly, in Japan, initial successes by Jesuit missions led by Francis Xavier were reversed due to concerns over foreign influence, culminating in the ban on Christianity in 1614 and the implementation of the isolationist "Sakoku" policy. In Korea, Catholicism spread subtly through Chinese texts and faced conflicts with Confucian norms, resulting in severe persecution during the late Joseon era (1392–1910). In Vietnam, Jesuits played a crucial role in establishing Catholicism and developing the Vietnamese Romanized script (quốc ngữ). However, increasing suspicion of Western influence prompted intensified suppression under the Nguyễn dynasty (Tran 2018, 4).

Despite facing various challenges, the Jesuit legacy has had a lasting impact on East Asia. Their presence facilitated an essential exchange of religious and cultural ideas. Christianity, with its Latin cultural characteristics and science, significantly influenced fields such as astronomy, mathematics, and cartography in China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. This influence fostered continuous cultural exchange, leading to the "Christianising Asianness" process in the post-Ricci era. In this new context, Asians witnessed the emergence of new religions and the blending of religious symbols, such as Maitreya and Messiah.

Secondly, in examining the symbolism of Maitreya as a Savior or Buddhist Messiah, researchers such as Sponberg and Hardacre realized that Maitreya's universal character can connect global religions. "Here, we have an aspect of Buddhism that resonates significantly with some of the most cherished themes of the Judeo-Christian tradition. From a consideration of 'Buddhist messianism', but only if we are willing to allow our culturally generated concept of messianism to be significantly transformed and expanded" (Sponberg and Hardacre 1988, 293). In another way, Kim Inchang focuses on portraying Maitreya as a benevolent future Buddha who brings salvation to the world. This role of Maitreya as a messianic figure has been integral to Buddhism, especially in East Asia, where the future Buddha's anticipated return has often paralleled Christian eschatological themes. Maitreya symbolizes hope and ethical reform, fitting well within syncretic movements seeking a messianic figure who embodies spiritual and societal salvation (Kim 1997, 15).

Thirdly, religious syncretism, which involves blending Christian and Buddhist symbols within East Asian religions, allowed for a fusion of beliefs that later influenced the symbols used in new religious movements. East Asian spiritual practices began to

incorporate elements of Christian messianism alongside Buddhist concepts like Samsara (beginningless cycle of repeated birth, mundane existence, and dying again), as well as "Asian syncretic pluralism," to meet local needs. This incorporation trend is evident in the practices of contemporary new religions such as Daesoon Jinrihoe and Caodaism.

In Korea, Daesoon Jinrihoe incorporates Maitreya's attributes of enlightenment that reflect Korea's spiritual heritage and form its messianic symbol through social convulsions. As David Kim points out,

> "The historical narratives of the political conflicts, social incidents, and civic protests are seen to generate the ideological change of the Korean peninsula from the traditional beliefs of Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, and folk religions. The emergence of the initial native new religions, such as Donghak, Daejonggyo, Wonbulgyo, and the Jeungsan movement, is the result of the social and political disorder in the process of colonial modernization" (Kim 2020, 8).

In Vietnam, Caodaism adopted not only symbols of San Jiao (三教) and Messiah to form Cao Đài Tiên Ông but also gathered different Western, Chinese, and Vietnamese literary icons such as Victor Hugo, Sun Yat-sen, Nguyen Binh Khiem to form a united "great way" (Đại đạo) of Caodaism, such as depicted in the painting "Three Saints Signing the Peace Treaty" (Tam Thánh ký Hòa Ước 三聖記和約).[2] This painting represents an inclusive and universal form of divinity incorporating Buddhist, Daoist, and Christian elements in the "united East-West culture." Caodaism emphasizes the symbol of the Supreme God (Cao Đài Tiên Ông) as a unifying figure who transcends cultural boundaries, representing both Maitreya's enlightenment and the Messiah's salvational role with a symbol: the Left Eye stands for God Cao Dai. As David Wesch explains, "The foundation idea of Cao Dai is that we are emanations of God, the original One-ness that appeared in the Voice in a time before time began. In the words of God Cao Dai" (Wesch 2023, 218).

Coincidentally, Greenberger and Lee found content depicted similarity in Daesoon Jinrihoe and Caodaism that "the painting depicted in Daesoon Jinrihoe titled *Five Immortals Playing Baduk* (五仙圍碁 Oseon Wigi), and the painting in Caodaism titled *The Three Saints* (三聖, Tam Thánh) are strikingly similar in the manner in which both countries depict a national representative alongside foreign representatives" (Greenberger and Lee 2021, 87). Such depictions are evidence of reframing Maitreya and Messiah symbols in the "Asianness" of the new religious movements of East Asia (Daesoon Jinrihoe and Caodaism) that Janet Hoskins pointed out like "conversations with divinities" (Hoskins 2015, 29). They address harmonious issues of salvation and ethical transformation for native residents. Both movements have adapted these messianic icons to resonate with local cultural values while emphasizing collective salvation, societal reform, and spiritual unity. This synthesis illustrates the dynamic process of religious hybridization and the enduring adaptability of East Asian religious systems in the face of global influences.

Maitreya and Messiah Symbol in New Religious Movements

The Role of Maitreya and Messiah in East Asian New Religions

As mentioned above, Maitreya and Messiah symbols in new religious movements (NRMs) serve as powerful symbols of world transformation and salvation, blending Buddhist concepts of the future Buddha with Christian messianic expectations to create syncretic concepts that address modern crises and offer hope for universal renewal. East Asian NRMs have developed sophisticated theological systems that creatively blend Buddhist and Christian messianic concepts, particularly through the figure of Maitreya, the future Buddha, and various Messiah-like saviors. These movements emerged during periods of social upheaval and modernization in the 19th and 20th centuries, offering alternative visions of salvation and world transformation (Jenchieh, 2020, 171).

