

**MUSLIM BUDDHIST DIALOGUE:
A QUEST FOR ETHNIC HARMONY IN THE SRI LANKAN
CONTEXT**

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Abstract

Although there are differences in the belief systems of Islam and Buddhism, there are some shared values that could form a strong basis for dialogue between these two religions. Dialogue of religion involves creating an understanding for people of different faiths to live together in peace and harmony. It is necessary that they should understand each other's religions, culture and traditions and learn to respect whatever they find good therein. When two civilizations meet, there is always a two-way process of interaction between them, both being influenced and molded by each other. Such interaction must not be seen as necessarily negative, because human existence is based on the principle of give and take. Therefore, along the line of ethics, and in particular on universal humanistic values and social responsibilities Muslims and Buddhists can work together for peace and a harmonious pluralistic living, in order to produce good socialized members who will work towards the progress of the country of Sri Lanka.

Keywords

Dialogue, pluralism, civilization

Sri Lanka, a multicultural, multi religious and multilingual country has faced many bitter experiences as a result of clashes between the different religious communities from time to time. As argued by some scholars (Arasaratnam: 1986, Devaraja: 1994, Ameer Ali 2004), although for most part of the post-independent era, civil and harmonious relationships have prevailed amongst the different ethnic and religious communities, but isolated incidents based on communalism by extremist groups have created challenges for the coexistence of the different communities in the society. In spite of the volatile nature of all communal clashes that have hitherto taken place, Sri Lanka, as nation has been able to stand united and return to normalcy within a short period of time subsequent to the incident. We have been able to do so because we have been fortunate to be heirs of good religious teachings. The Sri Lankan population consists of the major religions Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. All these four religions have contributed immensely towards maintaining peace and harmony.

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We in Sri Lanka in the post-conflict period of transition and transformation, realize there is a need to arrest the negative trends in the society through the dissemination of factual knowledge, analysis informed by reason, and critical thinking. By doing so, we can achieve harmony and reconciliation. The measure of success we achieve in this period of ethnic conflict will define Sri Lanka's future, a democracy in which diversity and tolerance will find a happy home, a home in which the right to differ and desire are considered exciting democratic challenges and enriching experiences.

Justice Christopher C.G. Weeramantry points out, the "misconceptions of Islam have been instilled all around the world in the non-Islamic minds by generations of prejudiced writings."¹ As such one of the goals of this paper is to create a better understanding of the Muslim-Buddhist dialogue in Sri Lankan context.

Islam recognizes diversity and pluralism, which is very clearly indicated in the following verses of Quran. "And if Allah (God) had willed, He could have made them one nation..."² "To each among you, we have prescribed a law and a clear way. If Allah (God) had willed, He would have made you one nation, but that (He) may test you in what He has given you; so complete in good deeds. The return of you (all) is to Allah (God); then He will inform you about that in which you used to differ."³ Hence, diversity is presented as a factor which contributes to the enrichment of human life, culture and civilization whereby different groups, communities and nations come to know each other in a spirit of tolerance and mutual understanding.

The dialogue of religions should be prioritized in our day to day life. International organizations and the global bodies support the idea of a "dialogue of religion". In the light of the above lines the prominent Indian scholar Nadwi wrote that "for people of different faiths to live together in peace and cooperation, it was necessary that they should understand each other's religion, culture and traditions regarding whatever they found good therein as precious and worthy of encouragement and preservation."⁴ He continued to call for the integration and accumulation of civilization, not the clashes of civilization. He remarked, "When two civilizations meet, there is always a two-way process of interaction between them, both being influenced and molded by each other. Such interaction must not be seen as necessarily negative, because human existence is based on the noble principle of give and take." In this give and take, he wrote, "lies its strength and glory"⁵

The welfare of each community living in Sri Lanka depends on the welfare of the other communities as well. Each Sri Lankan has two homes, his own little hut as well as the large mansion that is Sri Lanka. The interests of the mansion have to be placed before those of the hut; if there is no peace and prosperity in the former then the inhabitants of the latter can never prosper.

Diversity is presented as a factor which contributes to the enrichment of human life, culture and civilization whereby different groups, communities and nations come to each other in a spirit of tolerance and mutual understanding. "O

mankind! We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another.”⁶ This verse of the Quran highlights three important points. Firstly, this passage is addressed to all of humankind, not only Muslims. Secondly, the creation of humanity into distinct groups came from God and distinction and diversity are of positive value, and third it encourages people to transcend these differences. The Quranic phrase “*Litha a’rafu*” in the above verse, which means to “know each other” is of great significance. By this call, the Quran invites nations and ethnicities that constitutes humanity to come to know each other discovering the commonalities which bind them as members of a larger human family.

