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The Influence of Mithraism on Christianity

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Abstract

In religious studies, the influence of mythology and religion on each other is worthy of deliberation. Among the religions, Mithraism, the ancient Persian pre-Zoroastrian religion, and Christianity have the most similar and common points that indicate logical influence. Religions influence each other and sometimes over laps, of course. As regards, Mithraism had priority over Christianity; however, there is no way for religious scholars to consider Christianity as the substitution of Mithraism. This study intends to present influence of Mithraism on Christianity by following traces and evidences in history.

Keywords: Mithraism, Christianity, Mehraveh, Bread and Wine, Yalda.

Introduction

Emotions and inner thoughts exist among people in all cultures and civilizations. For this reason, investigating religions to understand human society increase awareness about the promotion and evolution of the human civilization. Anthropologists' study of ancient nation myths and investigation of social structures of primitive people show that this repetition of old patterns has been the basis of all rites and practices of various ethnic groups of prehistoric and primitive people and still is. And the drama caused by the belief to the mentioned old patterns could be seen from the historical periods to the time of being. They interpreted primitive and

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basic framework of the creation of themselves and world by using their creative mind and considered all the nature-objects to be holy and commendable. The beings who should be worshiped so that they will not be unhappy and wreak havoc, because of human's inability to deal with these phenomena and also their existence myths and gods emerged. Therefore, all of these situations emerged as mythology in the religions. This phenomenon continued to exist as Ayzdn. Some of these deities in Persian myths are: the god of Mihr, god of sun, god of moon, god of fire, water god and Aahita. In this study, we investigate the history of Mithraism during the Persian history and then, its emergence in Europe. Later we compare cult of Mihr with Christianity based on the evidences, artifacts, inscriptions and coins which have been left from Mithraism in Europe.

History of Mithraism

Mihr is one of the ancient Aryan gods, for the first time he had been named in Boğazköy, Nasatia, Varuna and Indva inscriptions and it had been worshiped a long periods of time. Mithra's name has seen beside Varuna and other Hindu's gods as the contract god. In the Vedic period in India, his name had appeared as Mtyrh which means "friendships and contracts" and is one of the ruler gods and in combination of "Mtyrh-Varuna" is called as help. In Indian's tradition, it has a glowing carousel in a golden domicile with a thousand pillars and doors. In this belief, he is a very old god and probably pre-Zoroastrian, yet has placed in a lower rank before Ahura Mazda and has been considered as his creation. He is the god of contract and protects the order and honesty. His major task is supervising the contracts. Contract would be in every area such as between man and woman or two countries. He is hostile towards those who break the contract, and so becomes the god of war. Therefore, the military of ancient Persia praised Mihr on their horses before fought against countries which were Mihr's opponent. These prayers performed in the special ritual and later Mihr established Mithraism in West (Haririan, 1390:108).

In his special hymns, Mihr Yasht has a magnificent description of him. Mithra is a god who provides glory and wealth, makes family full of joy, gives rewards to the believers, and punishes opponents. In village and family, there are beautiful tall woman, brave offspring, brisk horses, wonderful carousels, magnificent buildings and soft and aromatic beds; hence, oldsters always present in his praise ceremony on time. In these rites, adorers were singing chorus and hymns (Razy, 1382: 339-340).

This god of courage has a carriage that was moving in heaven by four white horses and exists on all fighting instruments. Mihr is war provocative. He splits the Persian enemy armies and spreads great horror and anxiety (Safa, 1363: 114).

Mihr is owner of the vast grasslands, a thousand ears and eyes (Spring, 1362: 151). Mihr is god of the sun that governs the night by a thousand ears and ten thousand of eyes. He is also participating in arbitration of spirit association with Soros and Rasn gods at the foot of the Chinvat Bridge and controls the judgments. According to Mahdi Farsha: "Moghan means special Mihr adorer has made alive the cult of Mihr and its astronomy traditions and expanded other places and outside of Persian origin and Moghans; means cult of Mihr followers had physical identity" (FarrokhZad, 1386: 434).