The syncretic nature of these movements reflects their response to both traditional religious heritage and encounters with Western Christianity that address contemporary spiritual and social needs. The role of Maitreya and Messiah symbols in East Asian new religious movements thus represents a renewed theological phenomenon that combines traditional Buddhist eschatology with Christian messianic concepts to create innovative frameworks for understanding salvation, world transformation, and religious identity in the modern world.

Within this context, the figures of Maitreya and the Messiah frequently emerge as central symbols, embodying hopes for salvation, social reform, and a utopian future. Thus, Maitreya, the future Buddha in Buddhist eschatology, is believed to descend to earth in a time of moral decay to establish a golden age of peace and prosperity not only for Buddhist followers but also for people of other religions. This concept resonates deeply in East Asia, where social upheaval and political instability have historically fueled messianic expectations. NRMs often identify their founders or key figures as incarnations or representatives of Maitreya, imbuing them with divine authority and the power to usher in a new era.

In this context, the Messiah—a concept originating in Judaism and central to Christianity—has also been adopted and reinterpreted by NRMs, often blended with indigenous beliefs and new cultural values. In some cases, the Messiah is seen as a universal savior, encompassing aspects of both Buddhist and Christian eschatology. The appeal of Maitreya and Messiah figures in East Asian NRMs stems from several factors: hope for a better future, divine authority, syncretism, and cultural relevance.

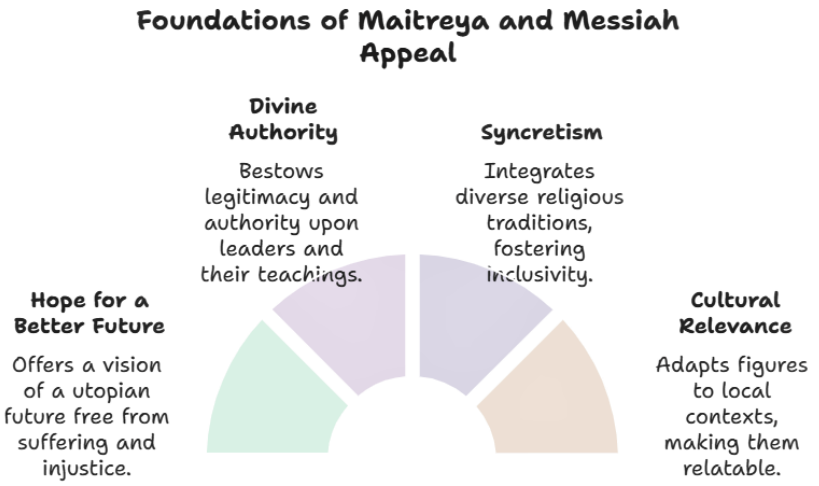


Figure 1. Foundations of Maitreya and Messiah appeal

This combination has created a dramatic shift in East Asian religious life, which is the blurring of the boundary between monotheistic religions and the polytheistic forms of belief that were dominant in Asia. This shift has two aspects: 1) the ideas of monotheistic religions have a new place in people's lives, and 2) NRMs in East Asia have a practice order and a doctrinal system that is clearer than before. Naturally, not all East Asian NRMs during this period had orderly doctrines and practices. Many NRMs emerged and "died young," while some groups are "still wavering" to this day (typically Long Hoa Di Lac in Vietnam and some groups in Korea). Meanwhile, Cao Daism and Daesoon Jinrihoe have asserted new positions in the new context of global religious life.

Maitreya as a Messiah Symbol in Daesoon Jinrihoe

Daesoon Jinrihoe embodies a syncretic blend of Eastern and Western traditions through its philosophical and theological frameworks. Its philosophical thought is described as "receptive, composite, and syncretic" within East Asian philosophy and custom. It aims to harmonize the "Three Realms (Heaven, Earth, and Humanity)" and unify faith from major religions. Its teachings are fundamentally based on the organized "by the logic of the three teachings (San Jiao) of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism" (Teiser 1996). Daesoon Jinrihoe integrates elements from Korean Shamanism, San Jiao, and Christianity. While affirming a "monotheistic" God (Kang Jeungsan, the incarnation of Gucheon Sangje, the Supreme Being of the Ninth Heaven), it also maintains a "pantheistic perspective" of celestial deities (Cheonji-Shinmyoung), allowing for a complex divine concept that is both monotheistic and polytheistic.

The religion presents a balance between Eastern traditions that emphasize human work and performance, and an absolute, personal God, akin to the Christian concept.

Its founder, Kang Jeungsan, admired Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci's approach to "inculturation," seeing it as a model for "opening the earthly paradise" and balancing "the two worlds" (Ricci's efforts to behave like a Chinese and introduce Confucian values to the West were seen by Kang as a bridge between cultures). Daesoon Jinrihoe's social work and ethical teachings, such as the "resolution of grievances for mutual beneficence (Haewon-sangsaeng 해원상생 / 解冤相生)" reflect this syncretic blend. This focus on harmony is described as being deeply rooted in East Asian philosophy, where everything is conceived as derived from a state of harmony that generates life.

In Daesoon Jinrihoe, the Maitreya and Messiah symbols are intertwined, representing a unique fusion of Buddhist and Korean religious thought. Therefore, Kang Jeungsan, the founder, is considered an incarnation of Gucheon Sangje, the Supreme God, and also identified with Maitreya, the future Buddha.

> "Maitreya's appearance in Daesoon Thought serves as a symbol throughout Korean culture. This symbol represents the highest role of a Supreme God, encompassing various religions such as Confucianism and Daoism, which are integral to people's religious lives. That shows that the Korean notion of Sangje in Confucianism has been combined with the teachings in Daoism to complete a hybrid symbol, Maitreya" (Dinh 2025).

