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Islam and Buddhism: Preserving Harmonious Relations

By Mohammad Alami Musa

Synopsis

The creeping Muslim-Buddhist tension and the recent alliance forged among hard-line Buddhist nationalist movements in the “saffron crescent” countries of South and South-east Asia will undermine inter-religious relations in the world today. Islam and Buddhism have always co-existed throughout history and enjoyed a special relationship.

Commentary

PEOPLE OF religion have few reasons to rejoice as the new year begins. According to the Institute for Economics and Peace, global peace as measured by the Global Peace Index has been deteriorating over the last seven years in 111 countries and improving only in 51.

One primary cause is the increase in the scale of terrorist activities, especially by terrorist groups like Boko Haram, Al Qaeda and now ISIS which committed crimes against humanity, erroneously in the name of Islam. An earlier report by Pew Research Centre showed that social hostilities involving religion had increased and that a majority of them involved Muslims and Christians.

Widening religion-based conflict

This dismal state of inter-religious relations has not shown any sign of improvement. On the contrary, it is worsening as religion-based conflicts are expanding beyond Muslim-Christian ones. Tension between Buddhists and Muslims in the “saffron crescent” countries of South and South-east Asia, specifically in Myanmar and Sri Lanka, has taken a turn for the worse.

This has motivated hard-line Buddhist movements to form a united front to challenge what they saw as increased fundamentalism amongst the Muslim populations. The recent alliance forged by the 969 movement from Myanmar and the Bodu Bala Sena group in Sri Lanka may only worsen the appalling state of inter-religious relations in the world today.

Does such an alliance together with the long-standing problem in Southern Thailand and the recent spill-over effect in the form of revenge killings of Myanmar’s Buddhists in Malaysia signal the start of a wider conflict between Buddhists and Muslims in this part of the world?

The 969 movement led by the combative monk, Ashin Wirathu, is regarded as a Buddhist nationalist movement to prevent the erosion of political supremacy of Buddhism in Myanmar, a perceived threat posed by an enlarging Rohingya Muslim population and the latter's assertiveness of religious identity. The Bodu Bala Sena, a hard line Buddhist group in Sri Lanka, has similar objectives with regard to containing the influence and rapid conversion rate of the Sinhala people to Islam. The peace that Sri Lanka had enjoyed since the end of ethnic conflict in the Jaffna peninsula was recently marred by ugly Buddhist-Muslim clashes that resulted in deaths.

Historical co-existence between Islam and Buddhism

This emerging South Asian/Southeast Asian alliance of hard-line Buddhist movements and the enlarging Buddhist-Muslim conflict do not augur well for social peace in this part of the world that has been generally known for harmonious living amidst religious diversity. The disturbing trend of rising Buddhist-Muslim tensions should be carefully watched because both are world religions having a 35 percent share of global population. The faithful from both sides need to be reminded that Islam and Buddhism had long co-existed with respect and understanding.

Islam and Buddhism had a long history of peaceful interactions that stretched for more than a thousand years, quite soon after the coming of Islam in the seventh century. Buddhists and Muslims co-existed and they did not feel threatened by each other's existence. On the contrary, they were involved in mercantile interactions.

Muslim scholars even engaged Buddhist scholars in debates on religious issues. They were also invited to Baghdad which was the centre of Muslim learning in the early Islamic era. Special recognition was also given by early Muslims to Buddhism akin to that accorded to the Abrahamic religions of Christianity and Judaism. The decision to give this special recognition to Buddhism was made in AD 710 when Muslims had just conquered the city of Brahmanabad in the province of Sind in India. Buddhists who formed the majority of the population petitioned the leader of the Muslim army, General Mohamed Qasim, to allow them to continue to practice Buddhism and to preserve their temples.

Raising the relationship

This was a question that needed a religious ruling (*fatwa*). Following a landmark religious ruling to accord special recognition to Buddhism akin to the special status of the Abrahamic religions, Buddhists in the Muslim empire were permitted to follow their own religion and their temples were to be protected just like churches and synagogues.

Buddhism and Islam continued to have a special relationship. For example, a Persian translation of a Buddhist text, discovered in the fourteenth century, showed Muslim interest in Buddhism. Buddhist interest in Islam was evident in the existence of early Buddhist literature that touched on Islamic matters like the halal method of animal slaughter.

Nevertheless, there had been historically little dialogue between Buddhism and Islam. It was an unfortunate tragedy that changed this. The Taliban's destruction of Buddha's images at Bamyán in Afghanistan in 2001 was not only denounced by Buddhists world-wide. A series of Buddhist-Muslim dialogues was organised, one of which was held publicly in 2004 to coincide with the meeting of the World Parliament of Religions.

On the part of Muslims, a noteworthy project is the "Common Ground between Islam and Buddhism" initiated by the Royal Al-Bayt Foundation for Islamic Thought in Jordan. It endeavours to show that both religions share many similar perspectives of key religious precepts.

Buddhist-Muslim relations in Singapore

Buddhists and Muslims in Singapore are leading the way in this part of the world to bridge understanding. They do this at three levels: the practical *dialogue of service* (for example, Buddhist donation of rice to mosques and Muslim distribution of free food to Buddhist residents of Old Age Homes); *diplomatic dialogue* (Muslim and Buddhist leaders publicly supporting social events

organised by their respective congregations); and scriptural dialogue (Buddhist and Muslim scholars are engaged in intellectual discussions on themes of common interest, using their respective sacred texts).

Buddhists and Muslims must never allow contemporary conflicts that involve identity and citizenship to be misused as religious issues to hype up feelings of hatred. They must be reminded of the special historical relationship between the two religions and that Buddhism had made important contributions to the development of culture and civilisation of the Malay-Muslim world.

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