



IIIT Students'

Magazine

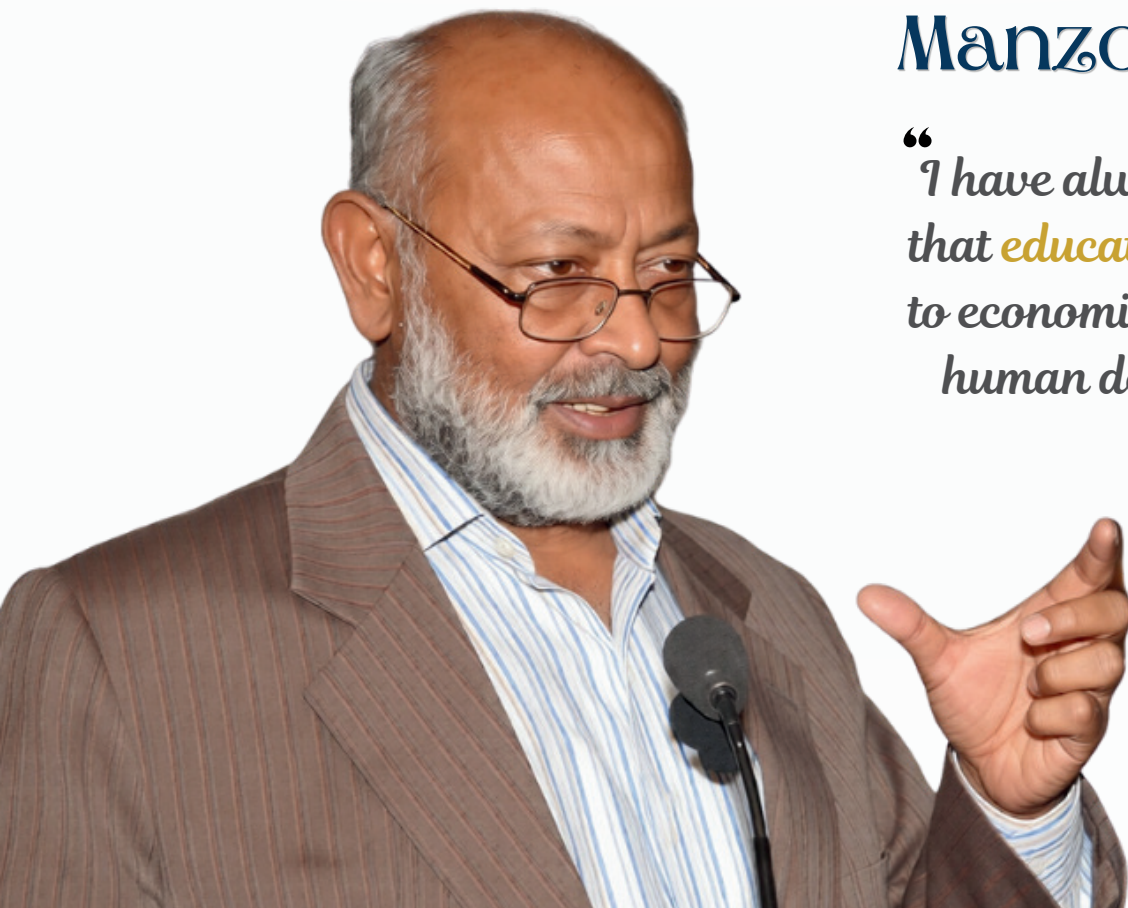


Volume 3, Issue no: 2

Faith, Identity, and Contemporary Muslim Thought

Dr. Muhammad
Manzoor Alam

“I have always believed
that **education** is the key
to economic growth and
human development.”



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Editorial Message



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بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

**In the Name of Allah, the Most Merciful,
the Most Compassionate**

Dear Students, Scholars, and Readers,
It gives me great pleasure to welcome the publication of the 7th IIIT-IIUM Students Magazine, a platform that continues to reflect the intellectual energy, moral concern, and creative expression of our students. A student magazine is never only a collection of writings; it is a mirror of the questions that occupy the minds and the values that guide their search for meaning.

This edition comes at a time when the world is facing deep challenges in thought, identity, education, family life, interfaith relations, mental well-being, and economic justice. For Muslim students and scholars, these challenges require more than reaction. They call for knowledge rooted in revelation, supported by disciplined inquiry, and expressed with wisdom, compassion, and responsibility.

The articles in this issue reflect this wider mission. The tribute to Dr. Muhammad Manzoor Alam reminds us that knowledge, when joined with sincerity and institutional vision, can become a force for social empowerment.