Mihr within the Achaemenids

As regards the ability, courageous and honesty were the Achaemenids characteristics and also Mihr was a support and help for kings and righteous. This angel regained his own dignity and was appealed to Mithra and Anahita two of the most prominent god of "Yasht" at the end of the Achaemenid in Persepolis according to Artaxerxes and Achaemenian inscriptions. In the six-goddess inscriptions, the name of Anahita has mentioned after Ahura Mazda (Pirnia, 1385: 132).

Mihr's worship which was traditionally in Persian Aryan religion extended at this time, they said "godhead" to Mithra, and swore to it (Amoozgar, 1385: 119). As expressed by King Artaxerxes, "The god of Ahura Mazda and Mithra preserved my country and I and anything which had done by me" (Estakhri, 1381: 156).

Mithra within the Pathian

Pathian also had extreme endeavor in Mithraism promotion of the bravery, warrior, courageous and heroism and most of the dynasty king names has combined with this word such as, Mehrdad, Mitradad, and Mehran. The cult of Mihr has spread over the Asia Minor and Cappadocia as a result of triumphs and expansion of the Achaemenid and Pathian kingdoms. Neron converted to the Mithra religion by Tiridates, the king of Armenia, and this was common in whole Roman Empire territories, and since influenced Italy in the first century (B.C.) and then all the western countries. Nowadays, many monuments of Mithra

religion would be found in Europe near the juxtaposition of main roads, shores, ancient Roman garrisons, and European fertile and green areas (Sami, 1389: 284).

Mithraism went Rome by hands of pirates and reached the Danub and Ren regions with Roman army (Ghirshman, 1375: 320).

Owing to homonymous, the Avesta-Mithra should not be combined with Roman Empire god which was a reflection of various Persian traditions (probably physical Vskay) and turned in non-Persian opinions and a mysterious creed (Sagheb Far, 1391: 571). Presence of Mithra and Anahita in Persian temple shows that royal religion had combined with Kolany astronomy (Hawar, 1386: 740).

Mithraism promotion in Europe and Rome

Roman religious thoughts have been concluded from distant countries. Religions and beliefs from East spread through and rooted in Rome, when it converted to an international force. Faith in Adonis from Sham, belief in Isis and Azirs from Egypt, cult of Mithra and Mithraism from Persia spread over Rome (John Nas, 1392: 107-108).

Historian Plotark, just one century after Christ, expresses his observations regarding Mithraism by stating that Romans recognized Mithra by Silica pirates that was one of the states of Asia Minor. Pampei Emperor was obliged to send several divisions to fight against pirates and suppressed them. He writes about Silica pirates that they made great sacrifices on the Mount Olympus in region of Locy and performed mysterious rituals secretly which nowadays was remained in cult of Mithra. These pirates were the first persons who tried to scatter the cult of Mithra. From a Roman historian Pyanvs point of view, the mid-second century Christian Roman Mithraists are survivors of the Mehrdad Opator beaten army who introduced secrets of Mithra's cult to the pirates and Mehrdad's army was consist of Mitra tribes in Taras-which was the capital-was respected. Coins of Emperor Grdyanvs of Rome proved this idea that the Mithra's face has seen in a side of coins which was killing a cow. There is a Roman statue in the Museum of London, which belongs to that time period, proclaims on the script at the bottom of it that this statue belong to "Asimus" who called himself as Clodious Lioyanus' slave. In so, if Lioyanus was the commander of Keshikchian Traian emperor, the statue belongs to beginning of the second century AD. At this time, the way has opened to mysteries cult of Mithra which has started his triumphal progress, and also has developed into Capitol and Palatn, simultaneously (Vermaseren, 1390: 32-33).

