

The Premises and Promises of the Buddhist-Muslim Dialogue

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THE concept of inter-faith dialogue refers to cooperative and positive interaction between people of different religious traditions (i.e., “faiths”) and spiritual beliefs, at both the individual and institutional level with the aim of deriving common grounds through a concentration on similarities between faiths, understanding of values, and commitment to the world. In reality, inter-faith dialogue was restricted to “divine religions,” Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These religions have in common the claim they are the word of God, and appeared in West Asia. They are distinct from other faiths, such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Sikhism, and Hinduism, which do not have divine claims and mostly appeared and flourished in South, Central, and Eastern Asia. Further, divine religions do not recognize non-divine ones. Islam only recognizes “the Peoples of the Book” as the only religious groups that Muslims could deal although other divine religions do not recognize Islam. Throughout history divine religions interacted with each other, and non-divine ones did the same with some exceptions when Islam spread into Central and Southern Asia. Japan was a model of this phenomenon, as it became a crucible for most non-divine religions and the other divine religions never made breakthroughs into Japan.

However, recently, such gap has been bridged through various models of inter-faith dialogues involving divine and non-divine faiths, the most important of which was the Buddhist-Muslim dialogues. In this presentation, we will review the historical interactions between Islam and Buddhism, the genesis of dialogue models in recent history with emphasis on dialogue between Japanese Buddhism and Islam, and finally we will focus on the case of the dialogue between Daisaku Ikeda and Majid Tehranian as exemplified in their book, *Global Civilization, an Islamic-Buddhist Dialogue*.

(I) Historical Contacts between Buddhism and Islam

The first contacts between Buddhism and Islam occurred in Central Asia

in the mid-seventh century. As Islam reached that part of the world during the reign of the Umayyad dynasty, Muslims began to realize the existence of Buddhism. Al-Kermani, a Muslim jurist, wrote about the Buddhist traditions in the city of Balkh, which is in today's Afghanistan, and compared them with Islam. During the Abbasside dynasty, the Caliph Al-Madhi, invited Buddhist scholars to Baghdad to translate some of their books into Arabic, including the book entitled, *the Book of the Buddha*. Ibn al-Nadim, who lived in the ninth century, wrote praising the Buddhist practices at his time. Also, when Mahmud of Gazni invaded India in the early eleventh century, the Persian historian Al-Biruni accompanied him and wrote a book entitled *the Book of India*, in which he described Buddhist customs in India. Finally, in the fourteenth century when the Mongol ruler Ghazan Khan converted to Islam, he commissioned his minister Rashid al-Din al-Hamadani (1247–1318), write a Universal History (*Jami al-Tawarikh*) which included a description of Buddhist beliefs written in cooperation with a Buddhist monk¹.

From the Buddhist side, there was little interest in communicating with Islam. Buddhists showed interest mainly in religions which were well established in their own regions, and little interest in religions which were trying to spread into regions in which Buddhism was the main belief system. Perhaps one of the few references to Islam in Buddhist literature was in the Kalachakra Tantra literature, which emerged in the tenth century². It referred to the beliefs of the Muslims in the context of the Buddhist-Hindu quest to preserve their religious identity in front of a Muslim expansion. The Kalachakra Tantra literature also highlighted points in common between Islam and Buddhism such as how souls bear responsibility for their actions.

The second encounter took place in South Asia and occurred between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries. Contrary to the widely-held beliefs, Muslim rulers of India co-existed with Buddhism. At the same time period, the third Muslim-Buddhist encounter occurred, but this time in Southeast Asia. In that part of the world, Muslim developed Sufi versions of Islam, which was mostly mystical and somehow compatible with Buddhist beliefs³.

It was not until the mid nineteenth century that the Mongolian novelist Injannashi wrote about some common features between Islam and Buddhism such as the common interest in "goodness."⁴

In contemporary times, these trends continued. Buddhism initiated dialogues with Christianity and Judaism as it spread in areas dominated by their two religions. As Buddhism made no advances in Muslim-dominated areas, there was no dialogue with Islam⁵.