Daesoon Jinrihoe places great emphasis on the figure of Sangje, the Supreme God, who is believed to have descended to earth in the 19th century to restore order and harmony to the universe. While Sangje is the central deity, the concept of Maitreya also plays a significant role in Daesoon Jinrihoe's cosmology and soteriology. Jo Jeongsan, the successor to Gang Jeung-san (considered the incarnation of Sangje), is regarded as Maitreya Buddha by many followers of Daesoon Jinrihoe. Following Kang's prophecies, Jo Jeongsan received religious authority and became the central figure of Daesoon Jinrihoe. Kang Jeungsan himself, and thus by extension his successor Jo Jeongsan and the Daesoon Jinrihoe tradition, are linked to the Maitreya Buddha (Mireuk) concept, which plays a significant role in the doctrine of the future world order. This identification is based on interpretations of Gang Jeung-san's prophecies and Jo Jeongsan's teachings. Daesoon Jinrihoe believes that Jo Jeongsan's role as Maitreya is to guide humanity towards enlightenment and salvation in the coming era of Great Transformation (Ko and Greenberger 2023).

The Maitreya symbolism in Daesoon Jinrihoe is intertwined with the concept of Haewon Sangsaeng, which emphasizes mutual cooperation and the resolution of grievances. Followers believe that by practicing Haewon Sangsaeng, they can contribute to the establishment of a harmonious and just society, paving the way for Maitreya's reign. Daesoon Jinrihoe's interpretation of Maitreya differs from traditional Buddhist eschatology in several ways. First, Maitreya is not seen as a future Buddha who will descend to earth at some distant point in the future, but rather as a figure who has already appeared in the person of Jo Jeongsan. Second, the emphasis is not solely on

individual enlightenment, but also on collective salvation through the practice of Haewon Sangsaeng.

In Daesoon Jinrihoe, Kang Jeungsan is considered the savior symbol. His mission involved carrying out the "Reordering Works of Heaven and Earth" to save the Three Realms (Heaven, Earth, and Humanity). Although the term "Messiah" is not explicitly used in Daesoon Jinrihoe's official teachings, the role of Sangje and Jo Jeongsan as saviors of humanity shares similarities with messianic figures in other religious traditions. They are seen as divinely appointed leaders who will guide humanity towards a new era of peace and prosperity, like Maitreya's millennium in Buddhism.

As Wang Zhihe has argued, Haewon-sangsaeng can be understood "as a representative thought regarding peace in Korean new religions" (Bae 2018). As a matter of fact, in some sense, many ideas of Daesoon Jinrihoe, such as the messianic vision, the concept of chosenness, the earthly paradise, and its eschatological beliefs, are closely related to the doctrine of Haewonsangsaeng. Also, Haewon-sangsaeng thought penetrated through the whole life of Kang Jeungsan (Park 2016), who established the tradition leading to present-day Daesoon Jinrihoe (Wang 2022).

Maitreya as a Messiah Symbol in Caodaism

Caodaism, founded in Southern Vietnam in 1926, is a syncretic religion that draws heavily on the principles of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism, collectively known as the "Three Teachings" (Tam giáo). Its full name, "Great Way of the Third Period of Universal Salvation" (Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ), explicitly references a three-phase eschatology and the unification of these ancient doctrines. The very name of its supreme deity, Cao Đài Tiên Ông Đại Bồ Tát Ma Ha Tát (Caodai the Immortal Mahabodhisattva Mahasattva), incorporates Daoist (Immortal), Confucian (Caodai), and Buddhist (Mahabodhisattva Mahasattva) elements, reflecting its foundational philosophy. The new doctrine teaches virtues found in Buddhism and Daoism, such as doing good, avoiding evil, loving humanity, and promoting harmony.

The term "Đấng Chí Tôn" (Venerable Supreme Being) is specifically used by Confucians to refer to the High Tower (Cao-Đài), demonstrating a direct link to Confucian terminology within Caodaist theology. This term may also be influenced by Western concepts, possibly transposed from the French "l'Être supreme." The Supreme Being is described as the "Supreme Spirit" who transmits divine teachings through spirit-writing mediums. These revelations aim to synthesize and preach the noble precepts of the Three Ancient Religions, including "Confucius' high morality." The Supreme Being also presents himself as the "Master of all mortal beings" (Thầy của chúng sanh) and teaches virtues like humility and self-effacement.

In Caodaist cosmology, the Supreme Being's existence is intricately linked to the cosmic order: he came into being from the clashing winds of the void (Hư Vô Chi Khí), and his throne is Thái Cực (Supreme Ultimate). This Thái Cực then divides into

Lưỡng/Nghi (yin/yang), with the Supreme Being remaining as the yang constituent. This creation narrative, while presenting the Supreme Being as primary, also introduces a dualistic element through the implied co-equality of the originating male and female aspects of divinity. Caodaism teaches that Maitreya is responsible for the third and final period of divine revelation, following the periods of Shakyamuni Buddha and Jesus Christ. In this final period, all religions will be united under the banner of Caodaism, leading to a universal era of peace and harmony. Jesus Christ is also revered as a significant figure in Caodaism, representing the Christian tradition and embodying the principles of love and compassion. He is considered one of the prophets who paved the way for the final revelation of Caodaism.