His life teaches that scholarship must not remain isolated from society. It must serve the marginalized, inform public discourse, and translate moral concern into organized action.

The reflection on Athippatta Ustādh's ethical and social leadership offers another important lesson.

Ethical Leadership for Muslim-Buddhist Engagement:

Prophetic Compassion as a Universal Framework



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In an era marked by interreligious tensions and identity-based conflicts, the search for ethical frameworks that foster genuine harmony between communities is of paramount importance. The engagement between Buddhist and Muslim communities, particularly in pluralistic Asian societies, presents both profound challenges and opportunities. While theological differences are significant, the principles of ethical leadership, rooted in compassion, dignity, and proactive care, can bridge divides. A compelling model for such leadership can be found in the conduct of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) towards non-Muslims. His life offers timeless lessons in mercy, respectful dialogue, and unconditional neighbourliness, providing a vital blueprint for constructive Muslim-Buddhist relations.

The Foundation: Mercy as the Core of Leadership

The Qur'anic declaration that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was sent as "a mercy to all the worlds" (Al-Quran, al-Anbiyā' 21:107) establishes the foundational principle for his engagements. This raḥmah (mercy) was not exclusive but universal, extending to believers and disbelievers alike. It was intrinsic to his character, shaping his responses to hostility, his manner of dialogue, and his social policies. As noted in classical commentary, his gentleness was a divine gift that prevented community fragmentation: "It is by the mercy of Allah that you dealt gently with them..." (Al-Quran, Āl 'Imrān 3:159).

This principle directly informs ethical interfaith leadership: it must be rooted in a compassion that transcends in-group loyalty, viewing the well-being of the "other" as an intrinsic good. For Muslim-Buddhist engagement, this echoes the central Buddhist tenet of karuṇā (compassion), suggesting a powerful common ground where leadership is measured by its capacity to alleviate suffering and foster mutual security for all beings.

Models of Engagement: Dialogue, Alliance, and Protection

Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) interactions provide concrete models for ethical conduct across faith lines. His dialogue with the Meccan leaders like 'Utbah ibn Rabi'ah exemplifies respectful engagement. He listened patiently without interruption, responded with calm recitation rather than polemic, and thereby earned 'Utbah's awe (Sirah Ibn Hishām). This demonstrates that ethical leadership prioritises active listening and the dignity of the interlocutor over propagandising or debate.

Furthermore, his life was marked by strategic and moral alliances with non-Muslims. The migration to Christian Abyssinia, where the Najāshī granted persecuted Muslims asylum, established a historical precedent of interfaith sanctuary. The Prophet later prayed for forgiveness for the Najāshī upon his death (Sunan an-Nasa'i 2041). In Medina, the Jewish leader

Mukhayriq fought alongside Muslims at the battle of Uhud, bequeathing his wealth to the community, an act the Prophet honoured by calling him “the best of the Jews” as mentioned in the Seerah Sources. These episodes show that ethical leadership recognises and honours moral courage and solidarity across religious boundaries, building community on shared values of justice and protection rather than mere creed.

The formal covenant with the Christian delegation from Najrān is a landmark in interfaith relations. The Prophet hosted them in his mosque, allowed them to pray there according to their rite, and guaranteed the protection of their churches, clergy, and religious practice (Ibnu Hajar al-ʿAsqalānī, *Fath-ul Bārī*, 8:119). This established a framework for pluralism and religious freedom under Muslim rule, where theological differences were acknowledged but did not negate rights to security and respect. For contemporary contexts where Buddhist and Muslim communities coexist, this model advocates for formal and social covenants of mutual respect, protecting spaces of worship and cultural practice.

Daily Ethics: Dignity, Neighbourliness, and Unconditional Compassion

While grand historical covenants and political alliances provide a crucial framework, the bedrock of sustainable interfaith harmony is often established through daily, personal conduct. Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) everyday interactions operationalised the Qur'ānic principle of universal mercy (*rahmah*) into a tangible social ethic of inherent human dignity. His behaviour established that respect was not contingent upon faith, but upon a shared humanity. This is vividly illustrated in his persistent care for his pagan uncle, Abū Ṭālib, until on his deathbed, and in his immediate, respectful stance upon the passing of a Jewish funeral procession. When questioned by his companions, he responded with a profound

rhetorical question that laid the foundation for Islamic human rights: “Was he not a human being?” (*Sahih Al-Bukhārī*). This simple yet revolutionary act framed dignity as an inalienable right of every person.

