

## CHAPTER 22

# Islam and Buddhism

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On truth's path, wise is mad, insane is wise.  
In love's way, self and other are the same.  
Having drunk the wine, my love, of being one with you,  
I find the way to Mecca and Bodhgaya are the same.

Rumi, *Kulliyat-e Shams-e Tabrizi* 302

Historically and theologically, the Qur'an and the Muslims have engaged primarily in discussion and dialogue with other Semitic religions. This is understandable, considering those religions' interconnections and relationships. Muslim engagements with the Asian religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism are largely the result of commercial relations, immigration, and political interactions between the worlds of Islam and Asia.

This paper examines Islam's view of Buddhism as a non-theistic tradition, the history of relations between these two traditions, themes and issues in Muslim–Buddhist dialogue, and the implications of such dialogue for the contemporary religious scene. While Muslims and Buddhists have coexisted in different parts of the world, their exchange has been largely political, military and economic, instead of doctrinal, and only a few scholars have studied the relations between the two traditions in any detail (Berzin 2007: 225, 251).

Islam and Buddhism first came into contact in central Asia (Foltz 1999) and later in south and southeast Asia (al-Attas 1963). These early encounters were followed, in some instances, by the conversion of Buddhists to Islam, as happened in central and maritime southeast Asia. Yet there were also other regions where Buddhists and Muslims continued to exist side by side, as in India, Tibet, and parts of mainland southeast Asia.

Despite the long record of Muslim–Buddhist interaction, such contact is at the present either nonexistent or rare, largely due to the strong trend of reified interpretations of religion in the contemporary world – interpretations which in turn overlook

the historical exchanges that took place between these religions during the Age of the Silk Road (400 BCE–1400 CE) and the Age of Commerce (1450–1680 CE).

## Buddhism and Islam in History

Encounters between Islam and Buddhism are as old as Islam itself (Yusuf 2003). The first encounter between Islam and Buddhist communities took place in the middle of the seventh century CE in East Persia, Transoxiana, Afghanistan and Sindh (Fyre 2012). Historical evidence indicates that early Muslims extended the Qur'anic category of *ahl al-Kitab* ("people of the book" or revealed religion) to Hindus and Buddhists (Ikram 1965: 11; MacLean 1997: 40–41; Vajda 2012; Wink 1990 1: 193–194).

During the second half of the eighth century CE, central-Asian Muslims translated many Buddhist works into Arabic. Arabic titles such as *Bilawhar wa Budhasaf* and *Kitab al-Budd* are clear evidence of Muslim learning about Buddhism (Goldziher and Lewis 1981: 141). Significantly, in spite of his awareness that idols of the Buddha were objects of reverence and worship, Ibn al-Nadim (d. 995 CE), the author of *al-Firhist*, observes that:

These people [Buddhists of Khurasan] are the most generous of all the inhabitants of the earth and of all the religionists. This is because their prophet *Budhasaf* [Bodhisattva] has taught them that the greatest sin, which should never be thought of or committed, is the utterance of "No." Hence they act upon this advice; they regard the uttering of "No" as an act of Satan. And it is their very religion to banish Satan. (Muhammad ibn Abi Yaquub Ishaq Ibn al-Nadim 1971: 407; see also Yusuf 1955: 28)

There is also evidence of central-Asian Buddhist influence on Muslims in the succeeding period. One possible source of this may lie in the Barmak family, who were descendants of Buddhist monks and governors in the non-Muslim regions during the early Abbasid caliphate, which ruled the greater part of the Islamic world for five centuries (750–1258 CE). It is noteworthy that the Buddhist monastery of Naw Bahar near Balkh, in addition to other Iranian monasteries, remained under the supervision of the Barmak family (Bulliet 1976: 140–145; Foltz 1999: 100; Xinru Liu 2011: 55–81).

We find vestiges of several Buddhist beliefs and practices among the Muslims of central Asia. For example, during the Samanid dynasty, which ruled Persia during the ninth and tenth centuries CE, the madrasahs devoted to Islamic learning were modeled after Buddhist schools in eastern Iran. (Foltz 1999: 100). The *pondoks* or *pasenterens*, Muslim religious schools of southeast Asia, seem also to have been influenced by the Hindu and Buddhist temple schools of the region.

The celebrated historian and Qur'anic exegete, Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari (d. 923 CE), who was born in northern Persia, mentions that Buddhist idols were brought from Kabul to Baghdad in the ninth century CE. It is also reported that Buddhist idols were sold in a Buddhist temple next to the Makh mosque in the market of the city of Bukhara in modern Uzbekistan (Foltz 1999: 100).

