

Dialogue between Islam and Buddhism through the Concepts of *Tathagata* and *Nur Muhammadi*

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The religions of Islam and Buddhism are different from each other in terms of their doctrinal and metaphysical understanding of the cosmos. Yet both have been existed in a social relationship to each other for centuries. This co-existence has led to adopting an attitude of “live and let live” towards each other. There also have been instances of violence between the two religions as seen presently in southern Thailand.

Upon inquiry one finds that in most cases the interreligious violence is often caused by non-religious factors such as ethnicity and economics rather than religious or doctrinal differences. Since the violent instances involve use and exploitation of the concepts of religious differences by parties involved the conflict, it requires us to pay attention to the need for dialogue to retrieve a deteriorating situation. This can be done by drawing attention to the history of relations, and availability of tools for dialogue between the Buddhist

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and Muslim teachings such as, *Tathagata*—"one who has gone thus"¹ becoming liberated Buddha and *Nur Muhammadi*—light of Muhammad. This is attempted here with the intention to contribute toward the development of a new humanism which emphasizes the moral dimension of coexistence in harmony with Absolute Reality or moral law.

History of Relations Between Islam and Buddhism

I have referred to the history of relations between Islam and Buddhism in my other paper (Imtiyaz Yusuf, 2003:131-143). Here I present it again with some additional information.

Religious encounter between Islam and Buddhism is as old as Islam.² 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.³ Historical evidence suggests that some early Muslims extended the Qur'anic category of *ahl al-Kitab*—people of the book or revealed religion to include the Hindus and the Buddhists.⁴ The second encounter took place in Southeast Asia beginning around 12th - 13th CE.

During the 2nd century of Islam or the 8th century CE Muslims translated many Buddhist works into Arabic. We can find Arabic titles such as, *Bilawar wa Budhasaf* and *Kitab al-Budd*. as evidence of Muslim study of Buddhism (Ignaz Goldziher, 1981:141).

Ibn al-Nadim (d. 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

1 *Encyclopedia of Religion*, s.v. "Tathagata".

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

3 *Encyclopedia of Islam*, s.v. "Balkh." *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. "Buddhism."

4 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."

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 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).

There is also evidence in this region of Buddhist survivals in the succeeding Muslim era. For example, the Barmak family of Buddhist monks played a powerful administrative role in the early Abbasid dynasty. The Abbasids ruled from Baghdad during 750-1258 CE, governing most of the Islamic world. The Barmakids controlled the Buddhist monastery of *Naw Bahar* (meaning new spring in Persian, a term derived from Sanskrit *nava vihara* or new temple) near Balkh, including other Iranian monasteries (Richard C. Foltz, 1999:100 ; Richard Bulliet, 1976:140-145).

There is also evidence of Buddhist beliefs and practices which have survived among the Muslims of Central Asia. For example, the Samanid dynasty which ruled Persia during the 9th and 10th centuries invented and modelled the *madrrasah* or Muslim religious schools which were devoted to advanced studies in the Islamic religious sciences after the Buddhist schools in eastern Iran (Richard C. Foltz, 1999:100-101).⁵ The same can be said about the *pondoks* or *pasenterens*—Muslim religious schools of Southeast Asia.

Muslim religious scholar and historian Abu Ja`far Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari (839-923 CE), who was born in Amul in Tabaristan, northern Persia, mentions that Buddhist idols were brought from Kabul, Afghanistan, to Baghdad in a ninth century. It is also reported that Buddhist idols were sold in a Buddhist temple next day the Makh mosque in the market of the city of Bukhara which is in present day Uzbekistan (Richard C. Foltz, 1999:100).

The classical Muslim scholar of comparative religion al-Shahrastani (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

⁵ See also *Encyclopedia of Religion* (Mircea Eliade, General Editor) s.v. "Madrrasah."

and Philosophical Sects) pays high spiritual respect to Buddhism. This is evident from his identification of the Buddha with the Qur'anic figure of al-Khidr, as a seeker of enlightenment (Qur'an 18:64 ; Bruce B. Lawrence, 1976:113-114).

More recently, the late Prof. Hamidullah observes that in line with the Qur'anic view of prophethood, the Buddha can be regarded as one among 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 The fig tree does not figure prominently in the lives any of the prophets mentioned in the Qur'an, hence, the Qur'anic verse refers to Gautama Buddha (Muhammad Hamidullah, 1974:27,107 ; David Scott, 1995:141-155).

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 unailing.
 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, recognising the existence of different religions including Buddhism. 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

Influences of Buddhism on Islamic Mysticism and Spaces for Dialogue

Buddhism has left an important mark on Islam. This is by way of the development of the ascetic/ mystic tradition within Islam known as Sufism. Leading to the development of the *zuhd*/ ascetic tradition in Islam. Muslim ascetics such as Abul Atahiya, imitated the example of the Buddha in their spiritual life (Ignaz Goldziher, 1981:142-143).