(II) Contemporary Contacts between Japanese Buddhism and Islam

Likewise, Japanese Buddhist dialogue with Islam was quite limited compared with its dialogue with Christianity which began with the advent of the Portuguese Christians to Japan in 1543. Japan contacted the Muslim world in the context of the Meiji reforms through political, rather than cultural channels, and it drew its knowledge of Islam through the West. The West implanted in the Japanese Buddhist thinking the image of Islam as a violent religion which does not recognize other religions and forces others to embrace it through the sword. This image was almost indelibly imprinted on the Japanese Buddhist thinking especially that Japan Buddhism continued the tradition of approaching the Muslim world through the political lenses of its role in Eastern Asia. In its quest to reinforce its imperial role in Eastern Asia, Japan was mainly interested in winning the hearts of the Muslims in that part of the world, rather than dialoguing with them⁶.

This pattern persisted after the Second World War until the 1973 Arab-Israeli War which alerted Japan to the need to reinforce its political and economic interests with the Arab Muslim countries, with cultural interests. Japan supported various projects to understand Islam. However, such understanding did not significantly differ from the old one, especially with the outbreak of the Iraqi-Iranian War (1980–1988), the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990–1991, and the terrorist attack on Japanese tourists in Egypt in 1996. All of this reinforced the image of violent Islam.

Ironically, the September 11, 2001 events were a reminder to other religions to better understand the Muslim world through contacts with the Muslims. The Government of Japan initiated various research projects on the Muslim world to which many Muslim scholars were invited to participate. In August 2002, the Japanese Association for Religious Studies held an international conference which witnessed a dialogue between Japanese Buddhism and Islam, and the Center for Monotheistic Religions (CISMOR) of Doshisha University was established to engage into the study of and dialogue with the three monotheistic religions in addition to oriental beliefs such as Buddhism. CISMOR held various conferences and initiated various research projects attempting to understand monotheistic religions including Islam. In 2006, the World Religions for Peace conference was held in Kyoto. It witnessed participation of representatives of most world religions including Japanese Buddhism and Islam where it was resolved to respect religious diversity and the

role of religions in world peace.

From their side, Muslims initiated models of dialogue with “oriental beliefs” including Buddhism. For example, the International Islamic Forum for Dialogue held a conference in Singapore on 23–23 November 2008 in cooperation with the Singapore Buddhist Lodge and the Jamiyah Singapore to discuss the theme of “Harmony, Peace, and Global Values from the perspective of the Muslims and the Buddhists.” In that conference, Muslims acknowledged the contributions of Buddhism and both sides focused on the common values between Islam and Buddhism. The International Islamic Forum also held an agreement for cooperation with the World Buddhist Council based in Taiwan. On 20–21 February 2010, the World Federation of Muslim Scholars in cooperation with major Indian Muslim organizations, Jamia Millia Islamia’s Zakir Husain Institute of Islamic Studies, Interfaith Coalition for Peace, and The Milli Gazette held a conference in New Delhi entitled “the Conference for Dialogue between Islam and the followers of Oriental Beliefs.” Al-Qaradawy, the head of the Federation justified this dialogue on the basis of three main rationales, (i) the collapse of the Muslim-Christian dialogue which began in 2006 after the Catholic Pope delivered his lecture on violent Islam, (ii) there are common values between Muslims and the followers of many oriental beliefs; and (iii) followers of oriental beliefs are almost 3 billion. The conference was attended by followers of many oriental beliefs including Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sikhism. The conference ended up with resolutions affirming the fundamental similarity between the faiths taking part in the dialogue⁷.