There is a common misunderstanding that Islam wiped out Buddhism by means of conversion and persecution. Marshall Hodgson comments:

Probably Buddhism did not yield to Islam so much by direct conversion as by a more insidious route: the sources of recruitment to the relatively unaristocratic Buddhism – for instance, villagers coming to the cities and adopting a new allegiance to accord to their new status – turned now rather to Islam than to an outdated Buddhism. The record of the massacre of one monastery in Bengal, combined with the inherited Christian conception of Muslims as the devotees of the sword has yielded the widely repeated statement that the Muslims violently “destroyed” Buddhism in India. Muslims were not friendly to it, but there is no evidence that they simply killed off all the Buddhists, or even all the monks. It will take much active revision before such assessments of the role of Islam, based largely on unexamined preconceptions, are eliminated even from educated mentalities. (Hodgson 1977: 557)

Further encounters between Islam and Hindu-Buddhist civilization took place in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. The Islam of this region had a conspicuously mystic orientation, and the Muslims who first brought Islam to Indonesia and then to Malaysia and southern Thailand during the twelfth–fifteenth centuries CE were largely Sufi mystics. In religious terms, this led to a meeting between the Hindu view of *moksha* (liberation) through the Hindu notion of monism, the Buddhist notion of *Dhamma* (Truth) through the realization *sunyata* (emptiness), and the Islamic concept of *fana*’ (the passing away of one’s identity by its merging into the Universal Being) as expounded in the monotheistic pantheism of the Sufis. Gradually there emerged a syncretic culture, particularly in Java and other parts of southeast Asia, giving rise to a version of Islam that was mystical, fluid and soft (Gordon 2001; Shih 2002).

The attitudes of Muslims and Buddhists toward one another in the course of history involves both positive and negative experiences and perceptions. Johan Elverskog has recently commented that Buddhist views that Muslims destroyed Nalanda University in 1202, and that Islam caused the general demise of Buddhism in India, is an invented myth. Nalanda University continued to function until the thirteenth century CE, Buddhist rulers remained in power after making deals with Muslim leaders, and the Buddhadhamma survived in India until the seventeenth century CE. He believes that the Dhamma declined because of its own failings (Elverskog 2010: 2).

Another negative Buddhist image of Muslims is contained in the Kalacakra Tantra, a text containing passages that may be construed as demonizing Muslims, including a prophecy about a holy war between Buddhists and *mleccha* – barbarians in general, but commonly interpreted as Muslim invaders of central Asia and India (Berzin 2012). The Kalacakra narrative continues to shape the Buddhist view of Islam and Muslims.

Shiite Persians settled in the Siamese kingdom of Ayutthaya and at the court of King Phra Narai (r. 1656–88), whose reign witnessed great commercial and diplomatic activities. Several Persians served as Prime Ministers and ambassadors at the court of King Phra Narai (Marcinkowski 2005: 6) and there was close diplomatic communication between Safavid Iran and Ayutthaya between 1660s and 1680s, including an exchange of embassies. The primary account of the state of the Persian community in

Ayutthaya is contained in Ibn Muhammad Ibrahim's *Safinai Sulaimani*, or *Ship of Sulaiman*, where the author suggests that Buddhism should be understood as idolatrous (Alam and Subrahmanyam 2010: 159–171; O'Kane 1972).

In Siam and in modern Thailand, Muslims are often viewed as a threat toward Buddhism, and as violent toward the Thai Buddhist state. The roots of this image lie in the history of political relations between premodern Siam and its Malay Muslim vassal states, Patani and Trengganu, at the southern cultural border between the ethno-religious worlds of Thai Buddhism and Malay Islam (Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit 2005; Ibrahim Syukri 1985; Milner 2008; Teeuw 1970). At Wat Matchimawat in the southern Thai city of Songkla, a mural depicting the Buddha's defeat of Mara during the night of the Buddha's enlightenment shows a bearded Muslim figure embedded in Mara's retinue (Keyes, 2008/2009).

Besides suspicion and rejection, the relationships between Muslims and Buddhists have also included numerous positive expressions of respect and receptivity. The classical Muslim scholar of comparative religion 'Abd al-Karim al-Shahrastani (1086–1153 CE), in a section called *Ara' al-Hind* (The Views of the Indians) within his magnum opus, *Kitab al-Milal wa 'l-Nihal* (*Book of Religious and Philosophical Sects*), shows a high regard for Buddhism and its spiritual richness, identifying the Buddha with the Qur'anic figure of al-Khidr as a seeker of enlightenment (al-Shahrastani 1910: 1275; Lawrence 1976: 113–114; for al-Khidr see Qur'an 18: 64).