An appeal and interest was feeling to cult of Mithra among the Roman army in every religious and authority position that it's not be a source of surprising; hence, all the soldiers who gathered under the eagle mark flag of Roman army could be supported strongly by Mithra. Roman military triumph had impacted upon the dissemination and formality of this religion. When Dioclesin, the Roman elderly emperor, Galerius and Lesenius gathered in town of Karnoronrothm, not far away from Vienna (308 AD), and made the three royal governments, they dedicated an altar and Mihr temple to Mithra in remembrance of concluded treaty between themselves. On the basis of, Mithra had been described as a guard of imperial power of Rome with glorious letters. The cult of Mithra achievement permeates among population which has derived from interest and attention of royal family, particularly in second and third centuries.

In Rome, there are over a hundred Mihr passages which remain in the all parts of the city where has not built synchronous; however, lots of them are from the same period. It should be reminded that the Mihr's caves had been built extensively. Quantity as well as magnitude of temples had increased over time by followers (Vermaseren, 1390: 43-44). Julian had an inner tendency to Mithraism and built temple of Mihr in his palace in spite of the fact that he apparently was a Christian. At his time, Georges wanted to destroy the Mihr temple at Alexandria and built a church instead. However, Mithraists prevented this request and eventually caught, imprisoned and then executed him. After Julian, the same situation turns back and Mithraists had been hurt.

The nobilities, who were Mihr advocators and protecting and opening his temples, weren't optimistic about religion of Christ and had a propensity to idolatry until the fourth century AD in Rome but prevented his propagation and development in the these years (Sami, 1389: 284-285).

This religion has fought continuously against Christianity throughout Europe until West Rome emperor "Constantine" finally accepted Christianity at the end of the fourth century AD and other religions were completely prohibited and gates of Mithras's temples were closed. Meanwhile, these worshipers adopted Christ or became followers of Mani (Hekmat, 1388: 163).

Cult of Mithra (Mihr)

Mitra's birth is astonishing that a mystical and magical force has emerged through a solid rock. As soon as Mihr was born, he prepared for doing arduous tasks. He was carrying a sword to sacrifice the cow and also some arrow and bow on his waist for hunting or performing miracle in water. According to cult of Zoroastrianism, Mithra was born by a virgin who was named Anahita. When Anahita had washing herself in Hamun Lake, she became pregnant with Zoroaster's semen that was spattered in and was protected by the angels. Then after a while, Mithra was born. Therefore, there has seen particular correlation between water and Mihr symbols and whatsoever which has fertilized and grown. The most prominent examples of them are pearls, dolphin and lily. According to Mithras's followers a group of scientists equated Mithra with sun and others made differences among them. One day he rose in cave of Sama's cliff as a man. According to Komen France "Mithra being born from a rock which was accompanied by the sound of splitting rocks, shepherds gathered to worship, at first were united with sun and then defeated a cow; in other words, he had lain back and had taken animal's leg and dragged it in to the cave and imprisoned, but the cow escaped, at this time Ahura Mazda or the sun was commanded the Mithras to perish the cow by the crow. He chased and taken its muzzle in his fist, but it was killed instantly by a blow of dagger.

The fertile and green lands had found in anywhere drops of blood had splashed, or in other words bunch of grapes and wheat and other planets had exited through cow carcass (Sharl Push, 1346: 150-151).

In the remains, image of Pergamon doctrine sculptors has seen as that Mithra was killing cow while a scorpion was on cow's penis and a snake was sucking its blood (Hawar, 1363: 114). A group of scientists believes these damaging insects probably are creature of Ahriman that has been attempting to poison and ruin springs of life which is cow's semen and blood with no prosperity. Instead, the others believe that perhaps snake and scorpion are land and generation signs, the goodness elements that are agent of various animals which had created of sacrificed cow's semen. After death, the cow's spirit has gone to heaven and has monitored and protected herds of cattle (Ibid, 1363: 151).

Mihr's cave is a symbol of the celestial sphere. Rock is also allusions to the sky which has sprinkled light over the earth. In some images, a fire flame leaps out of stone and even Phrygian cap sometimes. Also the stars have seen on Phrygian cap and it can be a symbol of celestial sphere such as the cave.

