

Islam and Buddhism; A Study of Medieval literature and its significance for peaceful co-existence

(A historical and descriptive study of the mutual literary interaction of both the traditions)

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Abstract

“Buddhism and Islam interacted each other in maximum spheres of life, during the last thirteen and a half centuries across Asia; Afghanistan, eastern Iran, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan India and central Asia. Within this panorama of history certain images of interaction are displayed in the form of actions and literature. In history of both civilizations, many kind of interaction has existed but the literary one can be considered long living and fruitful in any nation’s history. The article starts with a short introduction of relevant Arabic words like *al-Budd*, *Bozasf*, *Shamniyah*. The primary focus of the paper is to sort out the piece of information about Buddhism in medieval Muslim literature. A precise but comprehensive study of the written works which deals with any aspect of Buddhism is presented here. Structurally the paper highlights century wise data like from 7th century al-Kermānī’s work to Bayt al-Hikmat, Murūj al-Zahab, Kitāb al-Fihrist, Al-Berūnī’s work, Jāmi’ al-Tawārīkh and Kitāb al-Milal wa al-Nihal (12^{CE}). Some clues of *Bozasf* (Buddha) are also found in classical Arabic dictionaries and books of ‘Ilm al-Kalām- scholastic theology but it goes beyond the scope of subject matter as the article is inclined to historical works. The second focus of the article is to find out how Islam has been portrayed in medieval Buddhist literary works- *Kālāchakra Tantara* and others. Descriptive methodology has been applied while exploring both the literatures. By doing this some mutually elaborated themes and topics has been extracted. A precise comparison and sharp analysis of all the characteristics has been presented to know that only the ethical and social aspects of Religions can be a feasible ground for fruitful Buddhist-Muslim dialogue in

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contemporary world. It ends up with detailed recommendations and concluding remarks elaborating plausible foundations for peaceful co-existence.”

KEYWORDS: Buddhism, Medieval Buddhist works, classical Islamic works, common characteristics.

Introduction

Buddhists and Muslims have interacted with one another in many spheres for the last thirteen and a half centuries. The earliest contact between Buddhist and Muslim populations was in present day Afghanistan, eastern Iran, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan. As soon as Islam had defeated the Sasanian Empire and started moving to the East Iranian lands, it encountered strongly Buddhist communities. It was the era after Abbasids and Umayyad's. During this time the religious map of Asia was one whereby Buddhism was gradually giving way to Islam because of Mongols.¹

David Scott presents an analysis that Buddhist scholars do not seem to have shown interest in explaining the Muslim customs and beliefs to the Buddhist audience. There is no recorded evidence of any such description up till this time. On the other hand, Muslim writers began to notice the Indian figure and religious adherents in their early literature calling them al-budd, Buzasf, and Shamniyah, an interpretation of Buddha and Bodhisattva. The early Muslim literary account of al-budd and Buzasf is strong and great evidence on positive interaction.² Like Scot, some other western writers have the similar way of taking account of the mutual history. So, to know the

¹ Muhammad Umar, *Hindustānī Tehzīb ka Muslmāno par asar* (Pak academy: Karachi, 1992), P:305

² David Scott, “Buddhism and Islam: Past to Present Encounters and Interfaith Lessons”, in *Numen*, vol. 42, No. 2 (May, 1995), pp. 141-155. Accessed on 13/11/2008 23:54 from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3270172>

extent of their claim's accuracy, one needs to go through the medieval classical literature.

We are beginning with the subject matter by describing the very first existence mentioned by any of the traditions. As the Muslims have recorded it firstly so the starting point would be the Muslim's account of literary contribution to understand and evaluate Buddhism. They have explained it in Islamic terms to make it understandable to the Muslim adherents. Afterwards we have searched out the Buddhist literature to know how the scholars of Buddhism have studied Islamic tradition, Islamic themes, beliefs, rituals, creeds...etc. Is there any distorted information recorded?

