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THE CONTRIBUTION OF MUSLIM-BUDDHIST RELATION ON ISLAMIC CIVILIZATION

Sumbangan Hubungan Muslim-Buddha terhadap Peradaban Islam

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Abstract

Islamic civilization is made up of various civilizations, particularly in the Central Asian region where Buddhist and Islamic scholars from the Middle East are emerging. As a result of the interactions and relationships in the areas of science, literature, medicine and the architecture, Islamic civilization reached its peak in that era, particularly during the Abbasid period (750-1258 AD). Thus, this article discusses in detail what type of the Muslim-Buddhist relationship is, and how it contributes to Islamic civilization. The study method is qualitative by emphasizing content analysis as well as adopting a historical approach. Studies have found the intellectual activity of Muslim-Buddhist dialogue to be one of the contributing factors to the excellence of Islamic civilization, especially in the Abbasid times. Studies suggests on the exchange of knowledge and religious heritage to develop mutual understanding and tolerance among both the religious followers.

Keywords: Islamic civilization, Abbasid, Muslim-Buddhist dialogue, civilizational dialogue, interfaith relation

Abstrak

Peradaban Islam terbina daripada pelbagai tamadun, khususnya di rantau Asia Tengah yang munculnya para ilmuwan agama Buddha dan ilmuwan Islam daripada Timur Tengah. Hasil interaksi serta hubungan para ilmuwan dalam aspek ilmu pengetahuan, kesusasteraan, perubatan dan seni pembinaan, peradaban Islam mencapai tahap kegemilangannya pada era tersebut, khusus pada zaman Abbasiyyah (750-1258 M). Justeru, artikel ini membincangkan secara tuntas apakah bentuk hubungan Muslim-Buddha, dan bagaimanakah ia menyumbang kepada peradaban Islam. Metode kajian bersifat kualitatif dengan menekankan kepada analisis kandungan di samping menggunakan pendekatan persejarahan. Kajian mendapati aktiviti intelektualisme dialog Muslim-Buddha menjadi salah satu faktor yang menyumbang kepada kegemilangan peradaban Islam. Kajian mengesyorkan kepada pertukaran ilmu pengetahuan dan warisan agama untuk membina persefahaman dan toleransi kalangan kedua-dua penganut agama.

Kata kunci: Peradaban Islam, Abbasiyyah, dialog Muslim-Buddha, dialog antara agama, sejarah dialog islam.

INTRODUCTION

The clashes of Muslim-Buddhist are gaining world attention, referring to the oppression against Muslim minorities in South Thailand by the Buddhist government (I. Yusuf, 2007), Muslim-Buddhist clashes in Sri Lanka (Stewart, 2014), and Buddhist nationalist campaign against Rohingya Muslim minorities in Myanmar (Kipgen, 2014; Lehr, 2019; Parnini, 2013; Prasse-Freeman, 2017; Rahman, 2015). Undoubtedly, the Muslim-Buddhist clash is rooted in the spirit of extreme nationalism and racism. In addition, Gravers (2015) and Stewart (2014) suggest the motivation could be prejudice against Muslims deemed capable of competing for religious, cultural, economic, national and government influence. In addition, (I. Yusuf, 2018) indicates that Buddhist religious animosity of Muslims is also due to their belief that Muslims once plundered Buddhist lands, particular the Nalanda events (Kumar, 2011; Scharfe, 2002). As such, the Muslim community is perceived as a threat to the survival of the religion, culture, and economy of the nation and a threat to the Buddhist kingdom (Crouch, 2016; Gravers, 2015; Stewart, 2014; van Klinken & Aung, 2017). Often such sentiments are prejudice and debatable, I. Yusuf (2018) raise up the focus should refer on history of good relations of Muslim-Buddhist. To recent day, the propagation of certain sentiment influences among group of Buddhists and led them into prejudiced against Muslim community, in directly proved the element of Islamophobic (Sharma, Ghafoor, & Gogineni, 2019). This phenomenon, indeed against with the principle of peace, tolerance, and compassion (Iqbal et al. 2017; Keyes, 2016), even the main doctrine of Four Noble Truth and Eight-Fold Path in Buddhism. The anti-Muslim attitude, according to Osman (2019) plays a significant role in predominantly Muslim societies and participates in Muslim countries' public

