Journal of Religion and Decoloniality
e-ISSN: 3110-1305
Vol. 1, No. 1, 2025. 75-78
https://e-journal.elkuator.com/index.php/jrd

Book Review

***Common Ground Between Islam and Buddhism* (Reza Shah-Kazemi.). Louisville, Kentucky: Fons Vitae, 2010. ISBN: 3021210172**

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At its core, this book offers crucial insights on the similarities between Islam and Buddhism at the transcendental level. The captivating text explores ideas around several relevant and significant themes that fall within three chapters: *Setting the Scene*, *Oneness: The Highest Common Denominator*, and *Ethics of Detachment and Compassion*. Shah-Kazemi expertly weaves through the intricacies of comparing the two distinct faith systems. The assessment is thorough and opens the possibility of looking at both traditions in a different light – the view which expresses a perennial truth that human beings are both simultaneously embedded and transcendent, with the immense potential for spiritual growth. The London-based academic points out that the objective of his work is to be as inclusive as possible, both as regards to 'the other' and to the Muslim perspective. Its implication is that the text is not just to reach out to Buddhists as an invitation to consider the Islamic tradition, but to also explain central concepts within Buddhism which might not be too familiar to Muslims.

There is one crucial caveat. It is argued that the similarities between the two traditions do not lie on the level of formal doctrine (the exoteric) but pertain to resemblances within the esoteric dimension.[1] The book contains a foreword by H.H. the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, an introduction by H.R.H Prince Ghazi B. Muhammad, and a preface by the Malaysian-based scholar Professor Hashim Kamali. There is also an essay by the founder of Zaytuna College, Shaykh Hamza Yusuf titled '*Buddha in the Qur'ān?*' towards the end of the publication. Shah-Kazemi begins his analysis by asserting that there are differences between Islam and Buddhism that cannot be reconciled, with the most obvious being theological discrepancies – given that there is no conception of God or a Necessary Being within Buddhist tradition. He also states:

[1] My reading is that there is a clear, definite difference in the way of worship or *'ibādāt* (in Islamic parlance; ritual/spiritual acts) but not so much in the *mu'āmalāt* (social/private acts) between the two traditions. The *'ibādāt* aspect is directed towards an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent Creator.

> "*The affinities to which we draw attention here are not, however, intended to obscure the differences; on the contrary, we start from the premise that these differences should unabashedly asserted as expressions of the uniqueness of each religion, and not tacitly denied in the quest for spiritual commonalities.*" (Shah-Kazemi, 2010:1).

From here, any criticism that might arise pertaining to the claim that Islam and Buddhism are the same in every aspect *is negated right from the start*. This is indeed a smart and necessary move as it allows for an appreciation of difference, while narrowing the focus on ethical considerations stemming from a sense of responsibility towards other finite beings. From an Islamic point of view, a Muslim might ask whether there is justification in attempting to go beyond, or to bracket out, formal theology in the effort to come to terms with spiritual affinities between the two faiths. To placate such concerns, the author calls for a reading of the great renewer (*mujaddid*) of his age, **Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī** (d.1111) who mentions in *al-Munqidh min al-dalāl* (Deliverance from Error) that it is the mystic who walks on the road of God without much pretence and is not hindered by specific 'veils' which might exist in the form of dogmatic theology. The mystic differs from the theologian in his approach to become a knower of God (*arifbillāh*). Parallels can be drawn to Buddhist monks who engage in meditative practices to subdue the mind from fleeting thoughts, thus recognising the value of silence and closing the door on needless chatter.

In the chapter highlighting Oneness as the highest common denominator between Islam and Buddhism, we see an unravelling of concepts such as the Absolute, the ultimate Reality, and the 'uncompounded', among others. The author discusses parallels drawn between the chapter (Sura) of Sincerity (*Al-Ikhlas*; Qur'ān 112:1-4) and the verses from the Udāna (80-81) which navigates the rough waters of being compounded beings. By the very fact that human beings are time-bound, s/he is aware of its passing, thus acknowledging the transitory nature of this existence. We are reminded of the ancient Greek philosopher; Heraclitus, who mentioned *that one cannot step into the same river twice*. The transitory nature of existence, as it were, creates room for an expression of the relative. However, the central lesson that the Buddha seeks to dispense is that we must *escape the painful illusions of the relative*, and to directly seek refuge in (the) pristine Truth. Therefore, there is minimal concern with describing the various attributes of the Absolute (as is often expressed within Islamic thought) (Shah-Kazemi, 2010: 32). This is a key difference between the two traditions.