1) Al-Kermānī's Work (7th century)

Umar ibn al-Azraq al-Kermānī (d. 7th century) explained Buddhism to the Muslims and wrote a detailed account of the *Nava Vihara Monastery* in Balkh, Afghanistan, and the basic Buddhist customs there, explaining them in terms of Islam like he described the main temple as having a stone cube in the center, dressed with cloth like Ka'ba. Al-Kermānī's writings were preserved in the tenth-century work "*Kitāb al-Buldān*" by Ibn al-Faqīh al-Hamadhāni.³

2) Caliph Maḥdī's Bayt al-Hikmat⁴ (8th century)

The next Buddhist-Muslim interaction took place during the last half of the eighth century CE. Caliph al-Maḥdī, who ordered the Muslim and Buddhist scholars to translate primarily medical and astronomical texts from *Sanskrit* into *Arabic*. It is very logical that the caliph provided a discussion

³ Alexander Berzin, *Buddhist-Muslim Doctrinal Relations: Past, Present, and Future* (EOS Verlag, 2008), p. 3.

⁴ A famous knowledge house of Abbasids

opportunity in “*Bayt al-Hikmat*” with people of other religion and traditions. By this very fact the literature from Greek, Hebrew, Semitic, Sanskrit and other rich heritages were translated into Arabic. In later times, some irrelevant sciences created problems in traditional Muslim thought and few reactionary scholars arose against them like Sheikh Ibn Taimiyah and Imām al-Ghazzālī who might have delivered speeches and involved in academic talks with them. This can be a sound proof of the possibility of Buddhist description in those discussions. But such kind of works just contained on speeches and discussions without having any known record.

3)Al-Mas‘ūdī’s work, *Murūj al-Zahab* (10th Century)

This Muslim historian travelled to India around 911 CE, described every detail of the faith about different Gods and creeds of the Hindus, to whom Buddha came for preaching. After showing the religious picture of that society Mas‘ūdī narrates, “While the Indian and Chinese people had been worshiping “*Devīs* and *Devtās*” for centuries, there came a person Buzasf, from the Hindu society who claimed to be the Prophet- mediator between God and his creature. He preached to leave all worldly attachments, to get rid of all human clutches, to contact to one who is in the skies and to whom our souls belong to. According to Mas‘ūdī ’s findings, he is actually the first person who initiated the religion of Sābi’ah.⁵

These are the very first steps of Buddhist religion to walk on the way to *Nirvana*. Such honest descriptions depict the standard of Muslim scholarship for centuries and also the interest to know what is going on around them.

⁵ al-Mas‘ūdī, Ali ibn Hussein, *Murūj al-Zahab* (Egypt: Ahmad al-Halaby Publisher, 1303 Hijrah), p.50.

4)Kitāb al-Budd, Kitāb al-Fihrist (10th century)

Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 998CE) is a prominent figure regarding calculating Muslim's literary heritage. His unique book "*Kitāb al-Fihrist*", also listed several Buddhist works that were written in Arabic, Such as an account of Buddha's previous life, "*Kitāb al-Budd*." The text was based on two Sanskrit works: A Rosary of Previous Life Accounts- "*Jatakamala* and *Ashvaghosha's*" Deeds of the Buddha (Skt. Buddhacarita). Till this era we don't find any Buddhist work.⁶

Ibn e Nadīm says about Buddhism, "I read the writings of a man from the person of *Khorasān* who has compiled Khorasān's culture. This part was similar to the constitution of Buddhist teachings. The most people behind the river *Furāt* were Buddhists before and after Islam. They were the generous people on the Earth. This is because their prophet Bozasf informed them the greatest things and their doctrine pushed Satan." Then he narrates,

"As for the statue of the great Buddha, he is sitting on a chair, no hair on his face, dipped in his chin in the clutches, smiling man."⁷

5)Al-Berūnī's work (11th century)

Al-Berūnī (d. 1048CE) was an outstanding astronomer, astrologer, mathematician, physician, geographer, geologist, historian, traveler and the first Muslim comparative religionist whose work on Hinduism is considered an academic discourse in scholarly terms even till today. He can be titled as the first Muslim academician of comparative religion. He came to India

⁶ Ibn al-Nadīm Muhammad ibn Ishāq, *Kitāb al-Fihrist* (Berut: Dar al-Ma'rafah li al-taba'ah wal-nashar, 1978), p. 484.