The concept of the Messiah in Caodaism emphasizes the collective responsibility of humanity to create a better world. The role of the Giáo Tông in Caodaism can be seen as having messianic undertones. The Giáo tông is considered the spiritual leader of the religion and is believed to be divinely appointed to guide humanity towards salvation. Caodaism's syncretic approach enables the integration of both Maitreya and messianic figures into its cosmology. The religion emphasizes the unity of all faiths and the importance of collaboration in building a better future for humanity. The symbols of Maitreya and Jesus Christ, along with those of other spiritual leaders, embody this unity and inspire followers to strive for peace, justice, and harmony. In Caodaism, Phạm Công Tắc is considered the savior symbol, the incarnation of the Hộ pháp of Caodaism, like Buddha in Buddhism and Jesus Christ in Christianity (Đức Nguyên 2000 Vol. 1, 1540). Caodaism teaches that Maitreya is the chief judge of the upcoming Universal Judgement and will instruct people in universal fraternity and mutual tolerance under the guidance of the Supreme God, Đức Chí Tôn. He will also usher in an era of high moral standards, symbolized by his return as a new Buddha to teach the divine law, or dharma.

Phạm Công Tắc's notable sermon, "The Divine Path to Eternal Life" provides a "celestial journey and esoteric mapping of Heaven." These sermons offer a visual summary of Caodaist beliefs and the operation of the cosmos. The "Holy Words" (thánh ngôn) collected from spirit-medium messages form an extensible corpus that directly influences liturgical use and religious law. This similarity, as Kang Jeungsan in Daeson Jinrihoe, is that practices and rituals are designed to guide adherents toward spiritual enlightenment and salvation within a framework that harmonizes diverse religious traditions. They combine elements of traditional East Asian cosmology, ethics, and ritual with modern spiritism, offering a path for both individual self-cultivation and collective spiritual progression.

In some ways, Cao Daism is like a variant of Xiantiandao (先天道, the Great Way of Former Heaven). These societies propagated the worship of the spirits of the Three Teachings (Tam giáo: Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism). Caodaism views Maitreya as a central figure in its eschatology. This assembly is described as a "great eschatological reunion of deities and men, modeled on assemblies of the Buddha Maitreya," promising aid in this life and salvation after death. The core doctrine of Caodaism, Đại Đạo Tam

Kỳ Phổ Độ (大道三期普度), explicitly references a three-phase eschatology (sān qímò jié), where Maitreya is said to usher in the third dispensation. The name "Great Đạo of the Third Cycle of Universal Salvation" signifies the realization of these prophecies (Đức Nguyên 2000 Vol. 1, 929).

The Influence of Maitreya and Messiah in East Asian New Religions

Maitreya, originally conceived as a deity for prayers regarding future reincarnation, came to be associated with immediate world transformation during times of crisis. Therefore, in premodern China and Korea, rebels who resisted state power reimagined Maitreya as a figure who would immediately appear to end the current world order. This is evidence that modern East Asian NRMs have developed these revolutionary aspects of Maitreya. This represents a fundamental shift from traditional Buddhist eschatology, in which Maitreya's arrival is still in the distant future. According to Daesoon's thought, "due to Jeungsan's descending on the earth, the incarnation of Maitreya has been accomplished" (Kim 2022).

It can be said that East Asian NRMs demonstrate the approaches to religious syncretism with messianic figures, as Jenchieh pointed out, these movements function as "types of nativist millennialism" where "the ultimate goal in all three is redeeming lost elements by magical means - the sudden disappearance of invading forces, the return of mystical heroes or messiahs, and an altered landscape" (Jenchieh 2020).[3]. This differs significantly from Christian concepts of sacrificial redemption while maintaining messianic themes of divine incarnation and world transformation.

Furthermore, East Asian NRMs typically emerge during periods of social crisis and offer visions of radical world transformation. The concept of Kaebyŏk in Korean new religions exemplifies this pattern, having evolved from a classical literary concept describing world creation into "a radical cosmological transformation in the future, which new religions in Korea have generally accepted until the present. This transformation occurred gradually during political crises in the 18th century and thereafter. These movements share "strikingly similar ethnocentric (i.e., Japanocentric, Koreacentric, Sinocentric, Vietnam-centric) colouring of the myth" regarding millennial transformation (Pokorny [ed.] 2020). The ethnocentric dimension suggests that salvation and world renewal will emanate from specific East Asian cultural centers, reflecting both religious nationalism and universal salvific claims.

Comparative research reveals consistent patterns across different East Asian contexts, suggesting common underlying dynamics in how these movements develop and function. It also shows how traditional religious symbols are reinterpreted during periods of social crisis. Some studies provide detailed textual analysis and historical documentation, while others offer comparative frameworks that may lack specific detail about theological development (Jenchieh 2020). Therefore, the blending of Maitreya and Messiah concepts in East Asian NRMs represents a significant change in this region. These movements

demonstrate how religious traditions can creatively synthesize seemingly disparate elements to address contemporary spiritual needs. The transformation of Maitreya from a distant-future Buddha to an already-embodied savior reflects an adaptation of Christian concepts of divine incarnation while maintaining Buddhist cosmological frameworks.

Nowadays, modern examples continue to emerge, as seen in movements that interpret global crises through millennial lenses. Research on how Buddhist adherents perceive civilizational crises through symbols associated with Maitreya, based on the Buddhist concept of the Messiah, suggests the ongoing relevance of these theological frameworks for understanding contemporary religious responses to global uncertainty. Understanding these syncretic processes has practical implications for the methodology of religious studies, interfaith dialogue, and the analysis of religious innovation. The success of movements like Daesoon Jinrihoe and Cao Daiism, which have attracted significant followings while maintaining distinctive theological positions, demonstrates the continuing appeal of syncretic messianic concepts in addressing modern spiritual and social concerns.

The Fusion of Maitreya and Messiah in East Asian New Religions

In East Asian religious movements, messianic figures are almost universally reconfigured in pre-modern and modern socio-historical contexts. Maitreya reinterpreted through messianic narratives that emphasize world renewal, moral regeneration, and collective salvation. This fusion is not a simple borrowing of Western messianism, but rather a creative synthesis shaped by indigenous cosmologies, millenarian traditions, and responses to social crisis, colonial encounters, and modernity. It rearticulates Maitreya as a messianic agent operating within historical time rather than a distant eschatological future. This transformation reveals a broader shift from transcendental soteriology toward immanent, socially embedded forms of salvation, as it is localized and re-signified in new religious formations.

