# Chapter 12
# Islamic Theology of Religious Pluralism: Building Islam-Buddhism Understanding

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**Abstract**  Drawing from the teachings of the Qur'an about human unity and religious diversity and also the history of Islam-Buddhism coexistence, this chapter looks at the chances, challenges and opportunities for building Islam-Buddhism understanding in the age of rising Asian Islamophobia and Muslim-Buddhist conflicts in Asia. The chapter draws its content from the teachings of the Qur'an regarding how it views the role of religion in human history and its attitudes towards different religions. It also highlights that the distortion of the Qur'an's positive views about religions is largely the result of political and economic developments in Muslim history – an interplay between religion and politics in the post-Muhammadan era. Finally, the chapter urges the Muslims to view other religions such as Buddhism from the perspective of the Qur'an – i.e. *Ahl al-Kitāb*  perspective which recognizes religious pluralism.

**Keywords**  Islam-Buddhism relations · Buddha in Qur'an · *Dukkha* · *Majjhima-Patipada* · *Waṣaṭiyya* · al-Bīrūnī · *Ahl al-Kitāb*

## 12.1   Introduction

> *O humanity! We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that you may know one another. The noblest of you, in the sight of Allah, is the best in conduct. Lo! Allah is Knower, Aware.* (Qur'an 49:13)

Islam emerged in the cosmopolitan trading city of Mecca in a religiously pluralistic environment where there was the presence of different religions, races and social groups.[1] Hence, religious pluralism is not something strange to the Qur'anic

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[1] Ziauddin Sardar, *Mecca: The Sacred City* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2014).

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message when it addresses itself to all humanity. The modern age religious parlance of addressing and classifying religious views about the other or of othering the other religions is defined and found in the historic Vatican II document of *Nostra Aetate* being the "Declaration On The Relation Of The Church To Non-Christian Religions Proclaimed By His Holiness Pope Paul VI On October 28, 1965",[2] which was given a more detailed exposure in the famous classification of religious views along the lines of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism by both Karl Rahner (d. 1984) and also Alan Race (b. 1951).[3]

Islam defines and classifies religious diversities along two parallel lines of (1) those who are Muslims – those who believe in the Qur'anic monotheism -, and (2) the followers of other religions as *Ahl al-Kitāb* – the People of the Book – i.e. those who have received revelations before Muhammad which was initially applied to the Jews and Christians of Arabia and was later, with the spread of Islam, extended to include the Hindus, Buddhists, etc. However, the contemporary modern age Muslims have also adopted the religious attitudes of viewing the followers of other religions along the lines of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism, mainly due to non-development and eclipse of the initial Muslim theology of religious pluralism. And the rise of exclusivist tendencies largely out of politico-economic conditions instead of the development of modern Muslim theology of religious pluralism fit for the age of globalization. In fact, the essential Qur'anic view of seeing other religions as belonging to the category of *Ahl al-Kitāb*, which is pluralistic in its view, has been abandoned and some Muslim clerics and religious bodies have gone to the extent of banning the adoption of the term religious pluralism which parallels along with that of *Ahl al-Kitāb*. The Qur'anic usage of the *Ahl al-Kitāb* has been substantially abandoned in contemporary Muslim religious language.

Religious pluralism means accepting religious validity and equality between religions; it holds that religious truth is not the exclusive property of one religion but is available through the teachings of different religions. Religious pluralism promotes the building of unity, cooperation, dialogue and understanding between different religions, and within a single religion, with the aim of building peaceful coexistence between religions, and the recognition of religious diversity as a boon not a bane for humanity.

This chapter draws its content from the teachings of the Qur'an regarding how it views the role of religion in human history and its attitudes towards different religions. The chapter also highlights that the distortion of the Qur'an's positive views about religions is largely the result of political and economic developments in Muslim history – an interplay between religion and politics in the post-Muhammadan era. Finally, the chapter urges the Muslims to view other religions such as Buddhism

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[2] "Nostra Aetate," accessed February 28, 2019, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html

[3] Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (London: SCM Press, 1983).

from the perspective of the Qur'an – a perspective which recognizes *Ahl al-Kitāb* or, in other words, religious pluralism.[4]

## 12.2   Islamic Theology of Religions – The Meaning of "Muslim"

Islamic Theology of Religious Pluralism – or '*ilm ilāhiyāt al-adyān* – began in Muhammad's reception of the Qur'anic revelation and continued to develop as Islam spread out of Arabia. As the youngest religion, Islam faced a religiously pluralistic space from its start. Muslims have discussed this topic – i.e. what is Islam's views of other religions – throughout Islamic history, since the time of the Prophet Muhammad when he established it practically through instituting the *Mīthāq al-Madīna* or the charter/constitution of Medina, which defined the interreligious relations in the city. And this is also related to how the Qur'an describes the term "Muslim."