Further, some national and international organizations sponsored models of Muslim-Buddhist dialogues. It may be useful to refer to some of them. In 1996, the International Movement for a Just World and the Santi Pracha Dhamma Institute co-sponsored a conference in Penang, Malaysia for Buddhist Muslim dialogue called “Alternative Politics for Asia.” It was held in response to ethnic rivalries in southern Thailand and concluded that the wisdom of both faiths should be used in order to solve regional problems. A follow-up conference was held in 2006 in Thailand under the theme “Buddhists and Muslims in Southeast Asia, Working towards Justice and Peace.” It issued the Dusit Declaration which referred to the threat of the hegemonic power of global capitalism to Muslim and Buddhist values and the need to work together to present another version of global justice.” It also established “the Buddhist-Muslim Citizens’ Commission for Southeast Asia,” Further, Buddhist-Muslim dialogue series was also initiated by “Global Family for Love

and Peace” to foster a new global communication on how Buddhism and Islam can respond together to the challenges created by the political, religious, economic and cultural crisis facing the world in the twenty first century. The dialogue’s goals were to create a partnership between Buddhist and Muslim communities in order to face these challenges on a peaceful basis of cooperation and friendship. The first dialogue took place at Columbia University in New York City in March 2002, followed by dialogues in Kuala-Lumpur in May, and in Jakarta in July. Subsequent to this series of Dialogues, a Muslim and Buddhist Dialogue Symposium was held in Morocco in 2005, and a Buddhist-Muslim Dialogue Conference was held in China in 2006. One of the highlights of this series was the Global Family for Love and Peace co-sponsored Buddhist-Muslim Dialogue Conference on Global Ethics and Good Governance at UNESCO headquarters in Paris from May 5–7 2003. The Conference was co-organized by the Museum of World Religions and the Elijah School for the Study of Wisdom in World Religions. The Paris UNESCO was designed to embrace the theme of the 1994 UNESCO “Declaration on the Role of Religion in the Promotion of a Culture of Peace.” It focused on comparing the Muslim and Buddhist experience in the area of good governance⁸.

This list of conferences is not exhaustive by all means. It meant to highlight the international concern to promote dialogue between Muslims and Buddhists, and to suggest that their contributions ought to be assessed so as future dialogues should build on their achievements.

One should add to these conferences, the contributions of the Institute of Oriental Philosophy in Japan to study Islam and establish parallels between Islam and Buddhism. *The Journal of Oriental Studies* issued by the Institute published a number of academic and policy-oriented articles which have provided solid analyses and data base that could be utilized in future Muslim-Buddhist dialogues⁹. Also, for the first time in its ninety-nine year history of publication, *Muslim World* journal dedicated a special issue to the theme of Islam-Buddhism dialogue. This was the issue of April–July 2010.

(III) The Need for a Muslim-Buddhist Dialogue and Its Problematics

Most Muslims and Buddhists came a long way from the historical legacy of non-recognition by the Muslims or marginalization by the Buddhists. They now realize that dialogue between them is essential for the preservation of world peace. For example, Ahmad Nabawy, an Egyptian

thinker, recently wrote in *Al-Ahram*, Egypt's most acclaimed national newspapers supporting dialogue with Buddhism because that belief does not subscribe to religious hegemony or political domination over others¹⁰. Alexander Berzin, an American Buddhist close to the Dalai Lama, also wrote in support of such dialogue provided that it was characterized by an emphasis on relativism which acknowledges differences¹¹. Also, contributors to the April-July issue of *Muslim World* journal, found that Muslims and Buddhists, advocated deepening Muslim-Buddhist dialogues and upgrading them to the level of sharing experiences¹².