Mihr ceremony should perform in caves due to this symbol of heaven arch. Running water should exist near or inside the natural temples, but there weren't caves in cities or plains. For this reason, these temples had been built underground, similar to caves. A set of long steps led temple to the ground. Temples neither have outside light or window. Sometimes the staircase led down to a room where followers were preparing for the ceremony and then were arriving to the main area of temple. They were adorned the temple's arch like night sky. Inside the temple there were two rows of platforms at both sides and deep courtyard of temple was located in where the ceremony was done and new spectators could sit and watch the ceremony on the bench which was found next to the platform. At the end of the courtyard, there was an image of Mithra on the wall that was killing the cow. Beside the entrance, a legged container was filled with sanctified water and on the opposite side two hearths at the foot of the Mihr image. On the walls of temples, most images were designed. The general point about these temples was the capacity, they were too small that they could not accommodate more than a few person (Bahar, 1381: 32-33).

The chamber is located in the cave, a small short entrance and arch ceiling on the platform and above the floor, with a window beside or on the top of the altar that shines the East light in the altar and its interior space. One of these altars has been decorated in blue, gold, white and red purple colors. These colors and decorations might be seen in some of European altars and subbasement of the churches. Most of the European and Asian altars consists designs of the sun, moon, stars and sometimes the twelve zodiac signs, such as milk, cow, scorpions, crabs, etc. These symbolic colors has entered Christianity which has derived from Mithra as the red hearth which had located at the front of alter, later changed into a legged table that it was seen the scarlet cloth on it.

Red is symbol of blood and life, and the allusion to red sun and holy blood of cow which had been sacrificed by Mithra is the factor in fertility and life in "human, animal and plant" creation. In Christianity red wine is the allusion to Christ's blood. Purple and ultramarine have been used for cape of Mithra in European altar. White is symbol of perfection, light, purity, holiness, and also color of love, life, death and burial. Moon and stars and zodiac signs have been painted in white and golden, later these colors had entered in Christian clergymen uniforms and architectural decorations of churches. On the other hand, these colors have a particular position in Mithraist, Zoroastrian and Islamic mysticisms.

According to Esmail Vakili, it should be noted that entry into Mithraism manner was doing at time of maturity and volunteers who has declared his readiness to pass examination, must

separate from the family and live independently for a while. In this period, this relatively new convert has been taught special education to be ready and attend to the following important ceremony. At this stage, the trainee must attract his master's approval, then training of mysteries was performed by two high-ranking members of the congregation; means the master is equal to old and herald.

According to French Rene Alelv, the volunteer must be sworn before entering the mystery congregation that never reveals the rank secrets and mysteries which will belong to him. After this level, the volunteer arrives a specific area with closed eyes and hands on a rope strap and opens ropes and passes through several experiments. First, the volunteer must have been bared completely that nudity was an indicator mark that avoids him from physical world and its glamorous phenomena (Farokhzad, 1386: 445-446).

Basing on the remain notes of a bishop of the Urshlym city, Vermaseren states that the novice who has wanted to join Mysreh Association, must have been taken part in eighty tests and has conquered major difficulty to give him entrance permission and became to the brotherhood degree. Mithra grades are: Corax (raven), Nymphus (spouse), Miles (soldier), Perses (Persian), Heliodromus (sun-runner), and Pater (father) (Vermaseren, 1390: 167-168).

Every year, Mithraists bring a decorating cow in to city center splendidly in October and slaughter it. After mourning they eat cow's meat due to idol's part being stayed in their body and guided towards the idol. They call Sunday the day of Sun and it was a worship and holiday for them. They start the year on month "Boghbad" means the month of worship MOGH (god) and this was according to the month of October which is called today Mehr.

New Year begins with winter in ancient Persia and Mehrgan celebration. Mehr ceremony was one of the biggest celebrations and called Gana Mithra (Ghadiani, 138: 747-748).