The earliest reference to the word "Muslim" in Qur'an (68: 35) is universal in meaning. The Qur'anic usage of the term Muslim means the one who submits/surrenders [or "has surrendered"] himself/herself to God or Ultimate Reality, and this has been a human religious practice in all times of human history; it does not only refer to the followers of the prophet Muhammad. Muhammad Asad comments on this topic as follows:

> the term Muslim signifies (means) 'one who surrenders himself to God'; correspondingly, *Islam* denotes 'self-surrender to God.' Both these terms are applied in the Quran to all who believe in One God and affirm this belief by an unequivocal acceptance of His revealed messages. Since the Quran represents the final and most universal of these divine revelations, the believers are called upon, in the sequence, to follow the guidance of its Apostle and thus to become an example for all mankind.[5]

Islam always accepts the possibility of salvation outsides its boundaries if they are based on the belief in God/Ultimate Reality and doing good. It affirms the religious truth of Judaism and Christianity as long their followers do not indulge in *shirk* – associationism. The Qur'an often repeats the verse*:* "And those who believe and do good are the inhabitants of Paradise; they shall abide therein forever" (Qur'an 2: 111–112). It also mentions that, "Indeed the faithful, the Jews, the Sabaeans, and the Christians—those who have faith in God and the Last Day and act righteously— they will have no fear, nor will they grieve" (Qur'an 5:69). Prophet Muhammad himself laid no restrictions in the interpretation of the above verses. For the *dīn* or the religion is one but the *shari'a* or the paths to it are different. Both the Islamic revelation and Islamic history stand up for a theology of pluralism which is founded

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[4] Isma''il R. al-Faruqi, "Meta-Religion: Towards a Critical World Theology," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (September 1986), 13–57.

[5] Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Quran* (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1980), 518.

upon the belief in surrender to God combined with being righteous. However, this Qur'anic view of the recognition of other religions was lost when "the universal narrative that emphasized the common destiny of humanity was severed from its universal roots by the restrictive Islamic conception of its political order based on the membership of only those who accepted the divine revelation to Muhammad."[6]

Islam recognizes religious diversity as a normal aspect of human life. It calls for the recognition of other religions and also for the freedom of religion for all. It is only when Islam became a political force that such concepts were pushed into the background. Islamic theology of religions seeks to address and resolve issues that affect Muslims across cultural boundaries. Its goal is to do things in ways different from the past. It emphasizes adopting an attitude of friendliness towards all religions.

The Qur'an does not condemn other religions nor their adherents; rather, it calls for building of religious humanism for the benefit of peaceful inter-human relations and societies. The Qur'an's support for religious freedom within the house of Islam and the world at large is conveyed in the following verse.

> those who have been driven from their homelands without right for no other reason than their saying, "Our Sustainer is God!" For, if God had not enabled people to defend themselves against one another, [all] monasteries and churches and synagogues and mosques – in [all of] which God's name is abundantly extolled – would surely have been destroyed [ere now]. And God will most certainly succor him who succors His cause: for, verily, God is most powerful, almighty. (Qur'an 22:40)

Revisiting and reviving this teaching of the Qur'anic attitude in contemporary times of religious conflicts would, hopefully, contributive towards starting a discourse and dialogue of religions within the Muslim community by removing the spread of the plague of emerging insularism and negative attitudes towards other religious communities. Tendencies which only hurt the Muslims themselves and creates Islamophobias of different types among non-Muslims.[7]

## 12.3   The Qur'an on Religious Diversity

Prophet Muhammad followed by his successors and later Muslim scholars have all addressed the question of Islam's view towards other religions. Islamic attitudes towards other religions also contain the trends of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism similar to those found in other religions. More about this latter. Since no religion is founded in a vacuum all of them need to express their attitudes towards other religions through developing a theology/doctrine of religions.

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[6] Abdulaziz Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 50.

[7] Imtiyaz Yusuf, "Three Faces of the Rohingya Crisis: Religious Nationalism, Asian Islamophobia, and Delegitimizing Citizenship," *Studia Islamika*, [S.l.], v. 25, n. 3, 2018, 503–542.

From the Islamic perspective of history of religions, the religion of the first human beings was *dīn al-fiṭra* – religio naturalis.[8] The concept of *dīn al-fiṭra* is rooted in the belief of human beings submission/surrender to Ultimate Reality; it is similar to the first pillar of Islam, which is belief and submission to God. The Qur'an describes it as follows:

> All mankind were once one single community; [then they began to differ] whereupon God raised up the prophets as heralds of glad tidings and as warners, and through them bestowed revelation from on high, setting forth the truth, so that it might decide between people with regard to all on which they had come to hold divergent views. (Qur'an 2:213)

From this first stance of religious belief emerged the different historical religions found in the different parts of the world, which have been recorded and studied by medieval and modern scholars of history of religions such as Mircea Eliade and his predecessors in the East and West. The historical religions include all views and forms of human worship of Ultimate Reality such as personal, non-personal religion(s), monism, polytheism, monotheism and non-theism, etc.

The Qur'an views religious diversity as natural to human life, thought and society. Religious diversity serves as the means for competition to do good between religious communities:

> Unto every community have We appointed [different] ways of worship, which they ought to observe. Hence, [O believer,] do not let those [who follow ways other than thine] draw thee into disputes on this score, but summon [them all] unto thy Sustainer: for, behold, thou art indeed on the right way. And if they [try to] argue with thee, say [only]: "God knows best what you are doing." [For, indeed,] God will judge between you [all] on Resurrection Day with regard to all on which you were wont to differ. (Qur'an 22:67–69)

> Unto every one of you have We appointed a [different] law and way of life. And if God had so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community: but [He willed it otherwise] in order to test you by means of what He has vouchsafed unto you. Vie, then, with one another in doing good works! Unto God you all must return; and then He will make you truly understand all that on which you were wont to differ. (Qur'an 5:48)

In order to further affirm the Islamic view of universality of religious belief and commonly shared religious history of humanity, the Qur'an emphasizes that what matters the most between religious differences is the competition to do good.