However, there are only a few opportunities to study other religions or for comparative religion in the government or private education system in Sri Lanka. The Muslim leader Sitthy Lebbe (A.D. 1838-1898) wanted the *Ulema* (Muslim Theologians) to have knowledge of various other religions. He said, “Acquaintance with other religions will facilitate success in any controversies with people of other faiths...”⁷ Ethnicization of the school system is a major contributing factor towards the lack of tolerance towards other religious groups and it prevents interaction between the multi-religious and multi-ethnic groups in this country.

Interaction between Islam and Buddhism

When we trace history by looking at the wider historical background of the Islamic perspective of diversity and pluralism, it indicates that the encounter between Islam and Buddhism has paved the way for a fruitful dialogue. Alexander Berzin, a scholar of Tibetan Buddhism, has contributed to the Buddhist-Muslim dialogue and according to Berzin there has been interaction between Islam and Buddhism for a period of thirteen and half centuries which has been very constructive and fruitful.⁸

There is a long history of relations between Islam and Buddhism. These two major religions of the world came in contact first in central Asia, later in South Asia and South East Asia. The first encounter between Islam and Buddhism took place in the Middle of the 7th Century in East Persia, Transoxiana, Afghanistan and Sind.⁹

Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Road demonstrates that the history of Buddhist-Muslim interaction is much richer and more complex than many assume. This groundbreaking book covers Inner Asia from the eighth century through the Mongol empire and to the end of the Qing dynasty in the late nineteenth century. By exploring the meetings between Buddhists and Muslims along the Silk Road from Iran to China over more than a millennium, Johan Elverskog reveals that this long encounter was actually one of profound cross-cultural exchange in which two religious traditions were not only enriched but transformed in many ways.¹⁰

The knowledge Muslims had of Buddhism during the Umayyad period is seen in the writing of Umar bin Al Azreq Al Karmani. This Arab author gives an

exposition of Buddhism and its customs drawing parallels with certain Islamic practices. Al Karmani gives a detailed account of Nava Vihāra (Nawbhar) at the beginning of the eighth century and his account is preserved in the later tenth century work *kitab-ul-Faquiḥ-al Hamadani*. Nava Vihāra was a Buddhist monastery near the ancient city of Balk in the Greater Khurasan province. Alex Berzin in his article “Historical sketches of Buddhism and Islam in Afghanistan” observes as follows:

“Al Karmani’s description indicates an open and respectful attitude by the Arab Muslims in trying to understand non-Muslim religions such as Buddhism that they encountered in conquered territories”¹¹. Nava Vihāra under the Muslim rule continued to flourish as an important monastery and the Han Chinese pilgrim Yijing visited Nava Vihāra in 680 A.D. and observed it as a flourishing Centre of Buddhist learning.

In Islamic history, the Abbasid dynasty has given emphasis to research and learning. During this period caliph Mansoor (752-775A.D.) established an institution called *Baitul Hikma* with a translation bureau. He invited scholars from various religious and cultural traditions to translate scientific texts available in Greek and Sanskrit into Arabic. Apart from scientific texts in order to give due recognition to Sanskrit Buddhist scholars translated a few Mahayana and Hīnayāna *Suttas* dealing with devotional ethical themes into Arabic.

Yahya bin Barmak, the Muslim grandson of one of the Buddhist administrative heads of Nava Vihāra was the minister of Abbasid Caliph Harun Al-Rashid (786-808 A.D.). Under his influence the Caliph invited the Buddhist scholars from India to translate Buddhist texts into Arabic. The *Kithab Al-Fihrist* of Ibnu Nadeem (995 A.D.) mentions the list of Buddhist works among which was the Arab version of an account of the Buddha’s previous life. This Arabic translation entitled *Kitab-ul Bhud* (Book of Buddha) was the text based on two Sanskrit works “*Jātakamālā*” (a rosary of previous life’s account of the Buddha’s) and *Buddhacarita* (acts of the Buddha).