According Mithraist belief, a day will come that Mithra's mission completed on earth and he will return to Ahura Mazda in heaven. This return is accompanied by a banquet which the sun and his battle followers participate, while he rides on the chariot of the sun and goes to heaven. Mithras also helps whoever believes him by leading them to heaven. He guides their souls to go on eight floors of heaven where peace and light are located. On day of resurrection, Mithra will come on earth and will revive all the dead, separate excellent from sinners, and sacrifice great cows which will emerge at that time and mixes their fat with holy syrup *Haoma* and give to excellent. In this way, they become immortal. On the other hand, Ahriman and his advocators will be burned in fire (Ibid, 1386: 52).

Mithra followers believe that life in physical world is not the last stage of existence, but human life is like a gateway that human walks from past to the other world and acquires eternity. Thus, when the last day will come, the dead arise from their position (Resurrection). Then, Mithra will call and send everyone, who were righteous and had done good deeds, to the luminous sky (the eight floors) and will send the other who had bad deeds to darkness world. This subject of resurrection has an influence on all religions (Razi, 1382: 343).

Comparative analysis: Mithra's customs with Christianity

The monuments in the Eastern Roman show traces of Mithraism on Christian. These traces would be found on rites such as man salvation at the beginning of Christianity. A secret association was having sessions in small groups, that its disciples especially propagandists were hidden under oath. Their most important rites were cow sacrifice, secretions in cave, and being in the presence of the sun and the moon. In these rites, women did not have role since Roman Mithraism was a religion of warriors and fighters. These rituals were a man religion (Polro, 1393: 125).

Altars, water wells and springs were important since believers were washing by them. Paintings and curtains depict Mithras Master or Mithras Moghan as practicing baptism for believers. There was a small pool in altars however, it is not clear this small pool was used for the wash of novices or not. A door or window opens towards sun in the altar and believers worship towards sun. Later, these altars were changed to Mehrab in Hebraic and Arabic times. A very large and magnificent bath had built in Rome. First, quite a lot of warriors go to bath and practice wash rituals for entering to altars and worship the Mithras. It must be known that fish was also a Christian indicator which was used to identify people like a password in the middle ages. It is also accompanied with knowledge like baptism that was making novel rebirth, means that the baptism washing purifies the past sins from human. When youth wanted to enter the temple and performed rituals, baptizing was practiced (Rezaie, 1378: 743).

Conclusion

The tradition of Worship Mihr goes back to ancient times, Mihr had been a principal deity in history and influenced myths of other lands hundreds of years. A group of scientists consider that these religious beliefs have many commonalities regarding sun, sky, stars, the spiritual light, honesty and truth. Mithra is the god of truth, honesty, and the care of the administration of justice. Therefore, Mithra's personality is harmonious with Zoroastrian. These beliefs spread not only among all social classes of Persia, but also among all West Asia and the Roman Empire people. Peasants, soldiers, artisans, even princes were his followers. Mithraists has attributed many legends to Mihr such as born of rock, battle of bull, the ascent of Mithra to the heaven, the guardian of vast grassland, affection and contract. Followers trained as a warrior as Mithra since they supposed to triumph over Ahriman forces only with a hard battle. Thus, the Mithra cult had a profound influence among the warriors of Roman Empire and performed temples, rituals and special customs for him. On one hand, development and influence of Mithraism was coincided with the advent of the European Christianity and on the other, caused long of conflicts and struggles between the religions in Europe that ensured its durability and permanency. Christianity became a successor of Mithraism in Europe by accepting most of these rituals to assure its continuity. It would be claimed that none of the ancient religions influenced Christianity as much as Mithraism. This conclusion can be tested by comparing Mihr cult and ritual with Christianity and the tradition performed in it. In addition to Christianity, Mithra cult could be seen in many customs of Iran even after the ancient Persia, such as: Yalda, Hajji Firuz, Dowry, Wednesday, Engagement Ring, Ancient Sports and so on.

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