Muhammad Asad, stresses that the word Muslim meaning submission, as used in the Qur'an, has a universal meaning; it is applied to anyone who believes in God/Ultimate Reality even though they are not Muslims professing the known religion of Islam. The Qur'anic verse 6:52 reads, "Do not send away those who call upon their Lord in the morning and in the evening, seeking only His grace. You are not by any means accountable for them, nor are they accountable for you. If you turn them away, you yourself will become one of the unjust." Muhammad Asad comments on

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[8] The concept of *dīn al-fiṭra* – religio naturalis – is different from the eighteenth century Enlightenment view of religion, and the concept of "natural religion" founded by liberal theologians influenced by Deism. See, Imtiyaz Yusuf, "The Concept of Dīn (Religion) as Interpreted by Ismail al Faruqi" in Imtiyaz Yusuf, ed., *Islam and Knowledge: Al-Faruqi's Concept of Religion in Islamic Thought* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012), 93–110.

this verse by saying that "the Muslims should not rebuff followers of other religions," and that "the exhortation voiced in this passage is directed to all followers of the Qur'an: they are enjoined not to repulse anyone who believes in God – even though his beliefs may not fully answer to the demands of the Qur'an."[9] God has created humanity to worship God, "O mankind! Worship your Lord, Who hath created you and those before you, so that ye may ward off (evil)." (Qur'an 2:21). Thus Islam recognizes all believers in religion(s).

The Qur'an contains two types of verses: (1) those which have historical and contextual relevance to the situation of Muhammad in Arabia and (2) universal moral teachings of all time relevance. Majority of contemporary Muslims under the influence of fundamentalist and puritanical interpretations of the Qur'an see the historical and contextually relevant teaching of the of the Qur'an as not being relevant under all times and conditions, hence they give importance to such verses of the Qur'an over those with universal moral application. Such an approach to the Qur'an leads to largely exclusivist understanding of Islam. This viewpoint goes against the pluralistic grain of the Qur'an and the principle of religious pluralism it presents. Most Muslim scholars accept democracy in the political sphere of life but opt for religious exclusivism or inclusivism when dealing with other religions.

Since the Qur'an comments on Judaism and Christianity, and rarely on other religions, several Muslim Qur'an scholars are inclusivists, but exclusivists towards other religions of humanity, naively labeling the religions of Asia, Africa, Oceania and also that of the Eskimos and Siberians as being false and polytheistic, and thus to be rejected as Muhammad rejected Arab paganism during his time.

In spite of the presence of Muslim exclusivists there are several Muslim scholars of Islam who have taken pluralistic positions or commented positively on the need for recognition of pluralism in Islam. Since it is not possible to go into their individual views here, I just mention their names for reference, they are: Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Yusuf Ali, Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, Muhammad Asad, Hassan Askari, *Frijthof Schoun,* Muhammad Hamidullah, Ismail al-Faruqi, Fazlur Rahman, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Mahmoud Ayoub, Abdul Aziz Sachedina, Asghar Ali Engineer, Maulana Waheedudin Khan, Chandra Muzaffar, Osman Bakar, Nurcholish Madjid, Khaled Abou El Fadl, Farid Esack, Mohammad Khatami, Abdolkarim Soroush, Abdul Rahman Wahid, and the young scholars of Jaringan Islam Liberal (JIL) group in Indonesia.

## 12.4   Religious Pluralism in the Qur'an

Every religion without exception claims itself to be the true religion, offering the true revelation or the true path of salvation. Such a claim amounts to what Paul Knitter calls the "myth of religious superiority."[10] It is difficult for exclusivists and

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[9] Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Quran*, 179, n. 41.

[10] Paul F. Knitter, *The Myth of Religious Superiority* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004).

inclusivists to accept religious pluralism that recognizes all religions as true paths of salvations and equal in terms of interreligious relations. Yet, when observed deeply, each religion's claim of superiority is historical, spatial and contextual. Contemporary study and research in the history of religions demands a shift from the above mentioned types of perspectives to a one that recognizes equality of religions. This is not an easy task but a struggle for the adherents of different religions.

There are many Muslims who hold exclusivist or inclusivists perspectives about Islam in its relations to other religions be they Middle Eastern, Asian, African, etc. Yet, a deep, reflective, historically researched and holistic understanding of the message of the Qur'an points to Islam's recognition of religious pluralism. Some of the verses of the Qur'an are a source for building an Islamically pluralistic theology of religions. Such a theology draws a distinction between the teachings of the Qur'an, the practice of the prophet Muhammad, and the later developed exclusivist/inclusivist Islamic theology of religions when Islam took on the forms of a religious, missionary and legalistic institution whose power was managed by the political authorities and knowledge came to be narrowly interpreted by the *ulama* – religious scholars, who claimed sole authority in the task of interpreting Islam.

Historically researched and phenomenological reading of the Qur'an and the *hadith* – the narratives of Muhammad – point to religious recognition of religious pluralism within Islam. In light of the fact that the Qur'an employs the term Muslim to mean a believer in Transcendent or Ultimate Reality, as mentioned above, and does not refer to an ethnic Muslim community, the Qur'an holds the following principles of religious pluralism.

