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Building a Bridge Between Theravada Buddhism and Islam¹

In a world riven by national egoisms and intercultural tensions, it is perhaps more important than ever for us to try to see what is noble and universal in the varied religious symbol systems of the world's cultures. Our long journey towards a global spirituality requires us to constantly translate the insights of particular faiths into universally intelligible concepts and images drawn from our common human experience and, thus equipped, to boldly encourage the world's religions to recognize their deep family resemblances. Global spirituality as I speak of it here, if it emerges at all, will not be a single new world religion but rather a cross-culturally shared sense of common values enabling people to see through their symbolic cultural constructs even while living within them. It was the Islamicist Wilfred Cantwell Smith, founder of Harvard's Center for the Study of Comparative Religion, who wrote: "It is not in fantasy but in empirical fact that we can now speak of a single religious history of humankind and of our own traditions in terms of Islamic, or Buddhist, or Jewish, or Christian *strands* in this single history." And he added: we must therefore "try to see our own faith and all the faiths of other men and women, past and present, as aspects of a single, if multiform, planetary spiritual heritage." As a small contribution to this seeing, or perhaps an example of this seeing, I'd like to take the short time at my disposal today to build a bridge between two religious traditions that seem, on the surface, quite wide apart, namely, Theravada Buddhism and Islam.

¹ Though I do not directly quote him here, virtually every line of this paper has been influenced by the British philosopher of religion, John Hick. Two of his many profound and relevant titles are his magnum opus, *An Interpretation of Religion* and *A Christian Theology of Religions*.

Theravada Buddhism professes no belief in a Creator God, yet to Islam this belief is central. Islam envisions humanity's ultimate end as the enjoyment of Allah's paradise while Theravada Buddhism speaks of the cessation of rebirth. In these two matters of theology and eschatology, the gap between Islam and Theravada Buddhism seems so great as to be unbridgeable. But in this brief talk I want to suggest how both the issue of theism vs. non-theism and the issue of conflicting views of the afterlife are relatively superficial differences that can mask deeper and more meaningful functional similarities between Islam and Theravada Buddhism when they are contemplated as systemic wholes.

The first and perhaps most important thing to see is that Theravada Buddhism and Islam share what may be called a common transformational structure. Both understand human life as an opportunity for a profound transformation from the diminished or distorted character of our untransformed condition toward a condition that is limitlessly better. Muslims describe the diminished or distorted character of our ordinary condition as *ghaflah* or forgetfulness of God. And they call the limitlessly better condition toward which we can grow the remembrance of God, submission to God, or simply, salvation. Theravada Buddhists refer to the distorted or deluded character of our untransformed condition as ignorance and suffering. And they characterize the limitlessly better condition to which life calls us as one of awakening and liberation. The languages are different, but the underlying transformational structure is strikingly similar. Both traditions invite human beings to undertake a journey of spiritual discovery, to move from a natural self-centered condition to a re-centering in a higher order of existence in which their deep fulfillment is said to lie.

It is true that when Muslims speak of salvation, or Buddhists of liberation, they ultimately look beyond death to an enjoyment of Allah's paradise or to the end of the round of rebirth. Yet if there is one thing that our planetary awareness of human religions has taught us, it is that when the human mind tries to see beyond death it enters a realm of pure speculation, a barren waste of claim and counterclaim. Happily both Islam and Theravada Buddhism also contain highly robust senses salvation or liberation in this very life. It is by focusing on these that we can move forward even while we bracket unanswerable questions about post-mortem destinies. But before I do more forward, there is a modest eschatological point I would like to make: both Islam and Theravada imply that individual death is not the end, and they equally affirm something that pure naturalism, for example, cannot: namely, that *human goodness matters* -- not only terrestrially, but cosmically and ultimately.

So now let us ask about the nature of the salvation that *islam*, that is, submission, offers to a human being in this life. I think it is fair to say that for Muslims the essence of life's spiritual journey is that of a deepening and ripening process of submission to Allah as the source of all life and being. Of course, anyone can *claim* to be so submitted. But what is the mark of genuine submission? The Qur'an and the hadith leave little doubt that it is an erosion of egoism that shows itself in the qualities of goodness, kindness, honesty and many other familiar virtues. "Do thou good, as God has been good to thee" says Sura 28, ayat 77. And here is a passage from Sura 17:

Thy Lord hath decreed That ye worship none but Him.
And that ye be kind to parents.
Whether one Or both of them attain Old age in thy life,
Say not to them a word of contempt, nor repel them,
but address them in terms of honour.