Four major factors encourage and reinforce Muslim-Buddhist dialogue and promote its chances of achieving positive results. These are the positive past record of Muslim-Buddhist relations, the potential of a Muslim-Buddhist conflict in some areas in Southeast and South Asia, and the relatively similar sensitivity of the Muslims and the Buddhists to the Western cultural offensive in the post Cold War era. First of all, there is no past imperialist historical legacy between the Muslims and Buddhists as the case between European Christianity and Islam especially during the Crusades. Secondly, a Buddhist-Muslim dialogue is also needed to avoid potential clashes between groups belonging to the two faiths in such areas as Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Myanmar, and Kashmir, where the two groups co-exist. For example, in Myanmar there is an ethnic conflict between the Buddhists and the Rohingya Muslims in Northern Rakhine State, Arakan. The tension is an outcome of the resentment of Buddhists against Muslims living among them which led to the immigration of some Muslim communities to neighboring Bangladesh. The third main factor which necessitates Muslim-Buddhist dialogue is that the main cultural Islamic and Asian values of the Asians and the Muslims respectively are being subjected to encroachments from the West. The objective is to universalize Western values. Being subjected to similar external pressures, it is in the interest of the Muslims and the Buddhists to embark on a dialogue whose main objective is to safeguard their cultural values and prove their relevance to the new issues in the twenty first century.

However, Muslim-Buddhist dialogue is not without certain problems. First of all, dialogues are a long-term process which produces results only in the long run. This tends to create frustrations which could lead the dialoguers to give up the process as its outcomes are not immediately visible. Second, Muslims and Buddhists are not homogenous groups. There are multiple versions of Muslim beliefs, and different versions of Buddhism. Further, Islam recognizes only "divine" religions,

Judaism and Christianity, and emphasized upon monotheism. In a survey of Japanese and non-Japanese Muslims, it was found that whereas Japanese Muslims do not accept the Buddha as a prophet since he did not teach monotheism, non-Japanese Muslims did acknowledge Buddha as a Prophet. Such discrepancy was attributed to the lack of intensive interactions between Muslims and Buddhists in Japan. The images of some Muslims of Buddhism are in fact an outcome of the lack of interactions between the two sides, rather than an outcome of some doctrinal beliefs¹³. In fact, one must acknowledge that most Muslims outside Eastern Asia know little about Buddhism, and they need to be better informed about it to comprehend its common grounds with Islam. These problematics call for a creative approach to deal with Muslim-Buddhist dialogues. The main element of this approach is mutual encounters and the transmission of knowledge between both sides.

(IV) Pre-requisites for an Effective Dialogue between Islam and Buddhism

The complexity and multi-dimensionality of the problematics of Muslim-Buddhist dialogue just outlined call for a new approach to that dialogue. The dialogue is likely to develop and prosper, if it is based on five major pillars¹⁴.

(i) The Pursuit of a Truly Multi-Cultural Dialogue:

Multiculturalism refers to the appreciation of the diversity of all cultures by all the actors. It includes various elements such as (i) the prevalence of a non-hierarchical paradigm of cultures so as all cultures are considered equal in value and importance, (ii) engagement in a genuine dialogue between the co-existing cultures based upon exchange of ideas and skills, (iii) the pursuit of an anti-racist strategy; and (iv) the participation of all the cultural groups in the institutions of cultural dialogue. Multi-culturalism essentially means acknowledging and respecting cultural differences and acting to establish channels of communication between faiths. This does not exclude the existence of common universal values, which cut across all faiths. However, the meaning and operational application of these values differ from one faith to the other .

In the context of the Buddhist-Muslim dialogue, the notion of Buddha-Nature, which describe the potential of human beings to become fully enlightened as well as the reality of the universe from a Mahayana Buddhist perspective, should be integrated into the dialogue, along with the notion of Mohammadan Reality as “the Perfect Human Being,” so as

each side could comprehend the culture of the other side¹⁵.

(ii) A Paradigm of the Universal Application of Mutually Accepted Norms:

The value and credibility of the multi-cultural paradigm depends upon its universal and consistent application across the issues, and the actors. Equal concern about human rights and cultural self-determination of all groups is likely to promote cultural exchange and promote confidence in Japan's firm commitment to such paradigm. If it were agreed in the Muslim-Buddhist dialogue that nuclear weapons are a threat to humanity, such value must be applied to all actors who possess such weapons. Agreement on human rights and national self-determination should be also applied to all peoples under occupation, being in East Timor or Palestine.

