Religious Diversity
in a Buddhist Majority Country:
The Case of Islam in Thailand

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No country today is religiously monolithic, living a religiously diverse way of life is both an intra- and interreligious reality. In responding to this situation as it relates to both salvation and living our lifetime on earth religious societies normally adopt any of the following positions:

1) Exclusivism - according to which salvation can be obtained only one religion. Religious fundamentalists in any religion are often exclusivists. They hold that salvation lies only in through membership of their own religion.

2) Inclusivism - it holds that while there is only one religion which makes true claims about ultimate reality, that particular religion is not the only way to salvation. For God will not forsake those people who are never exposed to the true doctrine e.g. "A Muslim or a Buddhist who cares for his family, shows compassion to others and performs religious duties can enter heaven as any other Christian. From the Christian point of view it means that

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it is not necessary to have the epistemological[1] knowledge about the salvific event (death of Jesus on the cross) to enter heaven mere ontological knowledge[2] is enough.

3) Pluralism - the position that all religions are right. Each of them is describing certain aspect of reality as revealed to them. That is salvation is available to all members of humanity. This position is borne out of religious tolerance and is found in nearly all religious traditions though not as a particular doctrine.

Thailand is a religiously pluralistic country in spite of its being a Buddhist majority country with the Muslims constituting about 5% and Christians less than 1%. There is also the presence of the followers of Hinduism, Sikhs, followers of traditional religion and others. Yet, as per its constitution Buddhism is not the official religion of Thailand.

In today's religiously pluralistic societies adherents of different religions live in a varied kind of relationships in which factors such as religion doctrines, ethnicity, economics, politics and language play a significant role. Hence, interactions and cross-influences across religious lines differ from country to country depending upon the self/other understanding of each religious community.

Muslims, the followers of the religion of Islam numbering about a billion today reside as majority and minority religious communities in different countries of the world. Indonesia (180 million) has the largest Muslim population in the world, followed by Pakistan (109 million) and Bangladesh (107 million). Middle Eastern Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia (13 million), Turkey (52 million) and Iran (50 million) have comparatively smaller populations. While India, China, Australia, USA, UK and Thailand have significant Muslim minorities.

Thai Muslims like their co-religionists in Sri Lanka and Burma are three instances in the world where Muslim minority communities living in majority Theravada Buddhist countries.

From the point of view of study of Religion, all religions are orthodoxies

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1 Epistemology - a branch of philosophy that investigates the origin, nature, methods, and limits of human knowledge.

2 Ontology - the branch of metaphysics that studies the nature of existence or being. In other words metaphysics.

in the sense that each regards its own doctrine and institutions as true and immutable. They accommodate religious co-existence and interreligious dialogue but do not tolerate any doctrinal changes. There are also present in every religious traditions perspectives that range from conservative to moderate and liberal. The same can be observed in the case of Islam and Buddhism in Thailand. In my observation interaction between Islam and Thai Buddhism is rather limited taking place mostly at the social level rather than doctrinal dialogue.

a) It is largely restricted to the "marketplace" where the Muslims and Buddhists interact with each other as sellers, traders and buyers resulting in a superficial understanding of each others religious doctrines and traditions.

b) At the socio-political level in reference to the majority-minority aspects of relationship.

Thai Muslims and Thai Buddhists live a life of mutual co-existence and accommodation and both have a primarily an ethnic understanding of their religious traditions. Whereby ethnicity defines religious affiliation.

Section 1
The History of Encounter Between the Religions of Islam and Buddhism.

1.1 Religious Encounter Between Islam and Buddhism

Religious encounter between Islam and Buddhism is as old as Islam, it predates the coming of Islam to Southeast Asia by about thirteen centuries.[3]

The first encounter between Islam and *ashab al-Bidada* or the Buddhist community took place in the middle of 7th CE in the regions of East Persia, Transoxiana, Afghanistan and Sindh.[4] Historical evidence suggests that some early Muslims extended the Qur'anic category of *Ahl al-Kitab* also to include the Hindus and the Buddhists.[5]

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3 Islam was founded in 611 CE when the Prophet Muhammad received the first revelation of the Qur'an in Mecca.

4 *Encyclopedia of Islam*, s.v. `Balkh'.