In China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, new religious movements have emerged as responses to social, political, and cultural upheavals, particularly since the 19th century. Among their most striking features is the fusion of Maitreya, the Buddhist future Buddha, with the Christian Messiah, creating a singular eschatological savior figure who promises a new era of peace and cosmic renewal. This syncretism is not merely a theological curiosity but a reflection of broader socio-cultural dynamics, including shared salvific expectations, doctrinal blending of Buddhist, Christian, Taoist, and indigenous traditions, and distinctive ritual practices that ultimately gave rise to the notion of a "United Savior" in modern religious discourse.

Taking *Tianzhu shiyi* as a foundational text of early Sino-Christian encounter, the section examines how Christian theological categories—God, salvation, and moral order—were initially translated and framed through Confucian metaphysics and ethical rationalism. Through textual analysis and comparative historical interpretation, we can

see that a "United Savior" reflects a shift from doctrinal exclusivity toward an integrative soteriology shaped by plural religious landscapes, social upheavals, and modern nation-building projects. This evolution reveals how salvation in East Asia has been progressively reimagined as a collective, this-worldly, and culturally mediated process.

From *Tianzhu shiyi* to a "United Savior"

As mentioned in the first paragraph, *Tianzhu shiyi* (天主實義), authored by Matteo Ricci in 1603, is a foundational text in the history of Christian–Confucian dialogue in China. It sets the intellectual and theological stage for later discussions about a "United Savior" in East Asian new religious movements as a key bridge between Christian and Confucian Thought. In his text, Ricci aimed to present Christian teachings in terms familiar to Chinese literati, using Confucian concepts and arguing for the rationality and universality of belief in "Tianzhu" (the Lord of Heaven/God). Ricci identified "Tianzhu" with the Confucian "Shangdi" (High Emperor) and the supreme principle of Heaven, while differentiating his view from Buddhist metaphysics. He sought to show a unity of highest moral authority rather than exclusive dogma. This approach fostered the notion of a single, supreme, benevolent deity—a conceptual shift that later influenced new religious movements seeking syncretic forms of salvation.

In the new situation, East Asian new religion, responding to periods of crisis and competing worldviews, often proposed a "United Savior" by fusing elements of Buddhist, Christian, Taoist, and indigenous traditions. An example of the Unification Church (Korea) also reflects this trend: its founder, Sun Myung Moon, taught that Jesus' mission was completed. It was blending Christian messianism with indigenous and Confucian motives of unity and cosmic restoration. It can be said that Ricci's Tianzhu shiyi paved the way for these innovations by demonstrating how doctrines of salvation could be meaningfully integrated across cultural and theological boundaries rather than being kept exclusive.

This heritage of dialogue and synthesis means that new religions commonly teach that "all faiths are united" and that the savior may be interpreted as Maitreya, the Messiah, the Lord of Heaven, or local incarnations. The concept of a "United Savior" in East Asian religious contexts relates to Tianzhu shiyi, which serves as a bridge between Christian and Eastern thought. In this case, Tianzhu shiyi was a strategic text to frame the Christian God (Tianzhu) as the universal, supreme Lord of Heaven, analogous to the highest Chinese concept of Heaven (Tian) and the Confucian moral order. This helped introduce a unifying divine figure— one supreme deity responsible for cosmic order and moral law - into a religious landscape traditionally populated by diverse deities and philosophies, and the foundation for syncretic salvation concepts. By demonstrating that Christian salvation could be reconciled with Chinese ideals on cultural and philosophical grounds, Ricci's text paved the way for later East Asian new religious movements to develop the notion of a "United Savior." This savior figure synthesizes figures like Maitreya (Buddhist

future Buddha), the Messiah (Christian savior), and even Confucian sages under a transcendent, singular cosmic principle, often depicted as a source of universal salvation.

The *Tianzhu* introduced in *shiyi* is not merely a Christian God but a concept that resonates across religious traditions as the divine source of all. The "United Savior" in later religions inherits this role as an all-encompassing savior, drawing legitimacy from Ricci's portrayal of a supreme divine authority that transcends and unites religious boundaries, as well as from the facilitation of religious dialogue and integration. Tianzhu shiyi helped cultivate an intellectual context in which religions could be discussed in dialogue and synthesized rather than viewed as competing exclusivities. This is reflected in new religious movements, where the figure of the "United Savior" embodies and harmonizes multiple religious identities, allowing followers of different faiths to find shared hope in one redeemer.

In East Asian religious contexts, the "United Savior" concept builds on the theological and cultural groundwork laid by Matteo Ricci's Tianzhu shiyi, which depicted the Christian God as a supreme cosmic lord compatible with Chinese ideals. This foundation enabled later syncretic religious movements to develop a unified savior figure who integrates Buddhist, Christian, Confucian, and Taoist elements into a single salvific authority, fostering both doctrinal inclusivity and spiritual renewal across traditions, laying the groundwork for the "United Savior" motif in East Asian new religions. These movements synthesize the roles of Buddha, Messiah, Confucian sage, and Taoist immortal, adopting inclusive doctrines and practices that embody the aspiration for cosmic and social renewal through a singular, universal savior-figure.

Shared Salvific Expectations Amid Social Upheaval

The fusion of Maitreya and Messiah as a singular savior figure in East Asian new religious movements is deeply rooted in shared salvific expectations that arise in times of social upheaval and crisis, including crisis and messianic hope, Maitreya as an apocalyptic savior, and the fusion of these elements into a unified salvific vision. Historically, periods of political turmoil, war, famine, invasions, and social injustice in East Asia generated widespread anxiety about moral and cosmic decline. These conditions fostered a popular yearning for a transformative savior who would deliver people from suffering and establish a new world order of justice and peace.