The Prophet (PBUH) elevated the mundane duty of neighbourliness to the status of a sacred trust, inextricably linking it to authentic faith. He stated that a true believer is one “with whom others feel secure” (*Al-Tirmidhī*) and issued the powerful warning, “He will not enter Paradise whose neighbour is not secure from his wrongful conduct” (*Sahih al-Muslim*). The divine emphasis on this duty was so relentless that the Prophet remarked, “Jibril (AWS) kept on commending the neighbour to me so that I thought he would make an heir” (*Sahih Al-Bukhārī*). This created a grassroots theology of coexistence, making ethical conduct toward immediate neighbors, regardless of their beliefs, a direct measure of one's spiritual state and a primary mechanism for building communal peace.

This ethic of unconditional compassion was most severely tested, and thus most clearly defined, in moments of extreme personal suffering and vulnerability. Following the brutal rejection and physical assault he endured in Ṭā'if, the angel of the mountains offered to crush the town between two mountains. The Prophet's (PBUH) response embodied a transformative, future-oriented mercy: “Rather, I hope that Allah will bring forth from their loins those who will worship Allah alone and not associate anything with Him” (*Sahih Al-Bukhārī*). Similarly, at the Battle of Uhud, amid the chaos of battle, a severe injury, and the loss of companions, his companions urged him to curse the attacking Meccans. He replied, “I was not sent to curse. I was sent as a mercy,” and instead prayed, “O Allah, guide my people, for they do not know” (*Al-Bayhaqī*). Here, ethical leadership is

compassion divorced entirely from retaliation and redefined as a steadfast compassion that holds space for the redemption and guidance of the oppressor. It is a proactive mercy that seeks to break cycles of hatred and transform the very source of hostility.

Thus, the Prophetic model demonstrates that the most powerful force for interfaith harmony is not merely high-level dialogue, but the consistent, daily enactment of dignity, proactive neighborliness, and a that remains unshaken even in the face of aggression. It is in these granular, personal interactions that the abstract ideal of being “a mercy to all the worlds” becomes a lived reality, building the indispensable social trust upon which all larger covenants depend.

Practical Lessons for Muslim-Buddhist Engagement: A Prophetic Framework

The profound historical examples from the life of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) are not mere anecdotes of a bygone era; they constitute a coherent and actionable framework for ethical leadership in contemporary interfaith contexts. For Muslim-Buddhist engagement, a relationship tested by tensions in regions like Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and parts of South Asia, this Prophetic model offers transformative, practical lessons. These lessons move beyond abstract theology to provide a blueprint for conduct at the leadership, communal, and individual levels, rooted in the shared ethical ground of compassion.



1. Leadership as Mercy-in-Action (Raḥmah/Karuṇā)

The foundational principle is the institutionalisation of compassion. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was described in the Quran as “a mercy to all the worlds” (21:107); the classical exegete al-Ṭabarī explained encompassed both believers and disbelievers (al-Ṭabarī, Muḥammad ibn Jarīr, 1967). This was not passive sentiment but active policy. His gentleness, deemed a divine gift (al-Quran 3:159), was the adhesive that held a nascent, diverse community together. For modern leaders, this translates into a dual responsibility.

Firstly, rhetoric must be disciplined to honor human dignity unconditionally. The Prophet’s prayer for his persecutors at Ṭā’if, “I hope that Allah will bring forth from their loins those who will worship Allah alone,” demonstrates a leadership that seeks transformative potential over condemnation (Sahih Al-Bukhari). Secondly, policies must proactively protect the vulnerable. The asylum granted by the Christian Najāshī of Abyssinia, which the Prophet later honoured by praying for the king’s forgiveness, establishes a cross-confessional precedent for sanctuary. In Muslim-Buddhist contexts, this means leaders must publicly condemn violence and discrimination, enact and enforce laws protecting minority rights, and create platforms for the marginalised. It calls for embodying the Buddhist concept of karuṇā (compassion) and the Islamic raḥmah as parallel, governing virtues in public life.

2. Dialogue as Respectful Listening: The ‘Utbah and Meccan Leaders Model

Modern interfaith dialogue often risks becoming a staged debate or a monologue of positions. The Prophet’s encounter with ‘Utbah ibn Rabī’ah, a Meccan elite sent to negotiate his silence, provides a superior paradigm. The Prophet listened to ‘Utbah’s offers of wealth and power without interruption, addressed him respectfully as “Abū al-Walīd,” and responded by simply reciting the profound verses of the Quran.