5 The "Ahl al-Kitab"- "the People of Book" is a Qur'anic and Muhammad's reference to the followers of Christianity and Judaism as religions that possess divine books of revelation (Torah, Psalter, Gospel) which gives them a privileged position above followers of other religions. See *Encyclopedia of Islam*, s.v. `Ahl al-Kitab.'

Ibn al-Nadim (d. 385 AH/995 CE), the author of *al-Firhist* in spite of being aware of the idol-worship of the Buddha comments 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 Badasaf(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 advise; they regard the uttering of `No' as an act of Satan. And it is their very religion to banish Satan.(S. M. Yusuf, 1955 : 28)

Classical Muslim scholar of comparative religion al-Shahrastani (469-548 AH/1086-1153 CE), in his section on '*Ara' al-hind*' (The Views of the Indians) of his **magnum opus** *Kitab al-milal wan-nihal*(Book of Religious and Philosophical Sects) pays high spiritual respect to Buddhism. This was done by identifying the Buddha with the Qur'anic figure of al-Khidr, as a seeker of enlightenment mentioned in the Qur'an.[6]

More recently, late Prof. Hamidullah observes that in line with the Qur'anic view of prophethood, the Buddha can be regarded as one among the previous prophets. According to Hamidullah, the symbolic mention of the fig tree in chapter 95, verse 1 of the Qur'an alludes to the prophethood of the Buddha. He concludes that since Buddha is said to have received *Nirvana*-Enlightenment under a wild fig tree and that fig tree does not figure prominently in the lives any of prophets mentioned the Qur'an, hence, the Qur'anic verse refers to Gautama Buddha.[7]

> By the fig and the olive,
> By Mount Sinai,
> And by this land made safe;
> Surely We created man of the best stature
> Then We reduced him to the lowest of the low,
> Save those who believe and do good works, and theirs is a reward unfailing.

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6 Qur'an 18:64. See also Bruce B. Lawrence, *Shahrastani on the Indian Religions*, (The Hague: Mouton, 1976), pp. 113-114.

7 Muhammad Hamidullah, *Muhammad Rasullah,* (Hyderabad: Habib & Co, 1974), pp. 27, 107. See also David Scott, "Buddhism and Islam: Past to Present Encounters And Interfaith Lessons." *NUMEN* 42 (1995): 141-155.

So who henceforth will give the lie to thee about the judgment?
Is not Allah the most conclusive of all judges?

Qur'an 95:1-8

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.

Qur'an 40:78. See
also Qur'an 4:164

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

Qur'an 14:4

Hence, Islam's position toward other religions is that of religious pluralism. For the Qur'an states that:

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.

Qur'an 5:48

"O Humanity! We have created you male and female, and have made
you nations and tribes that ye may know one another. Lo! the noblest
of you, in the sight of God, is the best in conduct. Lo! God is Knower,
Aware."

Qur'an 49: 13

1.2 History of Islam in Thailand

Scholars attribute the following three reasons that led to the spread of Islam in Southeast Asia in general:

1) The role of Arab Muslim merchants who established themselves in the Hindu Malay-Indonesia courts offering their important diplomatic skills, wealth and international experience and marriage into local ruling families,

leading to conversion of local rulers to Islam.

2) The role of the Sufis- Muslim mystics from Gujarat and Bengal in India and Yemen in Arabia who came as traders and politicians. Soon their influence spread to the courts, bazaar (Malay:*besar*)and the countryside. Being religiously oriented they communicated their religious vision in religious forms compatible with local pantheistic beliefs of Hinduism.

3) Islam's stress on monotheism and human equality provided a viable alternative of freedom in a Hindu society based on the caste-system.(Ira M. Lapidus, 1989:469)

Hence, the moral message of the Qur'an with emphasis on monotheism as well as on social justice found vigorous reception in Southeast Asia.(Fazlur Rahman, 1979:79)

The establishment of Islam in Malacca during the reign of Sultan Iskandar a Muslim convert and the former ruler of Srivijaya led to the spread of the early syncretic Islam in the Southeast Asian archipelago, reaching Pattani by 1474.(Ira M. Lapidus, 1989:470)

Islam   spread   to   Thailand   from   different   directions   the Malay-Indonesian archipelago, Yemen (Hadhramawt), Persia, India, Burma, China and Cambodia. Just as other Southeast Asia Muslim communities the Thai Muslim community is made up of two groups the "native/local Muslims" and "immigrant Muslims." Hence, there is ethnic, lingual, cultural and political variety within the Thai Muslim community.