Buddhist doctrine traditionally expects Maitreya's arrival far in the future, but popular belief has repeatedly anticipated his imminent coming during times of social distress. Throughout the history of China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, Maitreya became a symbol of rebellion and hope, inspiring religious uprisings and messianic movements promising an earthly paradise—often called the "Maitreya Kingdom." This transformation reinterprets Maitreya not just as a Buddha of spiritual awakening but as a messianic deliverer who intervenes directly in history to establish salvation here and now. Meanwhile, the Messiah symbols in Christianity and syncretic traditions also embody the

expectation of a returning savior who will defeat evil, resurrect the righteous, and inaugurate God's kingdom on earth. As a result, East Asian syncretic movements absorb this Christian hope, merging it with Buddhist and indigenous traditions to create a composite savior who is both spiritual redeemer and worldly ruler.

To create a unified salvific vision, Maitreya and Messiah become two aspects of one "United Savior" figure who addresses both the spiritual and social dimensions of salvation. This savior promises cosmic renewal, repairing the fractured moral order, restoring natural harmony, and ending suffering, reflecting the hopes and fears of people caught in epochal change. Movements like Yiguandao [4] and Victory Altar explicitly articulate this fusion, portraying their founders or leaders as incarnations of the united savior, tasked with bringing the prophesied new era.

The fusion inspires not only cosmic salvation but also social redemption: liberation from oppression, the abolition of corruption and inequality, and the restoration of harmonious community life. It speaks to the aspirations of marginalized and suffering groups who see in the united savior the possibility of radical personal and communal transformation. As a result, shared salvific expectations amid social upheaval motivate the fusion of Maitreya and Messiah in East Asian new religions. The savior figure embodies popular hopes for immediate deliverance and cosmic renewal during times of crisis, merging Buddhist millenarianism and Christian messianism into a powerful, unified vision of spiritual and social salvation that resonates deeply with East Asian historical experiences. These shared expectations reflect a collective yearning for salvation and stability, with the Maitreya-Messiah figure serving as a bridge between Buddhist eschatology and Christian soteriology.

Table 1. A comparation between Maitreya, Messiah, and Syncretic savior

Maitreya in Buddhist tradition	Messiah in Christian influence	Syncretic savior
Maitreya is the future Buddha who will appear at the end of the current cosmic cycle to restore dharma and establish a world of harmony. This eschatological hope resonated with communities facing crises, offering a vision of renewal.	Christian missionary activities in East Asia introduced the concept of the Messiah, a divine figure who redeems humanity and establishes God's kingdom. This resonated with local populations seeking salvation amid oppression.	where a universal savior, informed by both figures, unites humanity in a new spiritual era. This era venerates Maitreya as a messianic figure who will lead adherents into the millennium, a time of universal harmony.

Doctrinal Syncretism and Blending Traditions

The fusion of Maitreya (the future Buddha) and the Messiah in East Asian new religions exemplifies rich doctrinal syncretism, blending Buddhist, Christian, Taoist, Confucian, Manichaean, and indigenous beliefs into unified salvific systems. Key aspects

of this syncretism include: 1) Maitreya as the Buddhist Messiah and a symbol of salvation in East Asian Buddhism; 2) Christian Messianism and the integration of Confucian and Daoist elements; 3) the eternal mother and a cosmic parent deity; 4) soteriological themes and historical progression.

In China, the messianic role merged with Manichaean dualistic themes in movements such as the White Lotus Sect, which incorporated apocalyptic and salvific expectations centered on Maitreya's return. Meanwhile, Christian Messianism, introduced through Jesuit missions and texts such as *Tianzhu shiyi*, brought the notion of a singular redeeming savior. This was combined with Confucian ideals of moral order and the Daoist concept of a primordial Way (Dao) that governs cosmic harmony. The idea of "Five Teachings in Unity" (Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Christianity, Islam)[5] often emerged, with Maitreya and Jesus regarded as complementary manifestations of universal salvation under a supreme cosmic principle.

Many sects elevated an eternal maternal figure (such as Wu Sheng Lao Mu)[6] as the cosmic source and orchestrator of the descent of Maitreya, Jesus, and other salvific messengers, blending matriarchal and patriarchal traits. The savior figure as the "True Parent" (e.g., Victory Altar's Cho Hee Sung)[7] embodies this fusion by acting as both Buddha and Christ, fulfilling the cosmic plan to restore heaven on earth.

In some central concepts, history is divided into distinct ages, with each savior figure inaugurating a new era: Dipankara Buddha (Green-sun), Gautama Buddha (Red-sun), and Maitreya Buddha (White-sun).[8] Here, parallel Christian and indigenous cyclical time concepts are integrated. Salvation involves spiritual rebirth in Maitreya's heavenly realm or the realization of the new cosmic age through the united savior's role. Meanwhile, syncretism appears in scriptures, ritual practices, and group identities - where Buddhist sutras, Christian gospels, Daoist texts, and folk prophecies intermingle. Historical rebellions and new religious movements often harnessed this syncretism to legitimize social and cosmic renewal under the banner of the Maitreya-Messiah savior.

This doctrinal syncretism enabled the creation of uniquely East Asian new religions in which the figures of Maitreya and the Messiah are not in opposition but are interwoven, reflecting the region's pluralistic spirituality and historical experiences of upheaval, hope, and renewal. The fusion of Maitreya and the Messiah is underpinned by a doctrinal syncretism that integrates Buddhist, Christian, Daoist, and indigenous elements, creating a cohesive theology that appeals to diverse audiences, as shown below. This blending of traditions reflects the adaptability of East Asian new religions, which draw on multiple sources to create a theology that is both universal and locally resonant.