And, out of kindness, Lower to them the wing of humility,
 and say: 'My lord! Bestow on them thy Mercy even as they
 Cherished me in childhood.' (23-24)
 And render to the kindred Their due rights, as (also)
 To those in want, and also to the wayfarer. (26)
 Kill not your children For fear of want:
 We shall Provide sustenance for them As well as for you.
 Verily the killing of them Is a great sin. (31)
 Nor come nigh to adultery:
 For it is a shameful (deed) And an evil, opening the road
 (To other evils). (32)
 Come not nigh To the orphan's property Except to improve it,
 Until he attains the age of full strength; ...
 Give full measure when ye Measure, and weigh
 With a balance that is straight.
 Nor walk on the earth With insolence:
 for thou Canst not rend the earth
 Asunder, nor reach The mountains in height. (trans. Yusuf Ali, 1977)

As this passage shows, true Islamic salvation, that is, a progressively mature
 submission to God, manifests itself as a life lived increasingly in a spirit of mercy and
 forgiveness and compassion toward parents, orphans, travelers and the poor, indeed all
 others, and in a spirit of honesty in business, faithfulness in marriage, kindness to
 children, cheerful courtesy, and humility of bearing.

And at Sura 2, ayat 177 there is this account of the heart of islam:

It is not righteousness That ye turn your faces Towards East or West; [i.e. merely to
 pray]
 But it is righteousness –
To spend of your substance,
 Out of love for God,
 For your kin,
 For orphans,
 For the needy,
 For the wayfarer,
 For those who ask,
 And for the ransom of slaves;
 To...practice regular charity;
 To fulfill the contracts
 Which ye have made.

Finally, when we turn to the *hadith*, we find that many sayings of or about the Prophet, peace be upon him, extol generous kindness, love, and compassion for one's fellows as the markers of that transformed human condition at which *islam* aims:

“It is one form of faith (iman) that one loves (hub) his brother as one loves oneself.”

“Verily Allah is kind. He loves kindness; and he bestows over kindness what He bestows not over harshness.”

“He who is devoid of kindness is devoid of all good.”

“You shall not enter Paradise until you believe, and you will not believe until you love one another.”

“The strong man is not one who can wrestle, but the strong man is one who can control himself in the time of anger.”

“Verily there are heavenly rewards for any act of kindness to a live animal.”

“Keep yourselves away from envy, because it eats up and takes away good actions, like as fire eats up and burns wood.”

“God loves those who are content.”

“Forgiveness was the chief jewel in the Prophet's character. So broad was his heart that the spirit of revenge was absolutely absent from it.”

“The Holy Prophet used always to invoke blessings on his enemies instead of taking revenge on them for the wrongs done to him.”

What I hope to have suggested by these all too brief citations is that a great part of what salvation/submission means in Islam is a process of human transformation from natural self-centeredness to a new orientation centered in the Real, an orientation whose authentic fruits are kindness, generosity, honesty, justice, patience, understanding, love, and the host of other virtues that are universally cherished by human cultures. Planetically perceived, Islam is a great cultural-symbolic assault on blind ego, a vast enabling context for the ethical betterment of human beings. The great work of Islam is ego-reduction and virtue production. But of course, precisely the same thing may also be said of Buddhism and its goal of liberation— to which we now turn.

The Buddha was once asked to put the whole of his teaching into a few words. He replied: To refrain from all evil, to achieve the good, to purify one's own mind--this is the teaching of all Awakened Ones (Dhammapada, 183). Notice the pre-eminently moral language here. I point to it because all too often Buddhism is thought to be about the pursuit of an experience, the experience of enlightenment, which, in a blinding flash turns frogs into princes and irreversibly actualizes all human spiritual potential. This is a misleading oversimplification. Properly understood, enlightenment names not a single altered state of consciousness, no matter how rarified, but an altered trait of consciousness, a transformation of character in which the conditioning forces of self-centeredness have gradually been shed -- like a worn-out skin. The freedom taught by the Buddha is not abstract but concrete: it is freedom from greed, freedom from aversion and freedom from the ego-delusion, and is, therefore an irreducibly moral notion. For freedom from the poisons of greed, hatred and the ego-delusion have specific and very well-known ethical correlates, namely, compassion (*karuna*), truthfulness (*satya*), patience (*kshanti*), generosity (*dana*), equanimity (*uppekha*), and of course, lovingkindness (*metta*).