policy, state ideology, elite/mass relation. While among Muslims, an example of intolerance is reflected in the Taliban, who is responsible for destroying the Bamiyan Buddhist statue in Afghanistan in March 2001 after being declared as idols. Although this group doesn't represent the whole Muslim communities, it does give a bad perception. However, the destruction only held a decade after the Muslim has governed the country. In fact, such intolerance is ironically contrary to the teachings of both religions that emphasis tolerance and peace. For example, the Buddhism triggered from the injustice and inequality around the world, and it provides a code of practice or way of life that leads to true happiness. This principle made Buddhism is tolerant of all other beliefs or religions and didn't preach and try to convert other people (Iqbal et al. 2017). While in Islam, the extremism and violence never been accepted in this religion. Thus, to provide good dimension of Muslim-Buddhist relation, it needs to track back from the historical records evidence that the Muslim-Buddhist relationship was mostly harmonious as early as the mid-7th century AD and reach its peak in 8th century, particularly in gold era of Abbasid.

EARLY MUSLIM-BUDDHIST ENCOUNTER

The early encounter begins as extended Muslim empire to Central Asia, and, as we shall see it was during this period that a part of the Indian subcontinent was annexed. In the course of these conquests, the Arabs became subject to ancient civilizations, compare to Persian, Transoxiana, Afghanistan and Sindh territories (I. Yusuf, 2005, 2010), where Hinduism and Buddhism tradition had flowered for ages. Since time immemorial spices from India and Southeast Asia had been in great demand in Egypt and southern Europe, with the transit trade largely in the hands of Arabs, who brought merchandise from the Indian ports to Yemen in southern Arabia. The goods were then sent by land to the Syrian ports to be shipped again to Egypt and Europe. The goods were then sent by land to the ports of Syria, to be shipped back to Egypt and Europe. As a result, the advent of Islam did not give rise to a relation with India, but it added a new element to commerce after the Arabs accepted Islam, And the first major conflict between the Indian subcontinent and Islamic Arabia occurred as a result of changes related to Arab sailors engaging in Indian Ocean trade. (S.M Ikram 1969: 5). They traveled as far as Ceylon, and when some of them died on that island, the local ruler thought it appropriate to submit their widows and children to Arabia, with presents and letters of goodwill to Hajjaj (661-714 AD), the mighty viceroy of the eastern provinces of the Umayyad Empire.

Unfavorable winds drove the vessels carrying the gifts and survivors to the shores of Debut (an inland port near modern Karachi), where they were seized by pirates, pillaged the gifts and captured Muslim women and children. Hajjaj, in reaction to this, protested against Dahar, Sind's king, and requested that the prisoners be released, and the booty be returned, but he only received a developing response. Caliph Walid was

convinced by the accused Hajjaj to sanction public action against Dahar. Two expeditions sent against Dahar ended in failure, but for the third, Hajjaj sent a hand-picked body of soldiers under the commander of Muhammad Ibn Qasim. The young Arab general, with six thousand horsemen, a camel corps of equal strength, and a baggage train of three thousand camels, marched until the lands had been captured and the Muslim flag was raised for the first time on the Indian subcontinent (S.M Ikram 1969: 5).

During the expansion on Sind, Alexander Berzin (1995) identified the territory located 400 Buddhist monasteries and sheltered 25000 monks. At Sind, the Arab administration followed the general pattern adopted by the Arab conquerors in other countries. The normal rule was to employ local talent and make minimum changes in local practices the recent Caliph acknowledged as the chief creator of the Arab system of administration, had laid down the working principle that Arabs should not acquire landed property in conquered territories. Under his system the conquering general of a new territory became its governor but most of the subordinate officers could retain their posts "The available evidence of Sind indicates that these injunctions have been followed. The Arabs settled in large towns, which were also military cantons, and established military garrisons, but the civilian government remained largely in the possession of the tribal rulers, only a handful of whom had adopted Islam (S.M Ikram 1969: 5).