Rashid al-Din (1247–1318 CE) who was attached to the Persian Il-khanid court, wrote a detailed introduction to Buddhism in his monumental *Jami al-tawarikh* (*Compendium of Chronicles*), aiming to make Buddhism accessible to Muslims (Canby 1993: 299–310 Elverskog 2010: 149–162).

Today Islam and Buddhism coexist in South Asia, southeast Asia, east Asia and the West. The state of this relationship is varied and diverse, a diversity that can be appreciated only in the context of the local histories of each region. Recently, the late Professor Muhammad Hamidullah (d. 2002) promoted a view of the Buddha as a Prophet. He refers in particular to the mention of a fig tree in the Qur'an (95: 1), which, according to several old and new commentators of the Qur'an, "may refer to the Bodhi tree of the revelation of Buddha; and his birth place Kapila-Vastu is supposed to have given the name of the prophet Dhu 'l-Kifl" (Hamidullah 1974: 54). Hamidullah concludes that because the Buddha attained *nirvana* under a wild fig tree (*Ficus religiosa*) – and because that tree does not figure prominently in the life of any of the Qur'anic Prophets – the Qur'anic verse itself must refer to Gautama Buddha (Hamidullah 1974: 54 and 160 f; Scott 1995 141–155).

The general contemporary Thai Muslim attitude towards Buddhism is that of "live and let live": "Unto you, your religion (moral law), and unto me mine" (Qur'an 109: 6). Educated Thai Muslims tend to view Buddhist understandings of *dukkha*, or suffering, and the search for nirvana, as a philosophical and methodical approach to life, while more popular Thai religious beliefs in spirits and demons appear strange and unwise.

At this popular level, Thai Muslims see Buddhism as a religion of *kufir* (disbelief in God) and *shirk* (idolatry/polytheism). They view Thai Buddhists as *kafirs* (unbelievers) and infidels and *mushrikeen* (polytheists). These two categories of religionists are scorned

by the Qur'an and opposed vehemently by Prophet Muhammad. As a result, they adopt and apply a literal understanding of Qur'anic passages to their Thai context, without applying interpretive tools of historical criticism. Hence, in charged or conflicted political situations, Thai Muslims view many Thai Buddhists as *najis* (unclean, immoral and faithless) engaged in *kufur* and *shirk*, which are to be opposed by engaging in *jihad*. Such a view, of course, remains ignorant regarding classical Muslim views of Buddhism, and thereby contributes to intensifying conflict.

## Buddha and Muhammad – Prophetic Dimensions

From a Muslim perspective on the history of religions, God has from time immemorial raised prophets among all nations, only some of whom are mentioned by name in the Qur'an. The Qur'an mentions 25 prophets, including Muhammad, all of them belonging to semitic religious traditions. However, there is no ambiguity about the fact that the Qur'an affirms prophethood as a universal phenomenon:

And indeed, [O Muhammad], We have sent forth apostles before your time; some of them We have mentioned to thee, and some of them We have not mentioned to thee (40: 78; cf. 4: 164).

And never have We sent forth any apostle otherwise than [with a message] in people's own tongue . . . (14: 4).

To each among you have We prescribed a Law and an Open Way. If Allah had so willed He would have made you a single people but (His plan is) to test you in what He hath given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to God; it is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which ye dispute. (5: 48)

The Qur'anic concept of *risalah*, or prophethood, offers an analogue with the Buddhist concept of "Buddha" in certain ways. Buddha is not a personal name, but a designation which may be considered, if not identical with, then somewhat similar to, the designations of *nabi* or *rasul* (prophet). Buddhas appear in different epochs to teach the path to nirvana, and Buddhist sources mention that 27 Buddhas have appeared over a period of 5,000 years (Fozdar 1973: 13; Griffiths 1994: 87–119).

Both Muhammad and the Buddha sought answers to age-old questions about the human predicament: What does it mean to be human? Why is there anguish and suffering? The Buddha called this phenomenon *dukkha* (suffering), whereas the Qur'an refers to man as being created in *kabad*, or affliction (Qur'an 90):

NAY! I call to witness this land –  
this land in which thou art free to dwell –  
and [I call to witness] parent and offspring:  
Verily, We have created man into [a life of] *kabad* – pain, toil and trial.  
Does he, then, think that no one has power over him?  
He boasts, "I have spent wealth abundant!"