In case of southern Thailand, the Malay form of Islamic religiosity reached as far our nearby town of Chana on the way to Hatyai marking the culturo-language border between the Thai and Malay speaking cultures. One reason for little spreading of Malay Islam beyond Chana was the consolidation of the "orthodoxy of Singhalese (Theravada) Buddhism, which had been introduced on the Indochinese Peninsula by the Mons of Burma and was disseminated further by the Thai" already a century ago following the decline of Hindu-Sanskrit culture and Mahayana Buddhism in the Menam and Mekong basins.(G. Codes, 1971:218) The encounter between Malay Islam and Thai Buddhism was one between two religious orthodoxies of "native" types founded on ethno-linguistic distinctions. Both agreeing to mutually co-exist together.[8] Today, majority of Thai Muslims reside in the four southern provinces of the country. The southern Muslims make up the majority

(numbering about 700,000 i.e about 80%) of the total Thai Muslim population.

The second arrival of Islam into Thailand came from different directions of the country made up mostly of "immigrant Muslims" of different sectarian and ethnic backgrounds. Persian Muslims belonging to the Shia sect served at the court of the Ayudhaya Kingdom in different official capacities.(Raymond Scupin, 1980:55-71)

The Thai Muslims of central plains of Thailand are of Persian, Pakistani, Indonesian and Cham extractions.[9] While those residing in the northern provinces of Lampang, Chiangmai and Chiang Rai are of Bengali, Burmese and Yunnanese origins who have migrated from Bangladesh, Burma and southwestern China.[10] These immigrant Muslims migrated from neighbouring countries to Thailand for economic and political reasons. They fled religious persecution at the hands of the communists in China and the nationalists in Burma. There are also Thai converts to Islam either through marriage or religious conversions.

Apart from the ethnic differences there is also linguistic diversity within the Thai Muslim community. Majority of Thai Muslims who reside in the south speak Malay language while those residing in other parts of Thailand converse in Thai both at home and in the public. They are not familiar with the languages of their ancestors.

Majority of Thai Muslims belong to the Sunni sect, there is also the presence of a small Shia community consisting of members belonging to the *Imami* and *Bohras/Mustali Ismailis* sub-groups within the Shia sect.[11]

Thai Muslims make up the largest minority religious group in the country making up "a national minority rather than as a border minority."[12]

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8 I use the term "orthodoxies"in the sense that both the religious traditions view themselves as the only correct beliefs as determined by their own authoritative standards.

9 The fall of the Champa Kingdom in the 17th CE led to immigration of Cambodian Muslims to Thailand. See Raymond Scupin, "Cham Muslims of Thailand: A Haven of Security in Southeast Asian." *JOURNAL Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs*10 (1989): 486-491. Also Seddik Taouti, `The Forgotten Muslims of Kampuchea and Vietnam,' *JOURNAL Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs* 4 (1982): 3-13.

10 Suthep Soonthornpasuch, `Islamic Identity in Chiengmai City: A Historical and Structural Comparison of Two Communities,' Unpublished Ph.D Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1977. Also David Wilson and David Henley, "Northern Comfort: The Contented Muslims of Chiang Mai." *Bangkok Post Outlook Section* 4 January 1995, pp. 33,40.

11 See *Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam* s.v. 'Ismailiya' and 'Shi'a'. And Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam.* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987).

12 This term was first applied by Prof. Omar Farouk in his comprehensive study of Thai Muslims, "The

Section 2

2.1 Interactions Between Islam and Buddhism in Thailand

Every majority-minority religious relationship has its own unique features and characteristics. Tensions between religions maybe due to differences in religious doctrines and political theologies as seen in the case of Islam-Christianity-Judaism in the Middle East , sectarian conflicts as seen in northern Ireland, religious communalism in the Indian sub-continent. In the case of Southeast Asia, relations between religions are influenced by factors of ethnicity and language. Southeast Asian Islam, Buddhism and Chinese religions operate along strong ethnic lines e.g. to be Malay means to be a Muslim and every Thai is a Buddhist is popular prevalent understanding of religious identification in Southeast Asia. This results in   minimal interreligious dialogue narrowing the scope for understanding of religious doctrines and philosophies.