There, the General Muhammad Ibn Qasim discovered the existence of Buddhists and considered them as idol worshippers (Yusuf, 2010), since not mentioned at any verses in the Quran (Musa 2015) nor in the Hadith or Ijmāc (religious authority consensus). Therefore, General Muhammad Qasim (695-715 AD) sent a letter to the governor of al-Hajjaj Ibn Yusuf al-Thaqafi asking for advice. Four guidelines were given as the response to the Umayyad governor on the position of Buddhists. First, treat them like the People of the Book (Ahl al-Kitab); second, no harm and attack on their monks; third, their monastery cannot be destroyed; fourth, Islamic tax (jizyah) will be charged (Yusuf, 2017). Muslim proposed these conditions to the Buddhist community who approved them as long as they were given full permission to practice their religious teachings and their monasteries were protected (Musa, 2015).

After Muslims understood the teachings of Buddhists, General Muhammad Qasim revised the policy and changed the status of Buddhists from the People of the Book (Ahl al-Kitab) to dhimmi, a non-Muslim who faithfully obeyed the caliphate and committed to paying the Islamic tax (jizyah). Despite the change in status, the rights of Buddhists to exercise their religious teachings remained protected, and they were given the right to own property and land. Therefore, since they have made representations and agreed to pay taxes to the Khalifa, nothing more can be adequately asked of them. We have been placed under cover, and we cannot in any way extend

their reach to their life or properties. Permission is granted to honour their gods. No one must be excluded and prohibited from practicing his own faith. We can live in their homes in whatever way we want (S.M Ikram 1969: 5). These policies proved the tolerance of the Muslim community towards Buddhists at the time and resulted in good relations and some Buddhist converts to Islam (Berzin 1995). What is more interesting, the Buddhist priests, which used to be under the Hindus governor, turned to welcomed and submit to the general as to revolted against the Hindu governor. In fact, widespread discontent with the Hindu rulers, or at least indifference to their fate, seems to have contributed significantly to Arab success. A large proportion of the population of Sind and Multan was Buddhist, but Chach, the minister of Brahmin to the Buddhist monarch, had usurped the throne in 622 A.D., and his dynasty was not popular with large sections of the population, and even the politicians and officials were quick to offer allegiance to the Arabs (S.M Ikram 1969: 9).

In 750, when the Abbasids overthrew the Umayyads, they sent their own officers to Sind. The Abbasid governor, Hisham, who had come to Sind in 757, carried out successful raids against Gujarat and Kashmir, but no lasting changes to Arab rule had been made. Later, by domestic issues, Arab influence over Sind diminished. Tribal conflicts among local Arabs are accelerating the process of disintegration. One governor went so far as to rebel against al-Mamun. The revolt was brought to an end, but Musa (the son of Yahya the Barmakid, the prominent wazir of Harun-al-Rashid), who was in charge of Sind's affairs, nominated his successor at his death in 836 to his son Amran. The caliph accepted the appointment, but the beginning of the hereditary succession to governorship indicated a loss of Baghdad's control (S.M Ikram 1969: 12).

THE CONTRIBUTION

Intellectual

During the Umayyad and the early Abbasid period, when the Arabs were at the height of their political power, they were also active in the intellectual field, making every effort to acquire knowledge from all sources. Sind became the link through which the fruits of Indian learning were transmitted to the Arabs, and by them made available to the rest of the civilized world. Indo-Arab intellectual collaboration was at its height during two distinct periods. During the reign (753-774) of Mansur, embassies from Sind to Baghdad included scholars who brought important books with them. As part of the urbanization plan, the Caliph also built the House of Wisdom (Bayt al-Hikmah) as an institution for research and translation of Greek and Indian-Sanskrit works (Berzin, 2010). By the time of Caliph al-Mahdi (775-785 AD), he invited Buddhist scholars from the Indian continent and Balkh to serve at the House of Wisdom (Bayt al-Hikmah) where a massive project was taking place for translating Sanskrit works covering medicine and astronomy into Arabic. During this period, the early Muslim-

Buddhist works entitled *Bilawhar wa Budhasaf* and *Kitab al-Budd* were translated into Arabic (Goldziher 1981: 141; Hamid Sadiqi 2008: 228; Yusuf 2013: 361; Selim 2011: 179; Vaziri 2012: 45).