Similarly, the Muslim mystical tradition known as Sufism shows much influence from Buddhism. One Muslim mystic named Ibrahim bin Adham (d. 776/778), who was the prince of Balkh, left his princely station to live a wanderer's life in imitation of the Buddha's example (Ignaz Goldziher, 1981:143).

Such examples show the cross-cultural interactions and influence between Islam and Buddhism. I have in another paper reflected upon how the concepts of *al-insan al-kamil* (perfect human being) and the *bodhisattva* of Buddhism have served as points of dialogue between Islam and Buddhism in Southeast Asia (Imtiyaz Yusuf, 2004:207-221). Highlighting how the two mystically oriented concepts of the *al-insan al-kamil* and the *Bodhisattva* representing the human urge to become perfectly developed human beings, became the ground for dialogue between Islam and Buddhism, along with Hinduism in Southeast Asia. This leads to the formation of religious communities in the region and these communities were marked by moral values of religious tolerance and

acceptance. This is phenomena in which the mystical dimension of Islam and the tolerant aspect of Buddhism played a significant role in forming the socio-religious character of religious coexistence in Southeast Asia.

In Southeast Asian countries today, Buddhists and Muslims co-exist together. In the case of Muslim majority countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei and the region of southern Thailand, Buddhism serves as the former religion of the present Muslims (Sanitsuda Ekachai, 2004:1). While in the case of Buddhist majority countries such as Thailand, Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia Muslims live as a religious minority.

Buddha and Muhammad as Model Religious Leaders: Worthy of Respect and Imitation

In this paper, I want to touch upon two concepts from Islam and Buddhism which can serve as a basis for dialogue and understanding. I will do this by presenting the Buddha and Muhammad as model religious leaders using the concepts of *Tathagata* and *Nur Muhammadi* as religious paradigms.

This exercise is not an attempt to Buddhicize Islam or Islamize Buddhism but to show how motifs drawn from religious phenomena can serve as mediums for understanding and dialogue between the two religions and their societies.

As bearers of charisma, which is achieved through contact with supernatural/other realm of being, religious leaders serve as models embodying moral values worthy of imitation by their followers (H. H. Gerth, C. Wright Mills, 1997:245-263). This is clear in the case of the Buddha and Muhammad both of whom were able to uncover the essential nature of being.

The Buddha and Muhammad are charismatic personalities, enlightened and blessed in religious ways, as models for their communities and luminous examples for humanity.

Hence, through practical employment of the concepts of *Tathagata* and *Nur Muhammadi* both the Buddha and Muhammad become models worthy of emulation and a bridge for Muslim-Buddhist dialogue.

Tathagata — One Who Has Gone Thus

The Buddha realized the state of liberation, the state of *tathagata*. “The Buddhist *suttas* state that Gotama, after attaining Enlightenment, identified himself to his former associates as a *tathagata*. (*Majjhima Nikaya* 1.171) A *tathagata* was understood to be a “most high person, a supreme person, one who attains the supreme goal (*Samyutta Nikaya* 3.118).”⁶

Thus Gotama as the Buddha became the supreme *tathagata*, exceeding all other *tthagatas*. Making him, “worthy, fully enlightened, endowed with wisdom and of virtuous conduct, well gone, knower of the worlds, unsurpassed charioteer of men to be tamed, teacher of gods, and men, an enlightened one, and exalted one.” (*Majjhima Nikaya* 1.401; *Anguttara Nikaya* 1.206). “*Tathagata* ... is the principle of mediation between the Absolute, that is the transcendent to thought (*sunya*) and phenomenal beings.” (T. R. V. Murti, 1974: 276). “The *Tathagata* ... descends from his divine plane and takes birth amongst men, conforms to their modes of life, gains their sympathy and reveals the truth through the ordinary methods of communication. The *Tathagata* is, to all intents, man perfected, deified by the destruction of passions (T. R. V. Murti, 1974:289). The Buddha was born for the welfare of humanity and obtained knowledge about the operation of *karmic* laws and the way to liberation—the Middle Way.

In another way, the lord Buddha realized the essence of enlightenment through uncovering the *Tathagata garba*—the Buddha-nature. And he had shown that, “The union of wisdom and emptiness is the essence of Buddha-hood, or what is called Buddha-nature (Skt. *Tathagata garba*) because it contains the very seed, the potential of Buddhahood. It resides in each and every being and because of this essential nature, this heart nature there is the possibility of reaching Buddhahood. Even though it is in everyone, it is not obvious, nor does it necessarily manifest because it is covered up by various thoughts and defilements, which are covering up the Buddha-nature.”⁷

⁶ *Encyclopedia of Religion*, s.v. “Tathagata”.

Thus, as *tathagata*, the Buddha is one who proclaimed the salvific truth for humanity and is also a model worth of imitation.