Does he, then, think that no one sees him?  
 Have We not given him two eyes,  
 and a tongue, and a pair of lips,  
 and shown him the two highways [of good and evil]?  
 But he would not try to ascend the steep uphill road . . .  
 And what could make thee conceive what it is, that steep uphill road?  
 [It is] the freeing of one's neck [from the burden of sin/bondage],  
 or the feeding, upon a day of [one's own] hunger,  
 of an orphan near of kin,  
 or of a needy [stranger] lying in the dust –  
 and being, withal, of those who have attained to faith, and who enjoin upon one another  
 patience in adversity, and enjoin upon one another compassion.  
 Such are they that have attained to righteousness;  
 whereas those who are bent on denying the truth of Our messages – they are such as have  
 lost themselves in evil,  
 [with] fire closing in upon them.  
 (Qur'an 90: 1–20)

Through the achievement of nirvana, the Buddha was liberated from the fetters of suffering (*dukkha*) and entered a state of relief, peace, and rest. He was freed from confusion, turmoil, anguish and distress, and entered a state of bliss (detachment). Similarly, the Prophet's experience of *wahy* (revelation) liberated him from the suffering caused by religious ignorance obtaining in his milieu, including *shirk* (polytheism, that is, attribution of divine qualities to aught but God) and *kufr* (rejection/denial of the existence of One Unseen God). Thus, Muhammad entered the state of *salam* (peace). The Buddha realized the state of being an *arahant* (an enlightened human being), Muhammad the state of being *rasul* (the Messenger of God). Each of them defeated the antagonistic forces of evil, called *mara* in Buddhism and *Shaytan* in Islam. A *hadith* states: "*aslama shaytana*" – my *shaytan* has become a Muslim, and does whatever I order him – meaning that through internal *jihad*, the Prophet had turned his lower faculties and instincts to the service and obedience of God. The Prophet thereby became *al-insan al-kamil* (the perfect man), with full control over the *Shaytan* (Schimmel and Ernst 2011: 113, 196).

The Buddha's experience of nirvana (enlightenment) and the Prophet Muhammad's *wahy* (revelation) became important sources of their essential religious message. The significance of these two prophets is rooted in their achievements as message-bearers of enlightened and humane worldviews to overcome ignorance. In the case of the Buddha, the ignorance he targeted is the cause of the cycles of *samsara* (endless rebirth and re-death) and *dukkha* (suffering). In the case of Muhammad, ignorance stems from the illusions of *kufr* (human rebelliousness or human rejection/denial of the existence of God) and *shirk* (polytheism or attribution of divine qualities to aught but God) as the cause of *khusr* (loss) (Qur'an 103: 1–3).

To have a better appreciation of the matter it would be pertinent to bear in mind that the Buddha was born and lived in a world full of belief in magic, petty gods, nature spirits (trees, mountains, rain, rivers and sky), and a world wherein priests had a vested interest in conducting prayers and rituals to appease these gods and spirits. All this,

however, did not bring an end to the mental anguish or social suffering of birth, sickness, old age and death, which were the Buddha's primary concerns.

In seeking to dispel belief in the superstitions prevalent in his time, the Buddha offered what might be termed a rational approach to salvation, based on humanist values of compassion and merit. The Buddha's main goal was to show the way to the end of human suffering. It was presumably for this reason that he remained silent on questions about God and gods. This does not mean that he was an atheist.

Moreover, the Buddha distinguished between the mundane and supramundane worlds, identifying the supramundane world with enlightenment, peace, and freedom from suffering. In the Buddhist scripture of the *Udāna* (Inspired Utterances), the Buddha describes the supramundane realm as eternal:

There is, O Bhikkhus, an unborn, unoriginated, uncreated, unformed. Were there not, O Bhikkhus, this unborn, unoriginated, uncreated, unformed, there would be no escape from the world of the born, originated, created, formed. Since, O Bhikkhus, there is an unborn, unoriginated, uncreated, unformed, therefore is there an escape from the born, originated, created, formed. (Strong 2010: 112)

Nonetheless, a significant difference should be highlighted again: the Buddha obtained nirvana from within himself, on the basis of self-effort, whereas Muhammad was given his spiritual stature through *wahy* (revelation), from outside himself, while seeking to comprehend the meaning of being *insan* (human) within God's creation.

Islamic–Buddhist dialogue need not stumble in any final way over fundamental differences in theistic perspective, particularly if the broader and more flexible concept of ultimate reality, interpreted as personal or non-personal, is used. It may also be possible to use a concept of God as *in precepte*, or a principle of axiological value, rather than *in esse*, an essential nature or creator God. (Al-Faruqi 1962: 219; Fletcher 2011: 92–112). Such flexibility allows in turn for discourse between the concepts of *Tawhid* (transcendence) and Dhamma (truth), whereby Islam and Buddhism can both be understood as religious systems directed towards easing the *kabad* (affliction) and *dukkha* (suffering) through *rahma* (mercy) and *metta-karuna* (loving compassion).