(iii) Addressing the Concerns of All Parties:

Muslim-Buddhist dialogue must address itself to the major issues of concern to all actors. The agenda of the dialogue must be acceptable to all actors. Issues such as strategies of achieving regional peace, the concepts of holy wars, concepts of democracy and human rights, the promises and limits of economic privatization in the Arab countries, ethnic conflicts in Arab world, inter-religious and inter-civilizational dialogue, could be included in the dialogue.

(iv) Production of New Knowledge:

Muslim-Buddhist dialogue should not be restricted to the recall of historical legacies and memories but should focus on the perceptions of all sides of the new issues resulting from globalization and their potential contributions to reaching an inter-subjective consensus on a global code of ethics.

(v) An Institutionalized and Modernized Dialogue:

In thinking of operationalizing these dimensions into viable mechanisms, one can conceive of Muslim-Buddhist dialogue as having an institutional framework. The institution must have a permanent headquarters with a board of directors composed of an equal number of Buddhist and Muslim thinkers from different backgrounds. The board of directors should be entrusted with the task of formulating the agenda of the dialogue and publishing the proceedings in order to achieve cumulation. Further, it is crucial to pay special attention to younger generations especially those who have a potential for future leadership. Those who

are enrolled in institutions of higher education need programs that portray the commonalities and differences among Muslim and Buddhist societies in a balanced way with special emphasis on mutual interests.

(V) The Case of the Ikeda-Tehranian Dialogue

The Buddhist-Muslim dialogue conducted by Dr. Daisaku Ikeda and Dr. Majid Tehranian and published in their book entitled *Global Dialogue: An Islamic-Buddhist Dialogue* is a prime example of the fulfillment of these pre-requisites. The book began from a well-defined perspective on the instrumental pre-requisites of a successful Buddhist-Muslim dialogue, which were clearly stated in the first chapter. The dialoguers proceeded from a well-defined agenda which addressed the relevant historical and contemporary issues ranging from religious beliefs to the questions of poverty alleviation, nuclear weapons, role of regional co-operation, etc...There was no sense of cultural superiority. In fact, the dialoguers warned against "cultural narcissism," categorically refuted the Clash of Civilizations thesis, and even went further to emphasize upon the existence of a Global Civilization which unites all human beings, instead of the argument that claims that there are multiple civilizations which are doomed to clash. They also discussed contemporary local and global issues and provided Islamic and Buddhist compatible perspectives on these issues. In fact, the book may be considered as a Model of Muslim-Buddhist future dialogues.

When I was asked to translate the book into Arabic, I pleaded for some time to read the book and know more about its content. Having done that, and although translation is not my original profession, I accepted to introduce the book to the Arabic reader because on various grounds, (i) Dr. Ikeda and Dr. Tehranian spoke in a very clear language which the average intellectual can understand. I believe that stylistic clarity reflects intellectual power. The dialoguers were able to transmit their message without complications, (ii) the comprehensiveness and contemporaneity of the issues debated in the book. The Ikeda-Tehranian dialogue did not focus solely on the past but also addressed issues of concern to modern mankind; and (iii) the book also reflected the post modern emphasis on the multiplicity of paradigms and perspectives to understanding human behavior. As a Professor of Political Science, and as a Muslim, the book provided me with a Buddhist paradigm which I was not aware of given my religious background and my Western education.

For these reasons, when I suggested to the Director of the National

Center for Translation in Egypt, Professor Gaber Asfour, to publish the translation by his highly-esteemed center, he readily agreed. I recall that I met him in his office, and he looked at the front page of the book and thought for few seconds and replied, Dr. Selim, I fully agree to publish the translation and to pay all the cost. Later on, I asked him why he did not refer the book to the steering committee which clears the books to be translated, he replied, "I immediately realized the high value of the book from the title, and the caliber of the dialoguers, and the rich table of contents." In a later discussion with him, I found out that he was aware of high caliber of Dr. Ikeda.

It is hoped that through this translation, Arab Muslims could be better informed about the commonalities between Islam and Buddhism. In fact, few months after the publication of the Arabic translation of the Global Civilization book, the first edition is almost sold out which shows that the Arab reader is keen to learn about the contributions of the Buddhist-Muslim dialogue.