On the other hand from the point of sociology, religion pluralism a fact of contemporary life style demands increased cross-cultural interaction specially in the non-religious are as of everyday life. In Thailand, this has led to adoption of nearly identical social attitudes, etiquettes, conventions, customs and formalities among the Muslims and the Buddhists. An indication of shared social co-existence. Thai Muslims and Buddhists tolerate, accept and cooperate with each other in a variety of activities and resolve their conflicts through the Southeast Asian social convention of moderation, compromise and mutual consultation.

Maintenance of religious and cultural identity has been one of the main concern of the Thai Muslim community as a religious minority. This concern has made them appeal to the state for special considerations for the Muslim. The Thai state has often recognized their demands as a genuine concern on the part of minority Muslim populace and granted their requests. The religious and cultural concerns of the Thai Muslims have played a dual role in

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Muslims of Thailand" in Lutfi Ibrahim (ed.) *ISLAMIKA* (Kuala Lumpur: Sarjana Enterprise, 1981) p. 97-121 and his other writings. As a result he came up with a both a more objective and original understanding of Thai Muslim minority situation paying attention to the developmental aspects of historical, religious and cultural experiences of Thai Muslims in contemporary Thailand.

the interaction between the two religious communities.

a) It has informed the majority community of the religious variations between Islam and Buddhism.

b) It has made the Thai Muslim minority realize its limitations and provided it with an opportunity to participate in the exercise of religious pluralism.

As a minority community, the Thai Muslims have expressed their special concerns and needs to the Thai state through their religious and political leaderships viz., the office of the *Chularatchamontri* (the office of the religious head of the Thai Muslims) and Muslims members of the parliament.

The main items which have concerned the Thai Muslim community have been:

1) easing of travel facilities in relation to performance of annual pilgrimage to Mecca,
2) permission for Thai Muslim women to wear Islamic style of dress both at the work place and educational institutions,
3) leave of absence from work place on days of Islamic festivals,
4) freedom to name new born Muslim children with Islamic names,
5) establishing of Muslim religious foundations and financial cooperatives,
6) publication and production of religious books, magazines and other informational material,
7) use of textbooks on Islam written by Thai Muslims scholars for use in Islamic Studies courses in the public schools
8) permission to build mosques.

The establishment of the "College of Islamic Studies" at the Prince of Songkla University in Pattani to cater to the educational and developmental needs of   Thai Muslims is also an example of the influence of Islamic academia on the Thai academic scene.

As Thailand enters the era of democracy and globalization the state is paying special attention to develop various parts of the country including the south by supporting economic development of southern region through the

promotion of IMT-GT program or Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle involving the three ASEAN countries.

Over the decades, Thai Muslims have also attained political recognition in the realm of Thai politics currently. There are Thai Muslim politicians who are senior members of the two major political parties of Thailand viz., the ruling Thai Rak Thai (TRT) and the Democrat Party. Today, there exists an independent Thai Muslim political faction called the *Wahdah* (Unity faction) which has become an integral part of Thai politics scene.

The evolution of democracy has resulted in Thai Muslim politicians assuming political positions such as the speaker of the Parliament and the foreign minister in case of Dr. Surin Pitsuwan and the present minister of interior, Mr. Wan Muhammad Nor Matta.

As the largest religious minority of Thailand, the Thai Muslims have always expressed their main concern has always been about maintaining their religious and cultural identity within Thai nationhood. The importance of this Muslim concern has been discussed by the learned Thai politician Dr. Surin Pitsuwan MP (Democrat) in his published Ph. D. thesis *Islam and Malay Nationalism: A Case Study of Malay-Muslims of Southern Thailand* (1985) presented to the Harvard University, in which he describes the importance of "cultural autonomy" allowing for the existence of cultural diversity as an important foundation upon which to build national unity.