### 12.4.1  Everyone Who Believes in Ultimate Reality and Does Good Is Guaranteed Salvation

This is mentioned in the following two verses of the Qur'an.

> Verily, those who have attained to faith [in this divine writ], as well as those who follow the Jewish faith, and the Christians, and the Sabians – all who believe in God and the Last Day and do righteous deeds – shall have their reward with their Sustainer; and no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve. (Qur'an 2:62)

> For, verily, those who have attained to faith [in this divine writ], as well as those who follow the Jewish faith, and the Sabians, and the Christians – all who believe in God and the Last Day and do righteous deeds – no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve. (Qur'an 5:69)

The above mentioned twice occurring verse in the Qur'an sets down a fundamental principle teaching of Islam that salvation/liberation/enlightenment is conditional upon three beliefs: belief in God/Ultimate Reality, belief in the Day of Judgment, and the performance of good deeds and righteous action in life.

### 12.4.2 Allah and Other Definitions of Ultimate Reality Are Identical

This Qur'anic verse shows that God, or Allah, and Ultimate Reality or the Transcendent are identical: "We believe in that which has been bestowed from on high upon us, as well as that which has been bestowed upon you: or our God and your God is one and the same, and it is unto Him that We [all] surrender ourselves." (Qur'an 29:46)

### 12.4.3 Diversity of Religions Is a Part of God's Plan and Will Last as Long as the World Lasts

Unto every one of you have We appointed a [different] law and way of life. And if God had so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community: but [He willed it otherwise] in order to test you by means of what He has vouchsafed unto you. Vie, then, with one another in doing good works! Unto God you all must return; and then He will make you truly understand all that on which you were wont to differ. (Qur'an 5:48)

Muhammad Asad comments on the above verse as follows, "Thus, the Qur'an impresses upon all who believe in God – Muslims and non-Muslims alike – that the differences in their religious practices should make them "vie with one another in doing good works" rather than lose themselves in mutual hostility."[11]

### 12.4.4 Muslims Must Be Tolerant and Respectful Towards Other Religions

In keeping with the spirit of religious pluralism, the Qur'an categorically declares, "There is no compulsion in religion" (Qur'an 2:256) This means nobody is to be forced to believe or convert to Islam and everyone is free to leave Islam. Everyone is free to believe or disbelieve in Islam, "Then whosoever will, let him believe, and whosoever will, let him disbelieve" (Qur'an 18:29). Prophet Muhammad did not only talk about no compulsion in religion but also practiced it as seen from below mentioned events.

Many commentators cite some events in which the Prophet himself implemented the requirements of verse 2:256 and prohibited his companions from compelling people to accept Islam. For instance, Tabari mentions that when the two Jewish tribes of Qaynuqa and Nadr were expelled from Medina, they had in their charge children of the Ansar (Medinian Muslims) who had been placed with Jewish families. The biological parents asked the Prophet's permission to take their children back and raise them as Muslims, but the Prophet said, 'There is no compulsion in religion.' Tabari mentions another event which indicates how this verse worked in practice. A Muslim named Al-Hussayn had two sons, who having

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[11] Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Quran*, 154, n. 68.

been influenced by Christian merchants, converted to Christianity and left Medina to go to Syria with these missionary merchants. Al-Hussayn pleaded with the Prophet to pursue the convoy and bring his sons back to Islam. But the Prophet once again said, 'There is no compulsion in religion', that is let them follow the religion of their choice, even though it is not Islam.[12]

Furthermore, Muslims and everyone is free to choose and practice their religions, "To you your religion and for me mine" (Qur'an 109:6). Diversity of language, race, ethnicity, color are to be honored and respected for the purpose behind it is to build human cooperation and respect for pluralism, which is a natural phenomenon. The Qur'an remarks:

> O human beings! Behold, We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Verily, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most deeply conscious of Him. Behold, God is all-knowing, all-aware. (Qur'an 49:13)

Muslims are recommended to be cordial toward non-Muslims. Muslims should not be judgmental nor condemnatory of non-Muslims; read Qur'an (6:52) and (42:15) cited earlier.


## 12.4.5  Islam Is Not a New Religion But a Re-Confirmation of Truth Revealed Before

Muslims believe in all prophets without making any distinction between them. Islam's attitude of religious pluralism is reflected in the Qur'an being a reconfirmation of the message brought by previous prophets:

> And unto thee have We revealed the Scripture with the truth, confirming whatever Scripture was before it, and a watcher over it … For each We have appointed a divine law and a traced out way. Had Allah willed He could have made you one community. But that He may try you by that which He hath given you (He hath made you as ye are). So vie one with another in good works. Unto Allah ye will all return, and He will then inform you of that wherein ye differ.

> The apostle, and the believers with him, believe in what has been bestowed upon him from on high by his Sustainer: they all believe in God, and His angels, and His revelations, and His apostles, making no distinction between any of His apostles; and they say: We have heard, and we pay heed. Grant us Thy forgiveness, O our Sustainer, for with Thee is all journeys' end! (Qur'an 2:285)

And it is the fundamental belief of the Muslims that though Muhammad is the last of a series of prophets, Muslims believe in all prophets without making any distinction between them:

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[12] Quoted in Adnan Aslan, *Religious Pluralism in Christian and Islamic Philosophy: The Thought of John Hick and Seyyed Hossein Nasr* (London: Routledge, 1994), 191.