Nur Muhammadi — The Light of Muhammad

The Qur'an describes Muhammad as only a human and a messenger entrusted with the guidance of the people (Qur'an 6:50; 25:8, 22) and the Qur'an also contains symbolic references to Muhammad as the light (Qur'an 5:15) and *siraj munir* (Qur'an 33:45). The famous light verse of the Qur'an in which there is the mention of a lamp (*misbah*) has been interpreted by Muqatil ibn Sulayman, an early exegete/theologian (d. 767), as reference to the Prophet Muhammad.

Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The similitude of His light is as a niche wherein is a lamp. The lamp is in a glass. The glass is as it were a shining star. (This lamp is) kindled from a blessed tree, an olive neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil would almost glow forth (of itself) though no fire touched it. Light upon light, Allah guideth unto His light whom He will. And Allah speaketh to mankind in allegories, for Allah is knower of all things (Qur'an 24:35).

“It is the lamp, *misbah*, that Muqatil sees as a fitting symbol for Muhammad; because through him the divine light shines upon the world, and through him humanity is guided to the origin of this light. The formula “neither of the East nor of the West” could then be taken as a reference to Muhammad’s comprehensive nature, which is not restricted to one specific people or race, and which transcends the boundaries of time and space.”⁸

Hence, the Islamic reference to *Nur Muhammadi* led to the development of theories about the luminous nature of Muhammad. As a model for mankind of the state of *fitrah* natural disposition of humanity in relation to God i.e. of God as the creator (*rabb*) and

7 Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, “Buddha Nature and Buddhahood: The Mahayana and Tantra Yana” available at: www.buddhistinformation.com.

8 *Encyclopedia of Religion*, s.v. “Nur Muhammad.”

human being as the servant (*abd*). The true state of being has been obscured through human confusion and ignorance, attachment to ego and a materialistic world view. The prophet Muhammad realized this by way of meditation and the religious experience of the Qur'anic revelation which revealed to him the state of human being in the universe. And since then Muhammad's revelation and his *sunnah* or example have become reference points for the Muslims. The Qur'an refers to this character of Muhammad by referring to him as a teacher of wisdom.

God it is Who hath sent among the unlettered ones a messenger of their own, to recite unto them His revelations and to make them grow, and to teach them the Scripture and Wisdom, though heretofore they were indeed in error manifest (Qur'an 62:2).

And Muhammad is beautiful example to follow (Quran 33:21). Hence, the Muslims imitate Muhammad in nearly all the aspects of their life.

According to the Muslim mystics or Sufis, the *nur Muhammadi* or the light of Muhammad has existed before the creation of Adam. In fact, God created Adam from the light of Muhammad (Annemarie Schimmel, 1985:126). And the prophets were created from Muhammad's light (al-Hussain ibn Mansur al-Hallaj, 1913:9,11). In fact, the light of Muhammad is referred to in Muslim literature as being the first thing created by God, making Muhammad the luminous prophet worthy of love by all humans and creatures. A poet said, "If there were not Muhammad, nobody would be, / And the two worlds would not have come into existence."⁹

Hence, the goal of a Muslim's life is to ascend to union with the state of *haqiqah muhammadiyah* "archetypal Muhammad" as the first principle of creation. Muhammad is for the Muslims, a model, "the prototype of the universe as well as the individual, "the pupil in the eye of humanity," the Perfect Man who is necessary for God as the

9 Shah Miskin quoted in Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad is His Messenger*, p. 132.

medium through which He can manifest Himself, to be known and loved." (Annemarie Schimmel, 1985:137).

Conclusion

The Buddha and Muhammad were teachers who devoted themselves to teaching humanity about the true state of being and how to overcome illusion which drags humanity along its feet groping in darkness. And thus both the Buddha and Muhammad are revered as enlightened and blessed examples for humanity.

The central position which the Buddha and Muhammad maintain in the lives of Buddhists and Muslims respectively, and the elevation of both these persons to luminous status, to whom people can turn in love, hope and admiration, can serve as an important reference for appreciation of their teachings and as religious leaders in Muslim-Buddhist dialogue, leading to mutual understanding and respect between their followers.

Both of them, in an imagined conversation with each other, will be engaging in profound discussion about life, its purpose and goal. Such a dialogue between their followers, will contribute towards building better interhuman relationships and humane societies, rooted in the concepts of religious tolerance and mercy towards each other. For the Buddha was the enlightened One, and Muhammad a blessing for humanity.¹⁰

Such an exchange will help overcome the state of ignorance and misguided aversion.

¹⁰ We sent thee (Muhammad) not save as a mercy for the peoples. (Qur'an 21:107)

Glossary

- Ahl al-Kitab* Peoples of religions existing prior to Islam
Ashab al-Bidada Arabic term for the Buddhist community.
Haqiqah Muhammadiyya Archetypical Muhammad as the first principle of creation
Insan al-Kamil Perfect human being
Madrasah Arabic term for Muslim religious schools.
Misbah Lamp
Nur Muhammadi Light of Muhammad
Pondok Muslim religious schools as referred to in Southeast Asia
Siraj munir Light giving beacon
Tathagata Enlightened, liberated Buddha
Tathagata garba Buddha nature
Zuhd The ascetic tradition in Islam

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