## The Buddha and Muhammad as Founders of Traditions

The Buddha and Muhammad each left intriguingly similar instructions to their communities about how to proceed religiously following their deaths. The *Mahāparinibbana Sutta* (Dīgha Nikāya 16) records:

Then the Blessed One addressed the venerable Ananda:

“Ananda, it may be that you would think:  
‘Gone is the Teacher’s word! We have no teacher.’

It should not be seen thus, Ananda, for the *Dharma* and the *Vinaya* [the Teaching and the Discipline] that I have taught and explained to you, will, at my passing, be your teacher. (Gopaka Moggallāna Sutta 2012)

For the twentieth-century Thai master Buddhadasa, “The real teacher, the *dhamma-vinaya*, is still with us,” (Buddhadasa and Swearer 1991: 51–52) working towards the extinction of suffering (Swearer 1996: 331).

Similarly, the prophet Muhammad noted in his Last Sermon:

O People, no prophet or apostle will come after me and no new faith will be born. Reason well, therefore, O People, and understand my words which I convey to you. I leave behind me two things, the Qur’an and my example, the Sunnah, and if you follow these you will never go astray (Prophet Muhammad’s Last Sermon).

The Qur’an comments:

Say: If you do love Allah, follow me: Allah will love you and forgive you your sins, for Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful. (Qur’an 3: 31)

And the Buddha says the following:

Enough, Vakkali! What is there to see in this vile body? He who sees Dhamma, Vakkali, sees me; he who sees me sees Dhamma. Truly seeing Dhamma, one sees me; seeing me one sees Dhamma. (Samyutta Nikaya 22. 87)

## The Buddha as Enlightened *Bodhisattva* and Muhammad as *Insan al-Kamil*

Muslims often employ the concept of *al-insan al-kamil*, which refers to the idea of the perfect human being, and in particular to the personality of the Prophet Muhammad. In practical Islamic life, reference to the Prophet as an *al-insan al-kamil* is intended to invoke imitation of Muhammad. Similarly, the Buddhist *bodhisattva* refers to one on the path of liberation, but who compassionately refrains from entering *nibbana*, in order to remain as a compassionate presence for those who suffer. Just as the Buddha was a *bodhisattva* before his enlightenment, so everyone is encouraged to become a *bodhisattva* in imitation of the Buddha. The concepts of *al-insan al-kamil* and the *bodhisattva* are active and practical encouragements toward emulation for religious adherents, in their aspiration to become similarly perfect human beings.

The concept of *al-insan al-kamil* is based in the prophetic hadith reported by Ibn Hanbal that, “God created Adam in His image [*‘ala suratih*]”: the one who has realized his original nature has realized that he was made in the image of God, thereby becoming an essential man and not an accidental one.

Here his every act is in accordance with the Divine Will, with which it is in fact identical; he is in perfect activity but ‘motionless,’ because he is identified with the First Cause but not with effects . . . When man has realized all the states of being, he contains the whole universe and has effectively returned to the state of Adam as he was before the Fall: his will and knowledge are in no way contradictory to God’s, he is the master of garden, the

perfect 'slave' (*'abd*) of God and thus the "perfect man" (*al-insan al-kamil.*" (Glasse and Smith 2001: 216–217)

Sufis such as Ibn al-'Arabī (1165–1240 CE), Mahmud al-Shabistari (d. 1320 CE) and Abdul Karim al-Jili (1365–1417 CE) have commented at length on the term *al insan al-kamil*. Ibn al-Arabī's use of the term *al insan al-kamil* expresses a pantheistic monism, in which all Being is essentially one, and different religions are equivalent. In his view *al insan al-kamil* means that man "unites in himself both the form of God and the form of the universe. He alone manifests the divine Essence together with all its names and attributes. He is the mirror by which God is revealed to Himself, and therefore the final cause of creation" (quoted by Gibb 1997 170–171).

For Ibn al-'Arabī, the Prophet "is the total theophany of the divine names, the whole of the universe in its oneness as seen by the divine essence. Muhammad is the prototype of the universe as well as of man, since he is like a mirror in which each sees the other. The Perfect Man is necessary to God as the medium through which He is known and manifested" (Schimmel and Ernst 2011: 272).

Abdul Karim al-Jili comments that the state of perception of sublime essence is obtained by the perfect man through mystical revelation (*kaṣṣh*). It is a state in which one knows that "thou art He and that He is thou and that this is not *ḥulul* (substantial union) nor *ittiḥad* (becoming one), and that the slave is slave and the Lord a lord, and that the slave does not become a lord nor the Lord a slave" (quoted by Gibb 1997: 171).

Ayatollah Murtaza Motahhari (1920–1979) comments that the *al insan al-kamil* is one who has developed the values of love, intellect, justice, freedom, service and devotion in a harmonious way. He is of pure heart, and does not engage in mere talk or proffer empty knowledge. He is one in whose heart the devil is replaced by an angel, he is benevolent, and he is interested in serving and loving humanity (Motahhari, n.d.: 70).