Table 2. The fusion of Maitreya and Messiah in NRMs of East Asia

Category	Description
Buddhist Elements	The Maitreya figure brings the Buddhist emphasis on compassion, enlightenment, and the cyclical renewal of dharma. For example, Won Buddhism (founded in Korea in 1916) reinterprets Maitreya as a symbol of universal truth (Il-Won), blending traditional Buddhist ethics with modern spiritual aspirations.
Christian Elements	The Messiah's influence is evident in the emphasis on salvation through divine intervention and moral redemption. In Caodaism, the savior is linked to the "Great Way" that incorporates Christian notions of a personal God (Cao Đài, or the Supreme Being) alongside Maitreya's universal compassion.
Taoist and Indigenous Influences	Taoist cosmology, with its focus on harmony and the cyclical nature of time, complements the eschatological visions of Maitreya and the Messiah. Indigenous beliefs, such as Vietnamese spirit worship or Chinese folk religion, add localized elements, including reverence for ancestors and deities like the Jade Emperor.
Example in Practice	Kang Jeungsan, the incarnation of Gucheon Sangje, the Supreme Being of the Ninth Heaven in Daesun Jirihoe, as well as Caodaism's "Third Amnesty" doctrine, merges Maitreya's role as a future teacher with the Messiah's mission to save humanity, incorporating Taoist deities and local spirits into a universal pantheon.

Characteristic Practices and Preparations for the Emerging Era

As a key point, the Maitreya-Messiah symbol is central to the ritual practices of East Asian new religions, which aim to prepare adherents for the promised new era. These practices include millenarian feasts, devotional recitations, and spirit-writing, each reflecting the syncretic nature of the movements. These communal gatherings celebrate the imminent arrival of the savior and the new era. In Caodaism, major festivals such as the "Great Ceremony of the Jade Emperor" involve elaborate rituals, vegetarian feasts, and prayers to align adherents with the cosmic renewal promised by the Maitreya-Messiah figure. Chanting and reciting sacred texts are standard practices to invoke the savior's presence and prepare for salvation. In Yiguandao, adherents recite mantras dedicated to Maitreya, blending Buddhist chants with invocations of divine protection drawn from Christian and Taoist traditions. These recitations reinforce doctrinal teachings and cultivate spiritual discipline.

Among the activities mentioned above, spirit-writing (giáng bút, cầu cơ) is one of the most significant, being a distinctive practice in many East Asian new religions. Spirit-writing involves mediums or masters receiving divine messages from the Maitreya-Messiah or related deities. In Caodaism, spirit-writing sessions (called cơ bút) produce sacred texts that guide adherents, blending Buddhist prophecies with Christian-inspired revelations. This practice underscores the living connection between the community and

the divine savior.

These practices create a shared experience that bridges cultural and religious divides. These rituals not only reinforce the syncretic theology but also build a sense of community and purpose among adherents, preparing them for the anticipated cosmic transformation. Thus, the fusion of Maitreya and Messiah in East Asian new religions represents a synthesis of Buddhist, Christian, Taoist, and indigenous traditions, driven by shared salvific expectations amid social upheaval. This syncretism is evident in the doctrinal blending of diverse frameworks and in ritual practices such as millenarian feasts, devotional recitations, and spirit-writing, which prepare adherents for a new era of cosmic renewal. Movements such as Caodaism, Yiguandao, and Won Buddhism exemplify how the Maitreya-Messiah symbol serves as a unifying symbol of hope, adapting global religious ideas to local contexts. By addressing the spiritual and social needs of their communities, these new religions highlight the dynamic interplay of tradition and innovation in East Asian spirituality, offering insights into the enduring human quest for salvation and renewal.

Table 3. Several NRMs containing the Maitreya-Messiah symbol

Movement	Savior Figure	Doctrinal Fusion
Yiguandao	Maitreya "Grand Patriarch" (Mile Zushi)	"Unity of the Five Teachings" (五教合一): synthesizes Maitreya, Laozi, Confucius, Christ, Muhammad under the Eternal Mother principle.
Xiantiandao	Wusheng Laomu's emissary Maitreya	Rooted in White Lotus lineage: Maitreya as final savior after Dipankara and Sakyamuni; frames itself as primordial "Way" transcending all religions.
Victory Altar	"Victor Christ" = Maitreya Buddha (Cho Hee-Sung)	Cho as incarnate Savior-Buddha; five "covenants" (e.g. ending war, ensuring harvests) mirror miraculous messianic acts (Rigal-Cellard 2024).
Daesoon Jinrihoe	Kang Jeungsan "Jeungsan is Maitreya"	Interprets founder as the real Maitreya to actualize an earthly paradise; merges Confucian, Buddhist, Christian motifs without literal millennialism.
Caodaism	Di Lặc Phật	In Caodaism, Maitreya (or Di Lặc) is the future Buddha who is destined to guide humanity to salvation and harmony.

Kenosis in the Christian theological concept of "self-emptying," epitomized by Christ relinquishing divine privilege to become fully human, intersects profoundly with Tianzhu shiyi and the idea of a "United Savior" in East Asian religious contexts. It presents Christian doctrine in dialogue with Confucian and Chinese philosophical ideals. The self-emptying love of Christ found resonance in concepts such as *ren* (Confucian benevolence) and Daoist emptiness, both of which emphasize humility, self-giving, and

unity with the cosmos. Ricci's method itself was kenotic when he entered the Chinese world with humility, adapting his message thoughtfully, emptying his "Western" self to become incarnate as a Confucian literatus, thus embodying the principle he preached. This is a background of the "United Savior" in East Asian new religions. It is often portrayed as one who embodies kenotic self-sacrifice. Such saviors' manifest qualities of humility, compassion, and selflessness, core criteria for spiritual authority in both Christian and Asian religious frameworks.