Say: "We believe in God, and in that which has been bestowed from on high upon us, and that which has been bestowed upon Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and their descendants, and that which has been vouchsafed by their Sustainer unto Moses and Jesus and all the [other] prophets: we make no distinction between any of them. And unto Him do we surrender ourselves." (Qur'an 3:84)

Behold, We have inspired thee [O Prophet] just as We inspired Noah and all the prophets after him – as We inspired Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and their descendants, including Jesus and Job, and Jonah, and Aaron, and Solomon; and as We vouchsafed unto David a book of divine wisdom. (Qur'an 4:163)

Above Qur'anic references and comments illustrate that contemporary Muslims in their efforts to brand the followers of other religions as *kafirs* – unbelievers, infidels -have very much deviated from the tolerant and pluralistic spirit of their own scripture. More about this below.

## 12.5   Buddhism and Islam – A Historical Sketch of Relations

Muslims and Buddhist met each other as early as the seventh–eighth centuries, much before Western Christians came to know about Buddhism, which happened only in the nineteenth century through the works of Orientalist scholars such as Monier Monier-Williams (1819–1899), and Alexander Duff (1806–1978).[13]

The first comprehensive academic study of Buddhism from Western Christian perspective was written only in 1844 by the French scholar of Sanskrit Eugène Burnouf, entitled *Introduction à l'histoire du Buddhisme indien*. It set the ground for the beginning of Western studies about Buddhism, while Muslims abandoned the study of Buddhism until today. Christian-Buddhist understanding and dialogue is a vibrant movement today.[14]

There is a long history of relations between Islam and Buddhism.[15] Though Islam and Buddhism are different doctrinally, they have historically come into contact first in Central Asia,[16] later also in South Asia and Southeast Asia.[17] The first encounter between Islam and *ashab al-Bidada*, or the Buddhist community, took place in the

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[13] Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 127.

[14] Eugène Burnouf, *Introduction to the History of Indian Buddhism*, trans. Katia Buffetrille and Donald S. Lopez Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Donald S. Lopez Jr., *From Stone to Flesh: A Short History of the Buddha*, rpt. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

[15] Johan Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Road* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

[16] Richard C. Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

[17] Manan Ahmed Asif, *A Book of Conquest: The* Chachnama *and Muslim Origins in South Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016); Syed Muhammad Naguib al-Attas*, Some Aspects of Sufism as Understood and Practised among the Malays* (Singapore: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute Ltd., 1963).

middle of the seventh century in the regions of East Persia, Transoxiana, Afghanistan and Sindh.[18] Historical evidences suggest that early Muslims extended the Qur'anic category of *ahl al-Kitāb* (People of the Book or Revealed Religion) to include the Hindus and the Buddhists.[19] During the second century of Islam or the eighth century CE, Central Asian Muslims translated many Buddhist works into Arabic. We come across Arabic titles such as *Bilawar wa Budhasaf* and *Kitab al-Budd*, as evidences of Muslims learning about Buddhism.[20]

In spite of being aware of the idol-worship of the Buddha, Ibn al-Nadim (d. 995 CE), the author of *al-Fihrist*, 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 *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.[21]

There are evidences of Buddhist survivals in the succeeding Muslim era of this region (Central Asia), such as the Barmak family of Buddhist monks who played a powerful administrative role in the early Abbasid dynasty (750–1258 CE). The Barmakids controlled the Buddhist monastery of *Naw Bahar* near Balkh in addition to other Iranian monasteries.[22]

There was also the continuation of several Buddhist beliefs and practices among the Muslims of Central Asia. For example, the Samanid dynasty, which ruled Persia during the ninth and tenth centuries, invented and modelled the *madrasa* or Muslim religious schools that were devoted to advanced studies in the Islamic religious sciences, after the Buddhist schools in eastern Iran.[23] Similar case may be the *pondoks* or *pasenterens* — the Muslim religious schools of Southeast Asia.

The renowned religious scholar and historian, Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (839–923 CE), who was born in Amul in Tabaristan, northern Persia, mentions that Buddhist idols were brought from Kabul, Afghanistan, to Baghdad in the ninth century. 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 present Uzbekistan.[24]

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[18] *Encyclopedia of Islam*, s.v. "Balkh"; *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. "Buddhism."

[19] The term *Ahl al-Kitab*, or "the People of the Book", is a Qur'anic term and Prophet 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 in Arabia. See Encyclopedia of Islam, s.v. "*Ahl al-Kitab*".

[20] Ignaz Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 141.

[21] Quoted in S.M. Yusuf, "The Early Contacts Between Islam and Buddhism", *University of Ceylon Review*, Vol. 13, 1955, 28.

[22] Richard C. Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road*, 100. Also Richard Bulliet, "*Naw Bahar* and the Survival of Iranian Buddhism", *Iran*, Vol. 14, 1976, 140–145.

[23] Richard C. Foltz, Religions of the Silk Road, op. cit., 100–1. See also Encyclopedia of Religion (Mircea Eliade, General Editor), s.v. "*Madrasah.*"

[24] Richard C. Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road*, op. cit., 100.