In moral terms, the *al-insan al-kamil* represents the highest type of human being. He acts in accordance with the precepts of the moral divine will, free from all attachment to results. With a heart full of love, kindness and compassion toward everyone and every being, he acts in a selfless spirit, and becomes a moral guide worthy of emulation.

This spiritually enlightened and morally active concept of the human being in Sufism is fully compatible with the concept of the bodhisattva. Gautama Siddhartha as Buddha was a bodhisattva for many lives prior to his enlightenment. For a bodhisattva, "salvation of one entails the salvation of all beings. Bodhisattvas vow to postpone their own liberation and to remain in the world as Sakyamuni did following his enlightenment, exercising compassionate concern for others until all beings have been saved" (Jones 2004: 996–1000). The bodhisattva seeks the liberation of others before that of oneself, through selfless compassion (*karuna*). Hence, bodhisattvas postpone their own enlightenment, choosing to remain in the world practicing compassion for others until all beings have been saved: "the fundamental feature of the ideal of the Bodhisattva is compassion and self-giving. "*Mahakaruna*" ("the great compassionate Heart of the Buddha") becomes the actuating principle of his life" (Spencer 1963: 89). The Bodhisattva path requires the practitioner to become perfect, over many lifetimes, in ten virtues, or *paramitas*: generosity, morality, patience or forbearance, effort/endeavor, contempla-

tion/meditation, transcendental insight/wisdom, skill in means, resolution, strength, and knowledge.

Prior to the coming of Islam to Asia, the concept of the Bodhisattva had passed from India and East Asia to southeast Asia, where it gained wide socio-political acceptance. Many southeast Asian Buddhist kings understood themselves as practicing Bodhisattvas (Samuels 1997). The Buddhist concept of Bodhisattva had been employed by the Hindu–Buddhist rajas of southeast Asia to identify themselves with the idealized personage of Buddha. However, following the arrival of Islam, Indonesian and Malay kings appropriated the title of *al-insan al-kamil* in order to legitimize their royal positions politically and religiously. The Hindu and Buddhist kings of Java, Sumatra, and Celebes, who had previously presented themselves as *dev rajas* (incarnations of Shiva) or *dhammarajas* (kings of Buddhist law), also adopted titles such as *al-insan al-kamil*, or Arabic–Persian royal titles such as sultan, shah, or *zillullah fil alam* (God’s Shadow on Earth). The Hindu kings of Patani were particularly interested in the Sufi doctrine of the *al-insan al-kamil*, and, upon conversion to Islam, used it as a way to hold together their complicated socio-cultural structures. The sultans of Patani claimed that they were *al-insan al-kamil* – one with God and blessed by Him. The concept of *al-insan al-kamil* was thus easily integrated with previous beliefs as Islam came to be adopted across southeast Asia, where Muslim sultans sought to represent themselves as saints worthy of emulation, to further support the conversion of their communities to Islam (Bruinessen 1994: 121–145; Hooker 1983: 12–13; Mansurnoor, 1999). The sultans also came to be seen as endowed with special powers capable of performing *karamat* (miracles) and possessing *berkah* – spiritual gifts that they could pass on to others during their lifetime or after death. Such notions were not far from those of local Hindu and Buddhist traditions.

The history of southeast Asia shows that the two mystically oriented concepts of the *al-insan al-kamil* and the *bodhisattva* became the ground for dialogue between Islam and Hinduism–Buddhism. During the Islamic phase of southeast Asian history the concept of *al-insan al-kamil* replaced that of the *bodhisattva* at the religious, political, and social levels, leading to the formation of inter-religious communities marked by the moral value of religious tolerance. As a result of this phenomenon, the mystical dimension of Islam and the tolerant aspect of Buddhism played a significant role in forming the character of religious coexistence in southeast Asia.

Thus the encounter between Islam and Hindu–Buddhist civilization that took place in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand was a sort of dialogue between a monotheistic and pantheistic form of Islam, and the monistic and non-theistic religious traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism. Sufi mystical approaches fit well with local populations’ previously inherited world views from Hinduism and Buddhism (Bougas 1994: 28–40).

## Contemporary Issues and Themes of Dialogue

There is a theoretical, historical and regional variety in the character of Muslim–Buddhist relations and dialogue shaped by the dominant form of religious practice and national identities of their followers.