⁷ Ibid

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during the *Ghaznavide's* rule. He throughs light on the history, faith and existence of Buddhism saying,

“Buzasf came appeared in India after one year to the age of a Persian King Tehmūrath. He used the Persian style of writing. He preached people to the Sabi’ah faith and attracted an overwhelming majority of Hindus. His followers still exist in India, China and Turk tribes. Their monasteries are found in the regions connected to India. He is called Shamnan in *Khurasān*.”⁸

In his second famous book “*Kitāb al-Hind*” al-Berūni confesses, “Neither i could find any book about Shamniyyah (Buddhism) nor any scholar who could describe us the accurate faith of this religion. Whatever I have written, is by the tradition of Erān Shehrī. He isn’t a trustworthy man because he neither collected this information after research nor from any Buddhist scholar.” Then he narrates Buddhists’ faith about a famous Indian holy mountain *Mīrū* by saying, “this mountain is situated in the center of four worlds...etc.”⁹

At a place, he described the basic Buddhist customs and beliefs like Buddha ordered his adherents not to bury any dead body but to leave in flowing water of river. So they do not burn the bodies. He noted that the Indians regarded Buddha as a prophet not God. He tried to explain Buddhism within the Muslim restrictions like at places when he tries to make us understand some Hinduism’s themes he explains it by quoting the same

⁸ Al-Berūnī , abu Raihan Ahmad ibn Muhammad, *al-Asār al-Bāqiyah ‘an al-Qurūn al-Khāliyah* (Germany: Leiden Press, 1897), p.206.

⁹ Al-Berūnī , *Tehqī q Mā li al-Hind Min Maqūlah Maqbūlah fil Aql aū Marzūlah* (Haidarabad Dakkan; Majlis *Dāirat al-Ma’arif al-Usmāniyyah*, 1958), p. 244.

aspect from Buddhism. After few pages he writes, “although Hindus consider Shamniyyah as their worst enemy but relatively they are close to Hindus as compared to other non-Hindu nations. In ancient Khurasān, Persia, Erāq, Musal and Syrian boundaries there were Buddha’s followers until the Zoroaster appeared from Azarbaijan who preached Majūsi faith by the help of king Gashtāshp and Buddhism disappeared.”¹⁰

6) Kitāb al-Milal wa al-Nihal (12th century)

Al-Shahrastānī (d.1153CE) repeated al-Berūnī’s account of Buddhism in his works. It is really only with al-Shahrastānī (d.1153CE) that we first get precise and accurate descriptions of the Indian traditions concerning the Buddha (al-Budd). His account of Buddhism is indeed remarkable for its accuracy.

Shahrastānī has called Budhhism as al-Samniyyah and chosen this name for them is an evidence of that his information about them exceeded the information of his peers and scholars of other religions. He says: "The meaning of ‘Budhh’ is a person in this world; He is not born, does not give up, does not feed, does not drink, neither does he give birth nor dies. The first "Budhh" appeared in the world called "Shakmin" (Shakyamuni) means noble, and his time was five hundred years before Hijrah (the Holy Prophets Immigration to Madinah). They say, without the rank of the "Budhh", "the Budhhisia" that means the student of right path. But no one can reach up to that rank without patience and avoiding ten sins and the completing ten Qualities.”¹¹ As

¹⁰ Ibid, pp. 15-35.

¹¹ Al-Shahrastānī ,Muhammad Abdul Karī m, *Kitāb al-fasl Fi al-Milal wa al-ahwa wa al-Nihal*, English translation by Ibn 'Abdur Rashid (London: 2009), p.260.

Here, we observe a very precise description, taking into consideration the prevailing norms in the time of al-Shahrastānī. It is also noted that Shahrastānī did not mention anything about the theoretical and spiritual portions of Buddhism like ‘theory of knowledge’ ‘*Nirvāna*’...etc. even he did not deny Buddha’s status of Prophecy. It seems that there is no judgmental statement about any section of that tradition. This careful and academic style of discussing non-Islamic faiths and traditions was prevailing among Muslim scholarships of that time.

7)Jāmi’ al-Tawārīkh (13th century)

Rāshid al-Dīn (d.1318CE) wrote “*Jāmi’ al-Tawārīkh*” with the help of a Kashmīrī Brahman. In its second volume, under the History of India he wrote the Life and teachings of Buddha. Like the previous works by al-Kermānī and al-Berūnī, Rāshid al-Dīn explained Buddhism with the help of Muslim terminologies. He listed Buddha as one of the six religious founders accepted as prophets by the Indians: three theistic – Shiva, Vishnu, and Brahma – and three non-theistic – Arhantā for Jainism, Nāstika for the Charvāka system, and Shakyamuni for Buddhism.¹²

8)Buddhists Description about Muslims;

At the end of the 12th century with the Islamic occupation on *Nālanda*, the central Buddhist seat of learning in North India, Mahmud Ghaznavid's regular attacks down from the *Hindukush* brought dismissal of Buddhist centers at Kabul and other centers.¹³We should be careful here, as T.Ling has argued that such Muslim actions were not in themselves the cause

¹² Ṭabīb Hamadānī,,Rāshid al-Dīn Faḏl-Allāh, *Jāmi’ al-Tawārīkh* (Tehran; 1977), vol.2, p. 243.