The second encounter between Islam and Buddhism took place in South and Southeast Asia beginning around twelfth–sixteenth centuries. In the case of India, there is a common misunderstanding that Islam wiped out Buddhism through conversion and persecution. Regarding this misunderstanding, the American scholar of Islamic history Marshall Hodgson remarks:

> 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.[25]

The third meeting between Islam and Hindu-Buddhist civilization in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand was a sort of dialogue between the monotheistic, monistic and non-theistic religious traditions. Islam arrived here in its mystic orientation which was shaped by the Persian and Indian traditions of Sufism. The Muslim individuals who brought Islam first to Indonesia and then Malaysia and southern Thailand in the twelfth–fifteenth centuries were the Sufi mystics. In religious terms, it was a meeting between the Hindu views of *Moksha* – liberation – through the notion of monism, the Buddhist notion of *Nirvana* – enlightenment – through the realization of *Sunyata* – emptiness – and the Islamic concept of *fanā'* – passing away of one's identity through its mergence in Universal being – as presented in monotheistic pantheism of the Sufis. Gradually, there emerged a hybrid culture, particularly in Java and in other parts of Southeast Asia, resulting in an Islam that was mystical, fluid and soft, and a spiritualism that is peculiar to the region.[26] Today, Islam coexists with Hinduism and Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia, the state of this relationship is diverse in the context of the regional and local histories of the various countries in these region. There are ample opportunities to build on Islam and Buddhism understanding as they make up the two main religions of Southeast Asia at the ratio of 42–40% per cents respectively.

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[25] Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam* Volume 2 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1074), 557.

[26] Alijah Gordon, *The Propagation of Islam in the Indonesian-Malay Archipelago* (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute, 2001). Anthony Shih, "The Roots and Societal Impact of Islam in Southeast Asia" *Stanford Journal of East Asian Affairs* Spring 2002, Vol 2, 114.

### 12.5.1    Buddhism as Non-theistic Religion

Humanity has experienced the Ultimate Reality in three ways, i.e., from outside (namely, through revelation) as in the cases of Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad and other Semitic prophets, from within as in the case of the Asian religions of Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Taoism and Shinto, and through a medium as in the case of Shamanistic and African religions. In this sense, the Buddha encountered the Ultimate Reality from within; it resulted in *Nirvana* – enlightenment which equals *Sunyata* – nothingness. The Buddhist concept of *Sunyata* is closer to the Abrahamic religious notion of transcendental monotheism.

Usually, monotheists, i.e., the Jews, the Christians and the Muslims, are too quick in commenting that Asian religions of Hinduism, Jainism, Taoism and Shinto are polytheistic religions. The reasons for this lies in the Middle Eastern and European view of monotheism that judges worship of many deities, and considers bowing before an idol or icons as constituting polytheism. The root cause of this lies in being unable to distinguish between personal and non-personal views of Ultimate Reality.[27] Monotheistic religions view God in personal terms, while Non-Theistic religions view Ultimate reality in two ways: (1) worship of many *devas* – gods – at a popular level and (2) philosophical and non-personal conception of Ultimate Reality. Max Müller defined it as henotheism, that is, worshiping a single non-personal universal principle called *Brahman,* which is monistic in nature in relation to the human soul – the *Atman* -, and also accepting the existence of other deities.[28]

With the risk of being accused of generalizing, I see philosophical compatibility between theistic and non-theistic views of Ultimate Reality as defined in the Jewish concept of Elohim/Yahweh, Christian concept of Godhead, Islamic notion of Allah and the Buddhist view that the Ultimate Reality constitutes of *Sunyata* – emptiness.

### 12.5.2    Buddha and Muhammad – The Prophetic Dimension

From a Muslim perspective of history of religions, God has since time immemorial sent prophets to every nation, only some of which are mentioned by names in the Qur'an. The Qur'an mentions 25 prophets including Muhammad, all of them belong to Semitic religion. It was impossible for the Qur'an to mention all the world prophets; for if it did that, it would not be able to convey its message to the Arabs who were its main addressee, and who at that time did not know much about other religions especially those in Asia and Africa. Furthermore, the Qur'an is a book of revelation and not a dictionary of religions.

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[27] John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982).

[28] Max Muller, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion: As Illustrated by the Religions of India.* (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1878).

The Qur'an comments on the universality of the institution of prophethood in the following way:

> 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, recognizing the existence of different religions including Buddhism, as another verse quoted earlier clearly shows (Qur'an 5:48).

The religious experience of *Nirvana* – enlightenment – by Buddha, and *waḥy* – revelation – by Muhammad are sources of the essential message of moderation in religion. The perfection of Buddha and Muhammad is connected to their achievements as enlightened prophets who overcame the impediments of religious ignorance. In the case of Buddha, this ignorance is rooted in the cycle of *samsara* – rebirth due to attachment as the cause of *dukkha* – suffering. In the case of Muhammad, it lies in 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,* or loss and disgrace.[29] Interestingly, both Buddha and Muhammad from an Islamic point of view were neither *mushriks*, namely polytheists, nor *kafirs*, namely those who associate other beings with God; they both rejected the petty gods of their respective communities.

