

Islam and the Buddha

Shah-Kazemi's *Common Ground Between Islam and Buddhism* having arrived, I lost no time in dipping into it with the help of friends.¹ In particular I looked into the section on Qur'ānic premises of dialogue between Islam and Buddhism. Before following this up, however, I want to recount two memories that came to me after I had written my article 'Buddhism and Islam'. These related not to Islam but to the Prophet Muhammad. As readers of *The Rainbow Road* will be aware, from the age of eight I was well acquainted with the pages of the multi-part *Children's Encyclopaedia*. In one issue there were pictures of the founders of the various world religions. One of these showed Muhammad. He was depicted wearing a turban and with a sword in his hand. The other memory was of a picture postcard that represented Muhammad in a very different way. He wears a green coat and a turban and is sitting astride Buraq, the mule with the head and face of a woman, and I particularly remember her expression of extreme intelligence. She is guided through the air by the archangel Gabriel, and angelic figures holding censers and other objects hover around the Prophet. Years later I learned that this representation of Muhammad depicted his famous 'Night Journey' from Mecca to Jerusalem and back.

With the help of quotations from the Qur'ān Shah-Kazemi establishes that like the Jews and the Christians the Buddhists have a Book (*Kitāb*) in the form of the Buddhist scriptures, as well as a messenger in the form of the Buddha. He therefore believes that it should be possible to say that the Buddha was a Messenger, inspired by God with a message that was destined to become the basis of a global religious community. Though not specifically mentioned by name in the Islamic revelation, like Noah, Abraham, and Ishmael, the Buddha was nonetheless a prophet in the Islamic sense. This argument is strengthened, he believes, in view of the fact that ten percent of the world is Buddhist and that according to the Qur'ān a messenger has been sent to every community. Moreover, the messenger will speak the language of that community.

Sixty or more years ago, I published an article with the title 'Religion as Revelation and Discovery'.² In this article I described both religion as revelation and religion as discovery in what I called their 'chemically pure' state. Christianity and Islam were examples of religion as revelation whereas Buddhism was an example of religion as discovery. At the conclusion of the article I attempted to mitigate the absoluteness of the difference between the two forms of religion by declaring that in the case of the Buddha, religion as discovery ultimately contained religion as revelation. By this I meant that the Buddha having discovered the truth proceeded to reveal it to humanity. Shah-Kazemi sees things differently. He believes that the Buddha, like Muhammad, was the recipient of a revelation from on high and he therefore does not see the Buddha as discovering the truth at a deeper level of his own being. Indeed, he sees the fact that the Buddha is called the Tathāgata as supporting his position. According to Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, whom he quotes, Tathāgata means,

“thus come” (*tathā āgata*) and “thus gone” (*tathā gata*), that is, the one who *comes* into our midst bearing the message of deathlessness to which he has *gone* by his own practice of the path.

Thus Shah-Kazemi sees the Buddha as being like Muhammad, a messenger from God, and his message as being a true religion or *dīn*.

¹ Reza Shah-Kazemi, *Common Ground Between Islam and Buddhism*, Fons Vitae, Louisville 2010

² 'Religion as Revelation and Discovery' in *Crossing the Stream*, second edition, Windhorse Publications, Birmingham 1996. Also at: https://www.sangharakshita.org/_books/crossing-the-stream.pdf

Besides seeing the Buddha as a prophet like Muhammad, Shah-Kazemi also sees him as both messenger (*rasūl*) and saint (*walī*). As he explains,

the Buddha's enlightenment comprises two aspects, one of which was proper to him alone, the other which is universally accessible. The first aspect can indeed be regarded as the source of his 'prophecy', to use Islamic terms, the 'message' or *sāsana* which formed the basis of the Buddhist tradition; in this respect, no other sage or 'prophet' is conceivable in the Buddhist tradition, and none can attain to his status, as regards what in Islam would be called his *risāla*, his message.

Like other books of an ecumenical nature, *Common Ground Between Islam and Buddhism*, contains a foreword by the Dalai Lama. 'This is an important and pioneering book, which seeks to find common ground between the teachings of Islam and of Buddhism', the Tibetan leader writes. 'It is my hope that on the basis of this common ground, followers of each tradition may come to appreciate the spiritual truths their different paths entail and from this develop a basis for respect for each others' practice and beliefs.'

As Shah-Kazemi looks for common ground between Islam and Buddhism, the government and army of Buddhist Myanmar continue to persecute the Rohingya Islamic minority. 'Last week I returned from refugee camps in Bangladesh,' writes Hozan Alan Senauke in the May-August *Seeds of Peace*, 'where 700,000 people have fled Myanmar – a country where Buddhism is the state religion – crossing into precarious exile in southern Bangladesh.' He continues:

The Rohingyas are a Muslim ethnic minority who have lived in Myanmar's western Rakhine state for many generations. The roots of this conflict are complex and arguable. But the sheer scale of Rohingya suffering goes beyond all argument and justification.

What I saw of the camps was a seemingly endless, sprawling, dusty tangle of tents fashioned from bamboo strips and plastic sheets. There are open sewers running in thick streams beside the dirt pathways. The refugees, among them huge numbers of children, are everywhere.

I heard stories of their villages burning just miles away in Myanmar. I was told of unimaginable violence, of mass rape and murder, of soldiers throwing babies into the flames. Satellite imagery shows the devastation of villages in Myanmar, but nothing can convey the realities of frightened and broken people, bereft of families, land and livelihood. The Rohingya people I met speak of this as the 'Buddhist terror,' an unholy alliance of the Myanmar army, monks and Rakhine Buddhists.

The terrible irony is that a decade ago, the world's Buddhists witnessed Myanmar's 'Saffron Revolution.' Monks and nuns courageously faced down the military's guns and bayonets, chanting the Metta Sutta, the Buddha's ancient verse of lovingkindness, which includes this verse: '...as a mother at the risk of her life watches over and protects her only child, so with a boundless mind should one cherish all living things, suffusing love over the entire world...'

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