The second fruitful period was the reign (780-808) of Harun al Rashid when the Barmakid Family, which provided wazirs to the Abbasid caliphs for half century was at the zenith of its power Arab bibliographers especially mention Harun's wazir Yahya the Barmakid, Yahya's son Musa, and grandson Amran. The good relations between Muslims and Buddhists also inspired Caliph Harun al-Rashid (786–809 AD) to appoint Yahya Ibn Barmak as a Chief Minister. Yahya, who is from the Barmakid family, was the grandson of the Nava Vihara Chief Executive, at Balkh (S.M Ikram 1969: 15). Besides sending scholars to India to study medicine and pharmacology, they brought their scholars to Baghdad, made them chief physicians of their hospitals and commissioned them to translate, into Arabic, Sanskrit books on such subjects as medicine pharmacology, toxicology philosophy, and Astrology.

Through vital positions in the Abbasid government, Yahya Ibn Barmak built an extensive network by inviting Buddhist scholars especially from Kashmir to participate in the project of translating works especially in medicine, such as Ravigupta's Ocean of Attainments (Skt. Siddhasāra) (Berzin 2010: 189). The influence of the Barmakid family on the Abbasid government attracted the attention of al-Kirmani (d. 901 AD) to write their biographies in his work Akhbār al-Barāmika wa Faḍā'iluhum (Anna Akasoy et al. 2011: 69; Bosworth 1994: 268). Although Muslim scholars have shown interest in studying Buddhism, Buddhists have shown no interest in studying Islam. As such, there is no record of translating any Arabic book into Sanskrit, as well as works containing Islamic teachings and dialogues among the religious, although at that time Buddhist institutions of higher learning were established in Afghanistan and the Indian continent (Berzin 2010: 190).

Subsequently, the earliest recorded Indo-Arab intellectual contact came in 771. When the Indian astronomer and mathematician reached Baghdad. Bringing with him a Sanskrit work (Brahma Siddhanta by Brahma Gupta) which he translated into Arabic with the help of an Arab Mathematician. Titles of three other works on astronomy translated from Sanskrit have been preserved by Arab bibliographers, but Siddhanta, which came to be known in Arabic as "Sindhind," had the greatest influence on the development of Arab astronomy in mathematics the most important contribution of the subcontinent to Arabic learning was the introduction of what are known in the West as "Arabic numerals," but which Arabs themselves call "Indian numerals" (*al-ruqum-al-Hindiyya*) (S.M Ikram 1969: 15). The nine Sanskrit characters contained in the Indian mathematical book Sindhinda (*Sindh-nata*) have had a considerable impact on the evolution of the number system used around the world today. In the 9th century, al-Khwarizmi used it as a place value in a system of 10, also known as the Indian

system, as well as altering the symbols of *sunya* as sifr (zero) meaning empty. This number system was later modified by the Islamic mathematical scholar in Spain by creating the second version of the symbols 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 0, also known as the Arabic-Spanish system, also known as the al system *al-ghubar* (Algorithm). (Hussain & Ramli 2017; Smith 2008).

The Indian medicine received even greater attention the titles of at least fifteen works in Sanskrit which were translated into Arabic have been preserved, including books by Sushruta and Charaka, the foremost authorities in Hindu medicine. One of the translated books was on veterinary science, and another dealt with snakes and their poisons. None of these translations are now known to exist, except a rendering of a book on poisons, which was originally translated into Persian for Khalid-al-Barmaki, the Abbasid wazir, and later was translated into Arabic. Indian doctors enjoyed great prestige at Baghdad, and although their names, like the titles of their works have been mutilated beyond recognition in Arab bibliographies, their number was very great. One of these men, Manka, was specially sent for when Harun-al-Rashid fell ill and could not be cured by Baghdad doctors. Manka’s treatment was successful and not only was he richly rewarded by the grateful caliph, but he was entrusted with the translation of medical books from Sanskrit. Another Indian physician was called in when a cousin of the caliph suffered a paralytic stroke and was given up for lost by the Greek court physician. Many Indian Medicines, some of them in their original names such as a triphala, which is the Hindi tri-phal (combination of three fruits), found their way into Arab pharmacopoeia (S.M Ikram 1969: 15).