Classical Muslim scholar of comparative religion, al-Shahrastani (1086–1153 CE), in the section on *Ara' al-hind* (The Views of the Indians) of his magnum opus *Kitab al-Milal wan-Nihal* (The Book of Religious and Philosophical Sects),[30] pays high regard to Buddhism and its richness in spirituality. This was done by identifying Buddha with the Qur'anic figure of *al-Khidr*, as a seeker of enlightenment.[31]

More recently, the late scholar Muhammad Hamidullah observes that in line with the Qur'anic view of prophethood, Buddha can be regarded as one among the previous prophets not clearly mentioned in the Qur'an. 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 attained *Nirvana*— enlightenment – under a wild fig (*ficus religiosa*) tree, and as that fig tree does not figure prominently in the life of any of the prophets mentioned in the Qur'an, hence, the Qur'anic verse refers to Gautama Buddha[32]:

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[29] Qur'an 103: 1–3.

[30] Muhammad Al-Shahrastani, *The Book of Religious and Philosophical Sects*, ed. William Cureton (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press LLC, 2002).

[31] Qur'an 18: 64. See also Bruce B. Lawrence, *Shahrastani on the Indian Religions* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976), 113–14.

[32] Muhammad Hamidullah, *Muhammad Rasulullah*, (Hyderabad: Habib & Co), 1974, pp. 27, 107. See also David Scott, "Buddhism and Islam: Past to Present Encounters and Interfaith Lessons", *NUMEN*, Vol. 42, 1995, 141–55.

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.
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)

What further facilitates this Islamic interpretation is the status of Buddha. There is a lot of parallel between the Qur'anic concept of *risalah/nubuwwa,* or *messenger-ship/* prophethood history of prophets (named and unnamed), and the Buddhist concept of "Buddha." Buddha is not a name, it is a designation like *nabi* or *rasul* – prophet. Buddhas appear over time to teach religion and the path to *Nirvana* – enlightenment/salvation. Buddhist sources mention 27 Buddhas that have appeared over a period of 5000 years.[33]

Buddha's enlightenment experience of *Nirvana* and Muhammad's experience of *waḥy/* revelation were liberative experiences freeing both founders of religions from the shackles of ignorance and social bondages. Both these prophets sought answers to the questions about human predicament. What is to be human? Why is there anguish, suffering and injustice? The Buddha called it *dukkha/* suffering, the Qur'an calls it *kabad/* affliction. The parallel between the teachings of Buddha and Muhammad can be seen in the Buddhist doctrine of the Four Noble Truths and the Qur'anic *surah* – chapter titled *Balad/* City (Qur'an 90), respectively:

1. Life means *dukkha* – suffering.
2. The origin of suffering is attachment.
3. The cessation of suffering is attainable.
4. The (eight fold) path to the cessation of suffering. (The Four Noble Truths)

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. (Qur'an 90: 1–4)

I see analogical compatibility between the Qur'anic usage of the word *kabad* meaning "pain," "distress," "hardship," "toil" and "trial" and the Buddhist religious term *dukkha*, "suffering," and find it useful in explaining the Islamic concept of the meaning of life, its struggles and goal.

Through *Nirvana*, enlightenment, Buddha was liberated from the fetters of suffering (*dukkha*) and entered a state of relief, peace, calmness and rest. He was freed from the state of confusion, turmoil, anguish and distress and entered the state of bliss and detachment. Similarly, Muhammad's experience of the *waḥy*, revelation, liberated him from the suffering caused by religious ignorance in his social milieu represented by the presence of *shirk* (polytheism, attribution of divine qualities to

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[33] Paul J. Griffiths, *On Being Buddha – The Classical Doctrine of Buddhahood* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), 87–119. See also Jamshed Fozdar, *The God of Buddha* (New York: Asia Publishing House, Inc., 1973), 13.

aught but God) and *kufr* (rejection/denial of the existence of One Unseen God), and led him into submission to God. Thus the Buddha through *Nirvana* entered the state of bliss, marking his freedom from suffering and rebirth, and Muhammad through the experience of *waḥy* entered the state of *salaam* – peace, tranquility. Both became founders of two world religions which carry the message of human freedom and liberation. Buddha realized the state of being *arahant*, the state of enlightened human being, and Muhammad the state of being *rasul* – the messenger of God. Both are prophets from the perspective of Islamic history of religions, and each of them defeated the antagonistic forces or evil called *Mara* in Buddhism and *Shaytan* in Islam. This is described in the Buddhist narrative of the Buddha's struggle with the forces of *Mara* during the process of his enlightenment as contained in the Buddhist text of *Sutta Nipata* (425–449).[34] Similarly, in Islam, a *hadith* tradition of the prophet Muhammad remarks, "*aslama shaytāni*" – my *shaytān* has become a Muslim/believer, meaning that the prophet has trained and turned his lower faculties and instincts of lust, greed, false views, delusion and illusion into the service and obedience of God. The prophet has become *al-insān al-kāmil* – the perfect man to which the *shaytān* prostrates or bows his will.[35]

Hence, through *Nirvana* the Buddha realized his *Buddha-dhatu* – Buddha nature or the true pure nature of non-attachment and emptiness of everything or being; the original nature present in all beings which when realized leads to enlightenment, and the prophet Muhammad the state of *al-insān al-kāmil* – the perfect human being. Both these prophets realized their enlightened human status in both religious and social terms in their respective societies.[36]

The Buddha obtained *Nirvana* from within himself on the basis of self-effort while seeking an answer to the question of *dukkha*/ human suffering and salvation, and Muhammad obtained *waḥy*/ revelation from outside himself while seeking to discern the meaning of being *insan*/ human, in terms of creation, the meaning of life and its end goal.