Buddhist scholar Robert Gimello puts it this way:

The point of Buddhist meditation, including the mystical experiences it allows, is as Dogen has said, 'not to obtain a certain thing' but to 'become a certain man.' Mystical experience...has no sovereign autonomy in Buddhism. Rather it is seen to have important consequences for all areas of human life--not the least of which is morality--and to be judged according to those consequences. The mystical experience affects the moral life, Buddhists believe, and they therefore take the greatest pains in their meditative disciplines to see to it that its effect is the proper, just and compassionate one."²

² R. Gimello, "Mysticism and Meditation," in Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis, Steven Katz, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press), 1978, 193-94.

There is no need to take more time to develop the idea of the Buddhist tradition's profound moral concern, so I will move to the conclusion I wish to draw from this section. It is simply this: There is in Buddhism and Islam a striking similarity of the transformed condition of life called liberation or salvation. It is a condition of life marked by essentially the same virtues: generous goodwill, justice, compassion, humility, self-sacrificing concern for others, generosity, kindness and forbearance. On this account, Islam and Buddhism fight a common jihad against the infinite forms assumed by the human tendency toward self-idolatry.

Thus far I have made two major points. The first is that Islam and Theravada Buddhism agree that human life as an opportunity for a profound transformation from the diminished character of our ordinary self-centered condition toward a limitlessly better condition. The second is that this limitlessly better condition, spoken of as salvation or liberation, when considered on this side of death, reveals itself as the condition of ethical flourishing. I can now proceed to my third and final point, my reason for saying earlier that the ostensive opposition between Islamic theism and Theravada Buddhist non-theism is of secondary import.

Theravada Buddhists and Muslims agree profoundly that the journey of self-transformation is possible only because the Universe, the nature of Reality itself, is well-disposed towards it. Both Islam and Theravada Buddhism affirm that Reality itself is

somehow friendly, somehow welcoming, somehow eliciting, somehow kindly bent toward, human spiritual fruition. That this is an essential aspect of the meaning of the term “Allah” in Islam is perhaps too obvious to require demonstration. But what about Theravada Buddhism? My answer to this question turns on the meaning of the word Dharma, or in Pali, *Dhamma*, and must, for time’s sake, rely on authority. What then does the word “Dharma” mean in the mouth of the Buddha? While some argue that it is simply synonymous with the sum his teaching, the earlier-mentioned philosopher of religion, Wilfred Smith eloquently begs to differ. He writes:

“It would puncture the whole Buddhist system of thought...to suppose that the Dharma is...something that he constructed. He did not concoct this; he discovered it...The Dharma that he taught does not owe its validity...to the fact that he was...wise; on the contrary he became...wise...because he awoke to its pre-existent truth. All else is evanescent. But the Saddharma, the True Law, is eternal...There is...he proclaimed, a final truth in accordance with which if a man lives he will be saved. If the universe consisted only in the flux of *samsara*...if there were no eternal Dharma, then man could not possibly save himself...It is living according to Dharma, the pre-existing law, that saves. The decision so to live is man’s own; but the fact that living so brings salvation is prior to man, independent of man, and the confidence that it will work...is based on a confidence in the very universe where such a truth obtains. [This] is the good news that the Buddha preached, and that his movement carried half across the world.” [*Faith and Belief* (Princeton University Press, 1979), 27-28]

If I myself had any doubts about Smith’s understanding of the matter, they dissolved the day I heard my own Theravadin meditation teacher say: “Your job is to pay attention. Let the Dhamma do the rest.” Thus, if we grasp Smith’s point, we begin to understand that “Dharma” and “Allah” are alternative cultural modes of expressing a profound confidence that Reality itself abets the human impulse toward self-transcendence. In Muslim terms, when we submit to Allah, when we constantly remember Him and do His will, our hearts begin to shine with goodness and kindness toward all of Allah’s creatures. Similarly, in Buddhist terms, when we awaken to the

reality of the Dharmakaya by seeing through the illusions of our own ego, we find ourselves reborn into a joyous state of compassion toward all sentient beings. In some such way we begin to understand that “Allah” and Dharma are symbols of the indefinable sacred reality in right relation to which human beings grow toward ethical maturity. A well known hadith of the prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, says: “Kindness is the mark of faith; whoever hath not kindness hath not faith.” And the Dalai Lama has famously stated: “My religion is kindness.” Enough said.

Human beings cannot avoid being shaped by their culture’s symbol systems. One of the great tasks of the human future is therefore to be able to live in and through our cultures at the same time we see through and beyond our culturally defined images of the Real. I have tried to suggest in this paper that Islam and Theravada Buddhism are very different containers for a single, precious planetary resource, the ideal of a morally evolved humanity. I would like to think I’ve said something newsworthy, yet eight centuries ago the Muslim poet Rumi already perceived the task before us with perfect clarity. “Love the pitcher less,” he said, “and the water more.”