Conclusion

Although global dialogues are occurring under major constraining conditions, mainly, the unipolar system dominated by the West, they are indispensable if a sense of togetherness and joint destinies is to be solidified. One of the main avenues to achieve this goal is the dialogues and common understandings between Oriental civilizations and faiths. They share the objective of maintaining a sense of multiplicity and multiculturalism in the global system and in securing oriental cultures against the Western offensive. The Muslim-Buddhist dialogue is one of the main promising areas that have been long neglected. Traditionally, Muslims have been focusing on dialogues with Christianity and Judaism to the detriment of dialogues with other oriental faiths. Recently, there has been an awareness of the need to energize dialogues with oriental beliefs, especially Buddhism. Such dialogue carries with it the promise of maintaining Muslim and Buddhist beliefs, achieving harmony and avoiding conflict among Muslims and Buddhist living in Eastern Asia, and creating an oriental concert of peoples advocating multiplicity and multi-polarity. It also carries with it the promise of success as there is no sense of superiority among the dialoguing parties. However, one must pay attention to the problematics that could side-track that dialogue, such as focusing on secondary and historical issues rather than ones that are directly related to the present concerns of all parties.

Notes

¹ Alexander Berzin, "Buddhist-Muslim Doctrinal Relations: Past present and Future," http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/study/islam/general/buddhist_muslim_doctrinal_relations.html

² Kalachakra Tantra comprises the innermost essence of the 84,000 categories of the teachings of the Buddha. Its major purpose is to assist us in purifying our body, speech and mind.

³ Imtiyaz Yusuf, "Islam and Buddhism Relations from Balkh to Bangkok and Tokyo," *Muslim World*, 100 (2–3), April/July 2010, pp. 177–186.

⁴ Alexander Berzin, op.cit.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Samir Nouh, *Bridges of Communication between the Muslim World and Japan*, (Kuwait: Ministry of Awkaf, Rawafed series no. 23, November 2009), pp. 74–76.

⁷ For a review of the papers presented in this conference.

<http://www.islamandorientalreligions.org/content/delhi-hosts-international-interfaith-conference>.

⁸ Imtiyaz Yusuf, op. cit., p. 15.

Alexander Berzin, "Historical Survey of the Buddhist and Muslim World's Knowledge of Each Other's Customs and Teachings," *Muslim World*, 100 (2–3), April–July 2010, p. 200.

⁹ For example,

Shunji Hosaka, "An Introduction of the Concept of Tolerance in Indian-Islam: A Legacy of Theological Thought in Indian-Islam," *The Journal of Oriental Studies* (Tokyo) 16, October 2006, pp. 41–57.

¹⁰ Ahmad Nabawy, "Contemporary dialogues, the dialogue of Islam and Buddhism: A suggested model," *Al-Ahram*, 27 February 2010.

¹¹ Alexander Berzin in

<http://www.rnw.nl/arabic/article/culuters-dialog29042010>

¹² For example,

Perry Schmidt-Leukel, "Buddhist-Muslim Dialogue: Observations and Suggestions from a Christian Perspective," *Muslim World*, 100 (2–3), April–July 2010, pp. 349–363.

¹³ Kieko Obuse, "The Muslim Doctrine of Prophethood in the Context of Buddhist-Muslim Relations in Japan: Is the Buddha a Prophet?" *Muslim World*, 100 (2–3), April–July 2010, pp. 215–232.

¹⁴ For a broader perspective on these pre-requisites,

Mohammad Selim, "Assessing the dialogues of civilizations between the Western and Muslim worlds," *Arab Studies Quarterly* (USA), 31 (1 & 2), Winter–Spring 2009, pp. 49–68.

¹⁵ Maria Reis Habito, "The Notion of Buddha-Nature: An Approach to Buddhist-Muslim Dialogue," *Muslim World*, 100 (2–3), April–July 2010, pp. 233–246.