Muslim minorities in majority Theravada Buddhist countries such as Sri Lanka and those of southeast Asia where both Islam and Buddhism have taken strongly ritualistic and ethno-nationalistic identities are concerned about maintaining their ethno-religious identities and protecting and preserving their political status as citizens in face of rising conservative Buddhism (Satha-Anand, 2003: 193–213). Similarly, Buddhist minorities in Pakistan, Malaysia and Indonesia are concerned about protecting their status and freedoms in face of the rise of Islamic puritanism, exclusivism and religious intolerance (Andree Feillard 2010). For example, Thai and Chinese Buddhists in Malaysia are grappling with the challenges of maintaining their ethno-religious identities and claiming their political rights as non-Malay citizens in a Muslim-majority country (Johnson 2012), and in Indonesia, Buddhists of the native and immigrant Chinese communities are also engaged in safeguarding their constitutional rights and civil liberties as Indonesian citizens. In these Buddhist and Muslim countries there is strong link between state and religion. Thus dialogue is centered around matters of Halal/non-Halal, Hijab, linguistic, cultural and religious identities and freedom of religion such as permission to build mosques and temples, teaching of religion in public schools, inclusion of the minority's history in national historical narratives, etc. In predominantly Mahayana Buddhist countries like Taiwan, Korea and Japan, where Buddhism assumes a more philosophical orientation, the space for dialogue between Buddhism and Islam and other religions is more open. Muslim–Buddhist relations in the Indo-Tibetan–Mongolian cultural spheres of Kashmir, Ladakh and Tibet which in the past have seen wars and political tensions today experience more peaceful co-existence and the tensions between their communities are largely economic rather than religious.

The contemporary dialogue between Buddhism and Islam takes many forms. Some converts to Buddhism attempt to overcome the ethnic divides between Buddhists and Muslims and attempt to engage in a purely spiritual dialogue, leaving aside the historical and political relations between the two traditions. While some Muslims have recognized the Buddha as prophet from within the Islamic notion of prophet hood, others do not see him as prophet since he did not preach *Tauhid* – the oneness of God. Muslim minorities in Buddhist countries often recognize the Buddha as a sage for the purpose of building harmonious relations between Muslims and Buddhists (Obuse 2010: 21–232). Traditional Buddhists, of course, assert that the Buddha was more than a prophet.

Shifting the focus somewhat, Maria Habito has suggested that the notions of *tathagata-garba*, or Buddha-Nature, and *Haqiqah Muhammadiyah*, or Muhammadan reality, can serve as a ground for dialogue between Islam and Buddhism (Habito 2010: 233–246). Somparn Promta has called for the need to distinguish between Buddha's open-mindedness towards other religions and the views or interpretations of later Buddhist scholars and writers. (Promta 2010: 302–320). I have written about how the Qur'anic concept of *ummatan wasatan* (the Middle Nation) in Islam and *majjhima-patipada* (the Middle Way) in Buddhism can serve as a models worthy of emulation by both Muslims (or other monotheists) and Buddhists (Yusuf 2009: 367–394). I have also pointed to the Buddha and Muhammad as bearers of charisma, achieved through contact with supernatural realms of being, and as religious leaders embodying moral values worthy of imitation by their followers. The Buddhist and Muslims concepts of *Tathagata* – “one

who has gone thus” – and *Nur Muhammadi* – light of Muhammad – offer religious paradigms for the development of a new humanism which emphasizes the moral dimension of coexistence in harmony with the Ultimate Reality or moral law. Without seeking to Buddhicize Islam or Islamize Buddhism, I argue that paradigms drawn from religious phenomena can serve as mediums for understanding and dialogue between these two religions and their societies. The Buddha and Muhammad are charismatic personalities, enlightened and blessed in religious ways, and worthy models for their communities thus offering a bridge for Muslim–Buddhist dialogue (Yusuf 2005: 103–114).

Reza Shah Kazemi has called for a dialogue of spiritual affinities between Islam and Buddhism, rooted in the concepts of Allah as *al-Haqq* and dharma as ultimate reality or truth (Kazemi 2010). And Chandra Muzaffar and Sulak Sivaraksa, Muslim and Buddhist activists from Malaysia and Thailand respectively, have discussed the role of Islam and Buddhism as a basis for political transformation, social reconstruction and civil society for Asian Buddhist and Muslim societies. They believe that mutual appreciation and exchange may help to find common solutions to national and global issues facing the two religions (Sivaraksa 1999).

The most devastating event in recent Islamic–Buddhist relations was the Taliban’s destruction of the Bamiyan Buddha statues in March, 2001. That act of destruction has left a lasting negative impression of Islam and Muslims among many Buddhists, though this is not expressed publicly in Buddhist countries. And although relations between these two religious communities are often constituted by mutual tolerance and peaceful relations, there are ongoing areas of conflict, such as the simmering ethno-religious conflict in southern Thailand, (Jerryson 2011; Pitsuwan 1985; Yusuf 2006) the expulsion of Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar, (Berlie 2008; Yegar 2002 ) and the political impacts of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka on the Tamil Muslims in that country (Ali 2004 372–383; Iqbal et al. 2011: 375–389; Mcgilvray 2011: 45–64).