¹³ Alexander Berzin, *Buddhist-Muslim Doctrinal Relations: Past, Present, and Future*, p. 4.

for Buddhism's disappearance from India, instead arguing that Buddhism was already declining before. Islam dealt a final blow.¹⁴

Buddhist texts themselves show awareness and worry about the advancing Islamic armies. One very clear example of increasing worry is the Tibetan Texts- "*Kālāchakrā Tantrā*," which talks about the man from Baghdād, 'Madhumati' who would be a false deceiver, causing destruction on the Buddhist world.¹⁵ As a reaction, "*The Kālāchakrā Tantrā*," reveals both external and internal levels of battle that could easily be called *Holy Wars*.¹⁶ Another example is texts from *Khotān*, which talk about the future decline of Buddhist treasures from advancing Persian armies, i.e. Islam.¹⁷

9)The Kālāchakrā Literature (10th century)

It is a Sanskrit term used in *Tantric Buddhism* that means "time-wheel" or "time-cycles". *The Kālāchakrā* tradition revolves around the concept of time (*kāla*) and cycles (*chakra*): from the cycles of the planets, to

¹⁴ T. Ling, *Buddhist revival in India. Aspects of the Sociology of religion* (London: 1980), p. 150.

¹⁵ H. Hoffman, "Kalacakra Studies. Manichaeism, Islam, and Christianity in the Kalacakra Tantra", *Central Asiatic Journal*, no. 13, 1969, pp. 52-73.

¹⁶ Berzin, *Holy Wars in Buddhism and Islam: The Myth of Shambhala* (November, 2001)

Retrieved on April 25, 2010 from http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/advanced/kalachakra/relation_islam_hinduism/holy_wars_buddhism_islam/holy_war_buddhism_islam_shambhala_long.html

¹⁷ F. Thomas, "Buddhism in Khotan: its decline according to two Tibetan accounts", *Sir Asutosh Mookerjee Silver Jubilee Volume*, vol. 3, part 3 (Calcutta: India, 1927), pp. 30-52.

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the cycles of human breathing. *The Kālāchakra Tantra* is divided into five chapters.¹⁸

The Kālāchakra description of the invader's religion indicates only a partial understanding of the Islamic sects of that time. It included the Islamic rituals of praying five times a day, worshiping one god, following the *Halāl* method of slaughtering animals, *Ramadān* Fast (eating only after sunset) and *Tahārat*, keeping general cleanliness. Other details are merely attempts to explain Islamic beliefs in terms understandable to Buddhists and Hindus, such as describing The Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) as an incarnation of al-Rahmān Almighty, much like Krishnā being an incarnation (*Avatār*) of Vishnu. *The Kālāchakra* literature also highlights points shared in common between Buddhism and Islam – namely, the atomic nature of matter and souls.¹⁹

Berzon also provided an overview of the Buddhist's literature that shows how the Buddhists advised Hindus to refurbish and secure their spiritual, ethical and political values as well as the solution for social drawbacks;

“The portions of the *Kālāchakra Tantra* that dealt with the external world advised the Hindus to reaffirm their own spiritual values and join together in one caste with the Buddhists and the rest of the population, so as not to be absorbed by the Muslim invaders' religion because of disunity.” It

¹⁸ Geshe Lhundub Sopa, *The Wheel of Time, the Kālāchakra in context* (Snow Lion publications; 1985) retrieved on April, 2010 from http://kalachakranet.org/resources_books_index.html

¹⁹ Raghu Vira and Lokesh Chandra (ed.) *Kalacakra Tantra and Other Texts* (New Delhi: 1966) p. 237.

also honors the equality of all men in “one caste” without asserting the Brahmans as a purer caste.” After that Berzon presents the concluding opinion being an authority in Buddhist-Muslim mutual matters,

“According to the opinion of Buddhism’s scholars, aside from *Kālāchakra Tantara*, further Buddhist interest in Islam was nil.”²⁰

10)A precise analysis of the emphasized themes;

Following are the main topics and areas narrated by both the traditions related to faith, creeds, rituals etc. we are presenting a sharp analysis of themes from both traditions.

