

Buddhism and Islam

‘As a Buddhist, I am utterly opposed to the encouragement of violence and discrimination against Muslims in Burma and elsewhere in the name of Buddhism.’ Such was the opening sentence of a statement which, in my personal capacity, I signed on 19 September 2017. The statement went on to declare that there could be no Buddhist justification for such violence. ‘To engage in or incite violence motivated by hatred and prejudice goes against the teachings of the Buddha and is a fundamental breach of Buddhist ethical principles, including Buddhist monastic vows.’

What had particularly shocked me was the fact that Buddhist monks had encouraged the violence and even taken part in it themselves. They had, of course, their apologists some of whom had created a history according to which Islam, having been responsible for the disappearance of Buddhism from India, was now threatening the Buddhist countries of South-East Asia.

My awareness of the existence of Islam went back to my early years. Madame Blavatsky’s *Isis Unveiled* having opened my eyes to the existence of religions other than Christianity, I set myself to investigate as many of them as I could; and Islam, one of the world’s major religions, naturally attracted my attention. As my custom was, I went straight to the source, reading three different translations of the Koran (Sale’s, Rodwell’s and Palmer’s). The reading left me with a rather confused impression. Islam was clearly monotheistic but it was also preoccupied with such subjects as divorce, which of was no interest to me. Yet it also contained short, poetic passages of extreme beauty which appealed to me. Later on I came across the works of Hafiz, Attar, and Rumi, much of whose poetry was saturated with Sufism and therefore with Islam. When I was eighteen the army took me to India where I saw some of the great monuments of Islamic architecture in Delhi, Agra, and Lucknow. This contact with the cultural side of Islam continued many years later when, with a friend, I visited Córdoba, Granada, and Seville.

It was at about this time that I came across the writings of Henry Corbin, beginning with *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, and going on to *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi*, and *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*. These works made a deep impression on me, revealing as they did that there was a philosophical and mystical side to Islam of which the Western world was largely ignorant. In 1982 I therefore led a seminar on Al-Ghazali’s *The Duties of Brotherhood in Islam*, a translation of which was readily available. We soon discovered similarities between the Buddhist ideal of spiritual friendship and Islam’s ideal of brotherhood. We also learned that according to Al-Ghazali there were three degrees of brotherhood. The first being when you gave your friend whatever you could, the second when you shared with him equally, and the third when you were delighted when he took something of yours without even asking. For Islam, as for Buddhism, friendship was part of the spiritual life. Twenty years later, however, the Western world was destined to see another side of Islam. The Jihadists were seen beheading their captives on video and on 11 September 2001 there came the unexpected and horrific attack on the Twin Towers in New York. I had seen those towers from Central Park and a day or two after the attack I wrote these lines:

Proudly they stood, those towers, twin monuments
To money, and the power that money brings.
But hate proved stronger. Now they lie in dust,
And impotent hands a mighty nation wrings.

Like millions of other people I felt deeply for the nearly three thousand who had lost their lives in the attack and images of men and women throwing themselves from upper storey windows have haunted me ever since. I also realized that what came to be called simply ‘9/11’ would affect the attitude of the Western world towards Islam for years to come.

A few days ago a friend drew my attention to a book that presaged a more hopeful relation between Buddhism and Islam than what at present exists in Burma and Thailand. The book was *Common Ground between Islam and Buddhism* by Reza Shah-Kazemi, a specialist in comparative mysticism, Islamic Studies, Sufism, and Shi'ism. According to the publishers, 'this ground breaking book explores the scriptural and spiritual tenets of Islam and Buddhism in relation to one another, creating a basis for comparison and analysis of the two traditions.' It 'discusses metaphysical traditions and philosophical studies born of Islam and Buddhism, places them in context with each other, thus encouraging understanding, and providing a point of reference for continued learning and cooperation.' I have not read the book, but I have ordered a copy, and look forward to getting a friend to read me extracts from it.

In the UK we have 2.7 million Muslims, the vast majority of whom live at peace with their non-Muslim fellow-citizens. There are Muslims in almost every walk of life and it is difficult for us to avoid contact with them, even if we had wanted to do so; and the more that contact is informed by a knowledge of Islam and its culture the better it will be for us all.

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