Astrology and palmistry also received considerable attention at Baghdad, and titles of a large number of books, translated from Sanskrit on these subjects have been preserved. Other books which were translated were on logic, alchemy, magic, ethics, statecraft, and the art of war, but literary works gained the greatest popularity. Some of the stories of the Arabian Nights’ Entertainments are attributed to Indian origin, and Arabic translations of the Panchatantra, popularly known as the story of *Kalilah wa Dimna*, have become famous in Various Arabic and Persian versions. The games of chess and chausar were also brought from India and transmitted by Arabs to other parts of the world (S.M Ikram 1969: 15). Eventually, it opened a new avenue of Muslim-Buddhist relations in the fields of socio-culture and knowledge exchange, further motivating the Muslim community to study Buddhism. Among the early Muslim scholars on Buddhism is cUmar Ibn al-Azraq al-Kermani, an Umayyad author who wrote about the history of the Nava Vihara in the eighth century (Alikuzai 2013: 118; Barnsley 2013: 124; Berzin 1995; Yusuf 2010: 188; Shah-Kazemi 2010: 124). Al-Kermani also studied the Buddhist tradition in Balkh and compared it with Muslim traditions (Selim 2011: 179).

In the ninth century, writings on Buddhism and its followers continued to gain Muslim scholarly attention in their work, among them (d.892 AD), al-Ṭabarī (838-923 AD), al-Mas'udi (896-956 AD), and al-Muqaddasi (d. 974 AD). Generally, the early writings by Muslim scholars do not discuss Buddhism in a theological context but adopt a narrative style as a result of their observations and personal interactions with Buddhists. Among the highlights included in these works are the design of Buddhist temples and the appearance of Buddhists (al-Muqaddasi 2004: 313; al-Ṭabarī 1991: 201; al-Baladhuri 1987: 613). The discussion of Buddhism was continued by the famous Islamic bibliographer Ibn al-Nadīm (935-995 AD) in his magnum opus al-Fihrist, followed by al-Biruni (973-1048 AD) in his work al-Āthār al -Bāqiyah min al-Qarūn al-Khāliyah (al-Biruni 2008: 243). Meanwhile, it is difficult to find Buddhist writings, except, according to Berzin (2010: 190), the Kālacakra Tantra, which appeared around the late tenth to eleventh century AD. This work reflects certain views of Buddhists on Muslims, in particular after the Muslims expedition to their territories. In the Kālacakra Tantra, there is a narrative which named the conquerors as mleccha, a Sanskrit name given to foreign conquerors in the Indian subcontinent. The Arab Muslims were regarded as Tāyi mleccha. Several characteristics of Muslims were described, such as the fundamental beliefs of Muslims such as not worshipping idols, honouring human rights, strict ethics and praying five times a day (Berzin 2010:194). While in the eleventh century, Muslim studies of Buddhism began adopting a theological approach such as al-Shahrastani (1086-1153 AD) in his work al-Milal wa al-Nihal. Al-Shahrastani classifies the Buddhists under the sub-topic of Ashab al-Bidada.

The Mongol invasion of Baghdad in 1258 AD abolished the Abbasid Caliphate. The invasion destroyed the House of Wisdom (Bayt al-Hikmah) which collected several important records of Muslim-Buddhist relations and Buddhist works. However, the records of Buddhism are still found in other manuscripts, such as Rashid al-Din al-Hamadhani (1247-1318 AD) in his work Jāmic al-Tawārikh, which was based on Kamāla Śrī. Other Buddhist manuscripts exist in Central Asia and Tibet. Al-Hamadhani also collected information from Buddhist scholars from Kashmir (Canby, 1993; Jackson, 2017; Robinson, 2012; Vaziri, 2012; Wink, 2010; I. Yusuf, 2010).

Interfaith Dialogue

During the reign of Caliph Harun al-Rashid (786–809 AD), the first Muslim-Buddhist dialogue took place in Baghdad. Elverskog (2010) remarks the narrative as below:

“At the eighth century a messenger from northwest India arrived in Baghdad and requested an audience with Caliph Harun al-Rashid. Since he believed that it would be valuable to display his magnanimity and magnificence to this poor vassal from the frontiers of the Islamic Empire the Caliph agreed. Yet when the man was finally brought before him in the glorious palace in the center of Baghdad, the Caliph was

shocked to hear the message that this minion was sent to challenge for debate. (Elverskog 2010)

The messenger: “I have been told that you have no proof of the truth of your religion but the sword. If you are sure of the veracity of your faith, send some scholar from your place to discuss religious matters with a pandit of mine.”