1. In Muslim writings, Mainly the literature is confined to the basic rituals of Buddhism like worshipping idols, orders about dead bodies...etc.
2. Very few philosophical concepts have been described like *Karma*, *Cognition*, and *Bodhisattva*...etc.
3. Only the mainstream Buddhism was discussed avoiding the different Buddhist denominations like Mahayana and Hinayana tradition.
4. No distorted information or negative picture has been portrayed in classical Muslim literature.
5. On the other hand, the only written work was *Kālāchakra* that indicates a partial understanding of the Islamic sects of the time.
6. It also highlights points shared in common– namely, the atomic nature of matter and souls.
7. Some explanations of few religious themes were posed in Muslim terms to make it understandable as the Covered Statue of Buddha is just like Ka’ba.

²⁰ *Buddhist-Muslim Doctrinal Relations: Past, Present, and Future*, p.3.

8. *Kālāchakra* also asked Hindus for a political alliance to deal with the external invaders like Muslims.

The quantity and quality of information from both sides elaborates the standard of focused issues and the psyche of the nations of that time. The Muslim literature is relatively positive and broad. On Muslims' part, it can be said that a reasonable effort existed at times to step forward to know others in form of literature for better mutual understanding.

11) Recommendations

Although some western authors are intended to seek some theological grounds for dialogue with Buddhists and find commonalities to some extent like wearing *Ihrām* in *Hajj* pilgrimage is same as wearing Monk's clothing in Buddhism, performing *Hajj* is like visiting *Bodh Gayā* once in life according to maximum traditions of Buddhism, paying *Zakāt* is like giving charity to the needy and some other rituals are also similar to Islam like Meditation.

- I. While the Muslim viewpoint disagrees with that and there is no such kind of similarity or common ground for theological dialogue. The very basic reason is that all Islamic rituals and practices are connected to Almighty Allah while the Buddhists don't have this highest concept of God at all. Instead they believe in achieving the highest psychological destination- *Nirvāna*.
- II. They do have very strong tradition of Meditation but again they don't have its association with God- any omnipotent God. On the other hand, Buddha is not an Omnipotent God. Not only this but they even intend to mix with any spiritual being because they in the absence of soul. All ritualistic practices end up with the matters of psychology.
- III. Although Islam focuses too the dismissal and detachment from worldly desires and asks its adherents to avoid attachments but it is

again very different qualitatively. Having such theological gap is there any possibility of theological dialogue? simply the answer may be No.

- IV. And the other field of interaction may be the historical one. When we seriously ponder upon this aspect it seems useless to rethink or redefine the history that has not such long mutual interaction which can be considered enough to find out reasonable footing and strong ground to work for future peaceful society.
- V. Relatively the better ground may be the ethical and social ones. Both traditions need to identify a common doctrinal ground for tackling the common threads; like working for human empowerment, make charities for human welfare, efforts against drug abuse, threads of terrorism, armed conflicts, global warming, science not for human destruction, environmental degradation etc. These are also the focus in livelihood of *Eight Fold path*. Only this can be a better ground for dialogue. Through peaceful cooperation and mutual understanding, solution to these problems perhaps be found.

Concluding remarks

Historically, Muslims and Buddhists had co-existed in many communities peacefully for many centuries. Even in southern Thailand and Burma, it was not a problem, only until recently. What is happening there is more of political and ethnic reasons than religious.²¹ So the religious dimensions need to be highlighted because both believe in prohibition of

²¹ Hoon Peow , “Buddhism and Islam - Comparison and Dialogue” *Malaysian Journal On Human Rights, The Human Rights Commission of Malaysia*, No. 4, July 2008 (Centre For Malaysian Chinese Studies: Kuala Lumpur Malaysia)

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harm to the humanity even to any living being. *Ahimsa* teachings should be revisit again. When the clash's reason is only political and ethnic then why not leaving them aside and shifting to the harmonious teachings of religion.

Traditionally Buddhist scholars have not shown any interest in the teachings of Islam for the reason that the Buddhists saw no need for any future interaction. Not same but nearly situation is with Hindu-Muslim interaction. Despite having a long relation over centuries the both did not have any remarkable work except little writings and that is precisely concluded in the above section. Even then, this precise picture can provide an intellectual base for contemporary Buddhist-Muslim dialogical efforts in the sense to focus just ourselves with the intention of self-reformation, self-accountability, self enhancement, leaving aside others' affairs.



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