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[34] *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, s. v. "Mara."

[35] Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 2 ed. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 113, 196.

[36] Uma Chakravarti, *Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publisher, 2008); Bhikkhu Bodhi and His Holiness the Dalai Lama, *The Buddha's Teachings on Social and Communal Harmony: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2016); Tariq Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet: Lessons from the Life of Muhammad* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman*, Rev. ed. (London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

## 12.6   Conclusion

This chapter has shown that both monotheistic and non-theistic religions propose moderation in religion. Their essential messages to humanity is to avoid extremism of all sorts in order to build mature human beings and peaceful societies; this is the ideal. But the history of religions shows that religious extremism has emerged in all religions, that while all religions present themselves as sources of building peace in humanity, no religion's history is free from the stain of violence. Hence, reviving the message of the middle path of Buddha or the middle nation of the Qur'an is an urgent task, especially today when extremism of religious nationalists and fundamentalists are hijacking religions for violence. Violence and killing has no religion. Islam is a religion of *wassatiyah*, of middle position between religious conservatism and extremism[37]: "And thus have We willed you to be a community of the middle way, so that [with your lives] you might bear witness to the truth before all mankind, and that the Apostle might bear witness to it before you" (Qur'an 2:143). Gai Eaton says,

> The Qur'anic concept of "a middle nation" tells the Muslims to be worthy of being "heir to ancient and universal truths, and to principles of social and human stability (often betrayed but never forgotten) of which our chaotic world has a desperate need;[sic] a nation which witnesses to a hope that transcends the dead ends against which the contemporary world is battering itself to death.[38]

Buddhism's notion of *Majjhima-Patipada* (middle way) and Islam's notion of *Ummatan Wassatan* (middle nation) both emphasize moderation and offer strong foundations of further cooperation between the two religious communities. The goal of building peaceful relations between the Muslims and Buddhists of Southeast Asia is an urgent need of the contemporary global age, otherwise immoderate views will only create animosity, havoc and conflict.

Islamic theology of religious pluralism based in the Qur'an which is basically inclusive of other religious traditions is a great resource for building understanding between Islam and Buddhism. The long history of mutual coexistence between the two religions has many positive aspects, one such example is that since the 1960's the king of Thailand annually solemnizes the opening day of the celebration of *Mawlid al-Nabi* – (Prophet Muhammad's birthday) in Thailand.[39] Information and knowledge about such examples will help bridge the current gap of mutual ignorance and misunderstanding separating the followers of the two religions currently

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[37] Imtiyaz Yusuf, "Dialogue Between Islam and Buddhism through the Concepts *Ummatan Wasaṭan* (The Middle Nation) and *Majjhima-Patipada* (The Middle Way)," *Islamic Studies*, vol. 48, no. 3, 2009, 367–394.

[38] Charles Le Gai Eaton, *Islam and The Destiny of Man* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), 26.

[39] Imtiyaz Yusuf, "Celebrating Muhammad's Birthday in Buddha's Land: Managing Religious Relations through Religious Festival," in *Religion, Public Policy and Social Transformation in Southeast Asia — Religion, Identity and Gender*, ed. Dicky Sofjan, Vol. 2 (Geneva: Globethics.net International Secretariat, 2017), 129–160.

caught in the Buddhist and Muslim religious nationalist conflicts that brew violence and terror, a phenomena that is being currently witnessed in the Theravada majority countries of Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand against Muslim minorities, and also in the Muslim majority countries of Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei where the Buddhist minorities are feeling vulnerable to the religio-nationalist threats of discrimination and intolerance.[40] Building Islam-Buddhism understanding through deeper understanding of the parallels and differences between them can help in creating peaceful understanding and cordial relations between the two main religions of Southeast Asia.

Muslims and Buddhists in Asia should abandon the exclusivist and narrow interpretation of the universal message of the Qur'an and Buddhism. They should opt for a religiously pluralistic understanding of the message of their religions, focus on building civil society and democratic institutions. Such a step has to be initiated both from the states representative houses and from the streets. The contemporary age demands of the Muslims to rethink their views and attitude towards other religions. The way of the future is that of religious pluralism, "Verily, God does not change the condition of a people unless they change it themselves (with their own souls)" (Qur'an 13:11).

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[40] John Clifford Holt, *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities: Religious Conflict in Contemporary Sri Lanka* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Mahinda Deegalle, ed., *Buddhism, Conflict and Violence in Modern Sri Lanka*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2006); Neil DeVotta, *Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalist Ideology: Implications for Politics and Conflict Resolution in Sri Lanka* (Washington D.C.: East-West Center, 2007); Jean A. Berlie, *The Burmanization of Myanmar's Muslims* (Bangkok: White Lotus Co Ltd., 2008); Melissa Crouch, ed., *Islam and the State in Myanmar: Muslim-Buddhist Relations and the Politics of Belonging*, 1st ed. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016); Imtiyaz Yusuf, "Three Faces of the Rohingya Crisis: Religious Nationalism, Asian Islamophobia, and Delegitimizing Citizenship," *Studia Islamika*, [S.l.], v. 25, n. 3, Dec. 2018, 503–542; Azeem Ibrahim, *The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar's Hidden Genocide* (London: Hurst, 2016).

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