Among intellectuals, an example of significant recent contact between Islamic and Buddhist scholars occurred on 29–30 May, 2009, at a conference titled “Buddhism and Islam: Encounters, Histories, Dialogue and Representation,” jointly organized by the Faculty of Religious Studies, the Institute of Islamic Studies, and the Centre for Research on Religion at McGill University in Montreal, Canada.

At the level of local religious community initiatives, the Islamic Center in Bangkok, Thailand holds occasional dialogues with Thai Buddhist monks, scholars and laypersons about issues of common national and international concern. Similar initiatives are undertaken by both Muslims and Buddhists in Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Indonesia.

Muslims and Buddhists have jointly engaged in relief and social work in face of natural disasters, such as the 2004 Tsunami in Indonesia, Thailand and Sri Lanka, and other local disasters, such as floods or other national hardships. At the international level, in the wake of the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddha statues and the 9/11 tragedy in the United States, the Taiwanese Dharma Master Hsin Tao, Chief Executive Officer of the Museum of World Religions, initiated a series of dialogues between Buddhists and Muslims in many parts of the world. The first of these dialogues took place at Columbia University in New York City on March 7, 2002, followed by dialogues in Kuala-Lumpur in May, 2002, and in Jakarta in July, 2002. These dialogues were

designed to foster new awareness between the Muslim and Buddhist communities, and to find effective ways of educating both communities about shared commonalities.

On May 5–7, 2003, a Buddhist–Muslim Dialogue Conference on Global Ethics and Good Governance took place at UNESCO headquarters in Paris, and similar symposia were held in November, 2005 in Morocco, in China in 2006, and at the United Nations Headquarters in New York in September, 2008. Attended by Muslim and Buddhist scholars, activists and community leaders, these meetings discussed topics such as: Global Ethics and Good Governance; Religious Responses to Violence; Interfaith Peace Education and Community Partnership Building; Poverty and Social Inequality; and Ecological Healing and Earth Rights. Though Islam and Buddhism appear externally different they can find common ground through mutual dialogue and mutual engagement concerning topics mentioned above by recognizing of interdependence between religious claims and lifestyles in the pluralistic age through cooperation not confrontation (Yi 2012; Yi and Habito: 2005).

The coming formation of the ASEAN community in 2015 made up of southeast Asian group of nations highlights the urgent need for religions of southeast Asia to move from co-existence to dialogue. In the ASEAN community Islam and Buddhism will make up the two largest religions, with Muslims making up 42 percent and Buddhists making 40 percent of the total ASEAN population, along with Christians and others. As the ASEAN region continues to gain economic and political importance, Muslim–Buddhist relations will become an increasingly significant issue for building harmonious socio-cultural relations in southeast Asia. In light of this developing situation, the Center of Asian Studies (CENAS), Jakarta, Indonesia in collaboration with Museum of World Religions (MWR), Taiwan, the Global Family for Love and Peace (GFLP) – a UN-affiliated NGO – with support from the Fetzer Institute of USA, organized the Buddhist–Muslim Youth Camp in Yogyakarta, Indonesia on May 7–14, 2012 on the theme of “Love and Forgiveness.” The goals of the youth camp were: to provide opportunities for Buddhist and Muslim youth to develop friendships through shared tasks and dialogical encounters, in ways that will influence their lives as individuals, and in their respective communities and organization; to foster harmonious life between Buddhists and Muslims in Indonesia; to promote religious pluralism, protect minority groups and build constructive relationships between Buddhist and Muslim youth leaders, as future leaders of the nation (Buddhist–Muslim Youth Camp 2012).

On July 17–18, 2012, CENAS organized a national conference on the theme, “Love and Forgiveness in Asian Religions” also in Jakarta, Indonesia, with the aim to build harmonious relations between Buddhists and Muslims in Asia. The conference discussed following topics: history of Islam and Buddhism in southeast Asia; concepts of love, forgiveness and compassion in Islam and Buddhism; inter-religious dialogue in southeast Asia; peace in southeast Asia; ecological issue from the perspectives of Islam and Buddhism. The participants also practiced meditation session led by Dharma Master Hsin Tao and visited the Istiqlal mosque in Jakarta to observe Muslim prayer ritual (Buddhist–Muslim National Conference 2012).

The history and state of Islam–Buddhism relations and dialogues around the world is subject to different factors of doctrinal, ethnic and political nature. As such it has a multifaceted appearance and needs a multipronged approach.

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