Ibn Al Nadeem (985 A.D.) the author of *Al Fihrist* has pointed out, “The people (Buddhists of Khurasan) are the most generous of all inhabitants of the earth and of all the religionists. This is because their prophet Buddha (Buddhi sattva) 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 this uttering of “No” as an act of Satan. And, Buddhism motivates its followers to banish Satanic evil activities.”¹²

The great Muslim scholar of comparative religion during the Seljuq period Al-Shahrastani (1086-1153 A.D.) wrote a book titled *Kitab al Milal Wal Nihel*- a text in Arabic on non-Muslim religions which contains some references to Buddhist texts. He shows a high regard for Buddhism and its spirituality.¹³ That the history of world religions shows a long historical interaction between Islam and Buddhism is an eloquent testimony to the fact that it is through understanding,

mutual respect and tolerance that a dialogue quest for religious harmony could be established between religions and cultures.

Religious tolerance does not mean amalgamating all religions into one. Tolerance in respect of religion involves the capacity to acknowledge the differences and diversities as real, basic and fundamental and to make a sincere effort to rise above these differences identifying the shared valued and commonalities.

Regarding the human values embedded in both Islam and Buddhism there are some common shared values that could form a strong basis for dialogue between these two religions. Modesty, compassion, moderation, wisdom, patience, forgiveness, tolerance and generosity are some of the important values emphasized by both Islam and Buddhism.

The value of Love and Compassion in Islam and Buddhism are similarly shared. *Rahma* in Islam and *Karuṇā* in Buddhism mean the same. *Ar Rahman*- the merciful and *Ar Raheem* – the most compassionate are two important attributes of (God) Allah. His love and mercy find its manifestation in the entire creation. God all mighty says “...my mercy embraces all things...”¹⁴ It is revealed in the Hadith as follows: “Have mercy on those who are on the earth, Allah who is in heaven will have mercy on you.”¹⁵ According to Islam love and kindness embrace not only mankind but it also extend to the entire creation. The Prophet Mohamed (PBUH) said “Creation is God’s (Allah’s) family”.

Compassion and mercy are central to Buddhist ethics as well. Buddhism places much emphasis on Loving kindness (*Mettā*), compassion (*Karuṇā*), sympathetic joy (*Muditā*) and equanimity (*Upekkhā*) as means of avoiding resentment. According to the Buddha, love and compassion will be generated only in a mind which is free from anger and hatred.

A truly great person is not one who succeeds in worldly matters, but one who “hurts not any living being.”¹⁶ Buddhists are to vow: “With all am I a friend, comrade to all and to all creatures kind and merciful”¹⁷ The Buddhist *Suttanipaāta* includes the following beautiful contribution to spiritual literature encouraging compassion in humankind:

May all be blessed with peace always;
all creatures weak or strong,
all creatures great and small;

Creatures unseen or seen
dwelling afar or near,
born or awaiting birth,
—may all be blessed with peace!

... As with her own life
a mother shields from hurting her own,
her only child, —
let all-embracing thoughts
for all that lives be thine,

—an all-embracing love
for all the universe¹⁸

Conclusion

It is clear therefore, in the cases of Islam and Buddhism there are differences but at the level of ethics and value systems, similarities do exist abundantly. It is therefore along the line of ethics, and in particular with regard to universal humanistic values and social responsibilities that Muslims and Buddhists can work together for peace and a harmonious pluralistic living, in order to produce good socialized members of a community. This is what we should keep in mind and do our best to promote. The common aim of the two religions is to collectively contribute the building of harmony between the two communities by strengthening unity, stabilizing peace and promoting co-existence through Muslim-Buddhist dialogue. This will also be a vital factor for the progress of Sri Lanka and the whole Sri Lankan community.

Abbreviations

Dhp. Dhammapada

Endnotes

- ¹ Weeramantry 1999: p. 128
- ² Holy Quran 42:8
- ³ Ibid. 5:48
- ⁴ Nadwi, Sayyid Abul Hassan Ali 2007
- ⁵ Ibid, p 76
- ⁶ Holy Quran 49:13
- ⁷ Alexander McKinley & Merrin Shorbhanna Xavier, 2018
- ⁸ Berzin A. 2020
- ⁹ Yousuf I. 2003: pp. 131-43
- ¹⁰ Elverskog J. 2013
- ¹¹ Berzin A. 2001
- ¹² Muhammad ibn-Ishak ibn- al-Nadim, Kithab al-Fihrist, Tehran: p. 407
- ¹³ Al Shahrastani, Kitab Al-Milal van Nihal, Cairo, Vol, ii, p. 1275
- ¹⁴ Holy Quran (7:156)
- ¹⁵ Al Tirmidhi 1924
- ¹⁶ Dhp.: p. 74
- ¹⁷ Burt: p. 79
- ¹⁸ Burt: pp. 46-47

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