In similar vein, Bruce Matthews, a Canadian scholar commented that it isnecessary that the Thai Buddhists and Thai Muslims should yield and negotiate their religious and cultural differences as compatriots and fellow citizens. This would necessitate an increase in the scope of Thai Muslim "political representation and participation."[13]

In the case of Muslim cultural practice, they stressed that the freedom of religion should also mean freedom for Thai Muslim women to wear *hijab* (head cover/scarf) both in the public and private arenas of life. And not to be discriminated against in her place of work, study, employment or profession because of it. For the wearing of *hijab* should not be seen as an indication of her qualitative inferiority or professional incompetence.

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13 Bruce Matthews, "Islam as a Minority Religion in Some Theravada Buddhist States of South and Southeast Asia" in *Resources, Problemes Et Defis De L'Asie Du Sud*. Rodolphe De Konnick and Jean Nadeau eds. (Quebec: Les Presses De L' Universite, 1986).

In fact Thailand, unlike some Muslim countries has already permitted the Muslim women in some instances to wear the *hijab* e.g. graduation ceremonies, in photos in identification documents such as the identification card and passport. This reflects the spirit of religious accommodation and tolerance of Thailand.

I can say here that in terms of influence of Islam on Thai thought has emerged in a two ways trusting relationship between the Thai Buddhists and Thai Muslims as citizens of Thailand. Thus the Thai Muslim minority is an integral part of Thai nation- a reality of contemporary Thailand.

2.2 Comment on Islam in Contemporary Southeast Asia:

Some political analysts comment that we are currently living in the age of the "Clash of Civilizations" (the most important battle of which will be the clash between the Islamic and Western/Christian civilization) as we enter the era of "End of History." F. Fukuyama, "Are We at the End of History"[14] This could well be the last stage of   the "Great Western Transmutation"as described by Marshall Hodgson.(Marshall G. Hodgson, 1990:44-71)

The impact of these political and global events have led to the emergence of new divide and difference in the Muslim world, that between Middle East and Southeast Asian world of Islam. This is large due to factors such as geo-politics, economic preferences of the multi-national corporations, development of infrastructure and levels of human resources development. This development has sever implications for the unity and diversity in the Muslim world. In other words, there have occurred significant changes of complex type in the realm of world political economy.

Contemporary Middle Eastern Muslim world is still engaged in sorting out unresolved problems such as those of Palestine, Afghanistan and Iraq strewn with violence and blood all over. While the Muslim countries of Southeast Asia along with their neighbours have experienced considerable success in their experiments with democracy, have attained a sort of political stability enabling them to pay serious attention to matters such as the

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14 *Fortune International*, 1990, pp 33-36; Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations" *Foreign Affairs* Summer 1993.

educational advancement of their citizens and undertaking initiatives in technological advancement. There success in these ventures is making them emerge on the world scene as representing the new face of Islam, which is intelligent, politically stable, dynamic, technologically advanced and economically prosperous with an intact Islamic identity.[15]

Malaysia is emerging as the new representative of Islam on the world stage. Its success lies in addressing the problem of integration of Islam and development. An issue which has become a perennial philosophical and political predicament in other parts of the Muslim world, as reflected in the often violent political clash between forces that favour democratically pro-Islam governments vis-a-vis those who want to maintain the status quo seen in the cases of Algeria, Turkey, Egypt, etc.

Conclusion

My presentation has illustrated that Thailand's embarkment on the path of democracy though largely "bumpy" has led to positive interaction between Islam and Buddhism in contemporary Thailand. In fact, the face of Islam in Southeast Asia is much different from that in the other parts of the world.

Over the decades, the Thai Muslims and Buddhist have come to understand and recognize each others as citizens of one nation. The enlightened in the Thai Muslim community have realized the need to move away from rigid and exclusive attitudes in favour of cooperation with their fellow citizens for the benefit of all. Thai Muslims have also demonstrated their political loyalty to the Thai nation.[16] And it is hoped that it will continue to improve further with the advancement of democracy and increase of cultural dialogue between Islam and Buddhism.

The contemporary condition of Thai Muslim minority when compared to those in other parts of the world is much better than that of the Muslim minorities in India, Burma, China, European Union, Israel and USA; where Muslims minorities are viewed as a threat and security-risk not only to the state but also the majority religion or ideology be it Christianity, Judaism,

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15 James Walsh, "The New Face of Islam." TIME 30 Sept 1996. Reprinted in Readers Digest June 1997.
16 "Ties of Faith" Far Eastern Economic Review April 11, 1996, pp. 29-30.

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