The Caliph was so enraged that he almost had the messenger put to death on the spot; however, he was also intrigued by the audacity of this overture and thus decided to send one of his religious scholars to debate this pandit. Unfortunately, the debate did not go well. The pandit drew upon the deep tradition of Buddhist debate and logic in order to systematically attack the Muslim scholar’s claims of the existence of a single, all- powerful God) When the pandit asked his penultimate question: “If your God is all-powerful, can He create an entity like Himself?” (Elverskog 2010)

The Muslim scholar was so befuddled he could only respond that he did not know the answer. The local ruler of Sind, who had arranged the debate, thus announced the Buddhist scholar the winner and sent the mullah back to the Caliph with the following message: “I had heard from my elders, and now that I have seen with my own eyes, I am sure that you have no proof of the truth of your faith.” At this turn of events the Caliph was incensed, and he summoned together all of his leading scholars in order to address this Buddhist challenge. None, however, could come up with an adequate response until at last a young boy stood up and said, “O Prince of Believers, this objection is baseless; God is He who has been created by nobody. If God creates an entity like Himself, that entity will be in all cases God’s creation. Then, again, that there can be an entity exactly like God is an insult to God and God will not countenance His own disparagement. This question is like such questions as: Can God be ignorant? Can He die? Can He eat? Can He drink? Can He sleep? Evidently He cannot do any of these things as they are all derogatory to his dignity.” (Elverskog 2010)

Everyone was pleased with this answer and Harun al-Rashid wanted to send the boy to India in order to defend Islam and defeat the Buddhists in debate. But the other scholars at the court objected by saying he was too young, and although he could possibly answer this question, what about other ones? Harun al-Rashid was swayed by this argument and thus he sent an older famous scholar in order to defeat the Buddhists in a new debate. By one account this scholar readily won the debate and the local ruler of Sind converted to Islam. Another account claims that the Buddhist pandit sent out a spy to see whether this Islamic scholar was a theologian, or else a scholar familiar with rationalism. When his informant told him that the mullah was indeed familiar with rational logic the pandit was afraid that he might lose the debate. In

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desperation he therefore paid someone to poison the Islamic scholar and he died before ever reaching northwest India.” (Elverskog 2010)

The record shows that the discussion was first sparked by a Buddhist scholar with a tone of agitation and a preconception that Islam was not based on truth and spread through abuse. The Buddhist scholar also used propaganda to challenge the existence of a God that Muslims believe to be All Mighty and Most Powerful. While Muslim scholars failed to answer the questions in the early stages, they ultimately won the debate using the same rational approach as their Buddhist opponent.

Architecture

After the Umayyad period in Central Asia, the Muslim-Buddhist relations continued during the Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258 AD) which strengthened in cooperation and knowledge exchange. For example, the basis of mathematical knowledge can be examined through the development of Bagdad city (Figure 1) on the order of Caliph al-Mansur in 762 AD and completed in 766-767 AD. There are four entrances through two layers of walls in this round city. There is an arcade path from each entrance leading to the center of the city, where the palace of the caliph and the mosque are situated. The construction materials are made from burnt bricks, gypsum plaster, mud-brick and wood. Some people are involved as advisers to urban construction that are not necessarily led by an architect (Hussain & Ramli 2017). Even the name of the city Baghdad is taken from the Sanskrit meaning 'a gift from God' (Berzin 2010; Yusuf 2010: 189).

Figure 1: The round city of Bagdad in the 10th century, the peak of the Abbasid Caliphate. Illustration: Jean Soutif / Science Photo Library



CONCLUSION

Muslim-Buddhist relation have taken many forms and have led to Islamic civilization. This is simpler because Islam is an open faith to gain some awareness as long as it benefits the religion and its followers. Therefore, starting at the end of the Umayyad era, the building of links between the two Islamic civilizations and India contributed to the convergence of knowledge. Earlier in the Abbasid period, the continuity persisted and called it the Golden Age of Islamic Civilization.

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