In the proceeding chapters, we observe the significance of living a life of kindness, which is grounded with a clear comprehension of the Self. Even on the human plane, compassion is not merely a sentiment, *but an existential quality*. An understanding of the human predisposition, the *fitra,* enables us to see that human beings have a latent possibility to dispense mercy by reflecting one of God's names; *Ar-Rahmān* (the Most Merciful). For one to express mercy, s/he must rise from being constrained by the coagulations of egotism and worldliness; an awareness that our time on earth is limited, and that there is no point on holding on to emotions – especially negative ones like envy and/or hatred. Each moment in an encounter cannot be repeated and ought to be treasured for the value it delivers. On the importance of detachment from the world, the author makes comparisons between two concepts, with the first being *samsara* within the Buddhist framework, and the second being the notion of *al-hayāt al-dunyā* found in Islamic belief. Human suffering tends to happen when

there is too much attachment to the world. This attachment need not necessarily be towards wealth, but to one's own *conception of effort* and its attendant consequences (touching on cause and effect).

Although not mentioned in the book, one ought to keep in mind that both Islam and Buddhism are dominant belief systems in the Southeast Asian region. In fact, Indonesia is the most populous Muslim nation in the world, while the top three countries with the largest percentage of Buddhists in their population are all located in the aforesaid area – Thailand (93%), Cambodia (90%), and Myanmar (88%) (Nalanda, 2017). There is another similarity in these countries and its people. It is the fact that colonialism had impacted (and continues to impact) how the colonised view reality. This method of viewing reality is often ensnared within the ambit of productivity – of approaching flora and fauna as resources to be exploited for pure gain. This approach is antithetical to both Islam and Buddhism, and is an imposition by those who do not appreciate the interconnectedness between living beings. The colonialists came in varied forms to different parts of the globe, with the British dominating the Indian subcontinent all the way to then Burma as well as Malaya, and the Dutch seizing control in neighbouring Indonesia. Although the garb of control was different, the line of thinking was the same – land is to be exploited, and the local population to be repressed. More striking was the way epistemic violence became commonplace whereby local knowledge was rendered an after-thought. The Eurocentric perspective displaced such knowledge, causing fissures within the locals who began to lose their symbiosis with the environment. One can make an argument that the *Eurocentric frame of thinking was one of scarcity, often fearing the worst in any given situation*. This fear manifests in thinking ill of others, which inevitably leads to physical violence on those deemed to be different. Unfortunately, such thinking has seeped into how governments operate today.

In recent history, Muslim-Buddhist relations have been dominated by impressions of animosity (See Anna Akasoy, 2002). Recent scholarship highlights the precarious tensions that exist between Buddhist and Muslim communities, with the case of the Rohingya in Myanmar one such example (See Ronan Lee, 2021). These tensions often revolve the inability for proper dialogue to take place between groups, thus fuelling more hate to come forth due to (assumed) irreconcilable differences. Perhaps, if there is acknowledgement of a shared moral ethos between the two traditions, such violence will cease.[2] With this in mind, the message of *Common Ground Between Islam & Buddhism* rings true today even though it was written over ten years ago. In a world fraught with challenges of consumerism and heightened individualism, there is an unrelenting need to emphasise the value of detachment, and the importance of kindness – ideals common to both traditions. Shah-Kazemi deserves praise for his clear writing, and the way in which he integrates complex ideas into a unitive whole, persuasively defending the central thesis that there are commonalities between Islam and Buddhism at the level of the Spirit. The celebration of pluriversality; a recognition of the existence of diverse ways of knowing and being, is much needed and counters the colonial narrative of yesteryears. Indeed, our time on this earth is limited, and it is with a true

[2] One must keep in mind how the politicisation of religion, pertaining to control of land and resources (often imbued with capitalist and consumerist undertones), has caused much discord between communities.

perception of its passing that we become more compassionate beings to others, and ultimately to ourselves.

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