Thus, the kenotic savior unites disparate traditions, not through power, but by emptying self and identifying with suffering humanity. Asian religious values of non-attachment, egolessness, and universal benevolence; the kenotic Christ, or Buddha-Messiah, is thus seen as the archetype of selflessness and reconciling unity, forming philosophical parallels. Ricci's *Tianzhu shiyi* drew explicit parallels between Christian kenosis and the Confucian virtue of *ren* ("benevolence" as self-emptying love), as well as the Daoist ideal of *wu* (emptiness).

Kenosis, also related to the concept of *sunyata* (Buddhist emptiness), constructs a model in which ultimate reality is achieved through self-emptying, not as negation, but as openness to others, aligning with both Christian and Buddhist mystical insights. Ricci's kenotic adaptation led to religious practice focused on life-witness, humility, service, and spiritual insight, rather than dogmatic assertion. This paradigm empowered Asian Christologies and Buddhist-Christian dialogs, informing the idea that the united savior must live and manifest self-emptying love in action. It can be said that Kenosis provides a conceptual and ethical bridge between Ricci's *Tianzhu shiyi* and the "United Savior" motif in East Asian religion. Both reframe salvation in terms of divine self-emptying, resonating deeply with the humility, compassion, and spiritual unity emphasized in Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, and integrating these into the figure of a universally redeeming savior.

Conclusion

This research offers a fresh perspective on the modern transformations of East Asian religions by integrating Christianity, particularly through the cultural exchanges initiated by Ricci and the Jesuit missionaries. These exchanges illustrate how Eastern and Western cultural concepts intertwine, creating new religious symbols. By examining Maitreya and the Messiah as symbols of future enlightenment and salvation, this research explores how East-West cultural interactions led to a profound reconfiguration of religious identities and a transformation of traditional symbols. This blending of messianic concepts gave rise to distinct expressions of "neo-messianism" in East Asia as new religious movements emerged.

Influenced by Buddhist and Christian eschatology, new religious movements in East Asia have developed new messianic visions. This "neo-messianism" reinterprets Maitreya and the Messiah by blending Buddhist concepts of samsara with Christian messianic

themes. This synthesis reflects a distinct combination of Eastern and Western religious ideas, creating symbols of hope, redemption, and universal harmony in Daesoon Jinrihoe and Caodaism. The fusion of Maitreya and the Messiah figure fosters a spiritual inclusivity that bridges Eastern and Western religious thought. It unifies and addresses modern existential concerns, social challenges, and the human desire for a meaningful connection across different religious and cultural boundaries. This integration also reflects a transformative process in which East Asian religions, influenced by early Christian interactions with Jesuit missions, gradually redefined their messianic symbols to resonate with evolving cultural contexts. Through this cross-cultural exchange, traditional symbols such as Maitreya, the Buddhist bodhisattva of the future, began to intertwine with Christian messianic themes.

Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

Notes

[1] "Lord of Heaven" is a title referring to a supreme divine being, most often God in Christian and Judeo-Christian contexts, signifying ultimate authority and sovereignty over the cosmos. It can also refer to deities like Indra in Hinduism or Ông Trời in Vietnamese culture (Dinh 2025, 196), emphasizing their dominion over heavenly realms. The phrase can also be found in historical works by Matteo Ricci, where it is used to explain the concept of God to a Chinese audience (Ricci 1607, 2016).

[2] "The Three Saints Signing the Peace Treaty" was created by artist Le Minh Tong in 1947, depicting the Three Saints of Caodaism, wearing typical costumes with halos on their heads. One wrote the content of the peace treaty in Chinese characters, and the other wrote it in French, with the same content: "Heaven and Earth, Compassion and Justice" (天上天下 博愛公平).

[3] For example, in Daesoon Jinrihoe, the Supreme God Sangje incarnated as Kang Jeungsan (1871-1909), who "did not offer himself as sacrifice when he came on earth but reorganized the world and taught how to apply benevolence to establish the Earthly Paradise" (Rigal-Cellard 2022).

[4] Yiguandao (一貫道), meaning the "Way of Pervading Unity," is a Chinese salvationist religion that blends Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism with elements from other faiths, emphasizing spiritual unity and salvation in a final era, known for its rapid spread from China to Taiwan and globally, despite being banned in mainland China. It's a syncretic faith, combining traditions and offering a path to enlightenment accessible to laypeople, often through home-based practice and communal worship in "Buddha Halls" (佛堂).

[5] The "Five Teachings in Unity" refers to a syncretic belief system that merges the core philosophies and doctrines of Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Christianity, and Islam. This synthesis is most prominently found in East Asian new religious movements, particularly in the Cao Dai religion and Yiguan Dao (Unity Way).

[6] Wusheng Laomu (無生老母), meaning "Unborn Old Mother," is a supreme, genderless divine principle in Chinese salvationist religions like Yiguandao, representing the source of the universe, also called the Infinite Mother (Wujimu).

[7] Cho Hee Sung (조희성 / 曺熙星) was the founder of the South Korean religious movement known as the Victory Altar (Seungnijedan 승리제단 / 勝利祭檀, also known as Yeongsaeng-gyo 영생교 / 永生

教), established in 1981, who proclaimed himself the "Victor Christ and God," a unique Messiah promising biological immortality and universal salvation, blending Christian, Buddhist, and Korean shamanistic beliefs with strong Korean nationalism, though considered a cult by mainstream churches.

[8] The triad of Dipankara Buddha (Green-sun), Gautama Buddha (Red-sun), and Maitreya Buddha (White-sun) represents the Three Sun Periods (三陽) or the Three Eras of Salvation in Chinese eschatological and salvationist traditions, particularly within Yiguandao. This doctrine divides human history and cosmic time into three stages, each of which is presided over by a Buddha sent to guide sentient beings.

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