The impact was not immediate conversion but a deep, disarming reflection that left 'Utbah acknowledging the extraordinary power of the message.

This model prioritizes process over outcome. It teaches that ethical engagement requires:

- Active Listening: Creating space for the other to express their worldview fully.
- Composure: Maintaining patience and respect, especially under provocation.
- Clarity of Expression: Sharing one's truth with eloquence and sincerity, not aggression.

For Muslim-Buddhist dialogues, this means moving beyond doctrinal comparisons to shared human concerns, suffering, ethics, peace, ecology, and listening to understand historical grievances and fears. It transforms dialogue from a potential battleground into a sanctuary for mutual recognition.

3. Building Covenants of Coexistence: The Najrān Precedent

The most direct template for structuring pluralistic societies is the covenant with the Christian delegation from Najrān. The Prophet engaged them in theological discussion, hosted them in his mosque, allowed them to pray there according to their rite, and finally granted them a written charter guaranteeing protection of their lives, faith, property, and clergy. This was a formal, institutionalized agreement of coexistence.

In today's world, this translates to the deliberate construction of social covenants. These can be:

1. Formal: Local peace treaties or mutual understanding agreements between community councils, religious leaders, and civil authorities.
2. Social: Joint community projects, running a shared clinic, disaster relief, environmental clean-ups, that build interdependence.

Such covenants acknowledge difference while forging a united commitment to the common good. They answer suspicion with tangible

guarantees, mirroring the Prophet's pragmatic yet principled grant of security to a community of different faith.

4. Neighbourliness as a Sacred Duty: Grassroots Harmony

While leaders set frameworks, social harmony is built in the daily interactions between people. The Prophet elevated neighbourly rights to an unparalleled degree, stating, "Jibreel (AWS) kept on commending the neighbour to me so that I thought he would make an heir" (Sahih Al-Bukhari). He defined faith through neighbourly conduct: "A man is not a believer who fills his stomach while his neighbour is hungry (al-Sunan al-Kubrā lil-Bayhaqī 19668)," and "He will not enter Paradise whose neighbour is not secure from his wrongful conduct."

This creates a powerful, grassroots framework for interfaith relations. "Neighbour" here transcends geography to include anyone in a proximate relationship, the Buddhist shopkeeper beside a mosque, the Muslim family in a predominantly Buddhist village. Practical acts, such as sharing meals during festivals, checking on the elderly, and collaborating on neighbourhood safety, build what scholars call "interfaith social capital." This daily, lived compassion creates a buffer against divisive rhetoric and fosters organic bonds of trust that top-down initiatives cannot replicate.

5. Transcending Reciprocity: The Ethics of Unconditional Conduct

Perhaps the most challenging yet transformative lesson is to act ethically without expectation of reciprocation. The Prophet's consistent kindness to his neighbour, despite the neighbour's habit of dumping garbage at his door, culminated in the Prophet visiting him when he fell ill, an act that reportedly led to the neighbour's conversion. More profoundly,

when asked to curse his persecutors at Uhud, he declared, "I was not sent to curse. I was sent as a mercy," and prayed instead, "O Allah, guide my people!" This principle dismantles the transactional nature of much human interaction. In contexts of historical Muslim-Buddhist tension, it calls for:

1. Initiative: One community taking the first step in goodwill, without waiting for the other.
2. Moral Autonomy: Adhering to kindness and justice as intrinsic duties, not as bargaining chips.
3. Breaking Cycles of Retribution: Responding to hostility with restraint and a reaffirmation of shared humanity, as modelled in Ṭā'if.

This transforms engagement from a negotiated settlement into a moral and spiritual practice, aligning with the Buddhist ideal of mettā (loving-kindness) and the Islamic imperative of iḥsān (excellence in conduct). The following diagram 1, explains all of the five pillars of prophetic framework establish universal leadership by rooting governance in active compassion (Rahmah/Karunā), transforming it from a personal virtue into a public policy that protects all communities equally.

Conclusion: From Tolerance to Synergistic Coexistence

Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) engagements reveal that ethical leadership in a pluralistic world is not about minimising differences but about constructing a shared life upon the bedrock of universal principles: mercy, dignity, active compassion, and justice. For Buddhist and Muslim communities, this model does not require doctrinal compromise but a concerted commitment to ethical action. It calls leaders to be architects of inclusive covenants, scholars to be facilitators of deep listening, and every individual to be a committed, caring neighbour.

By embodying these lessons, communities can evolve from a fragile tolerance, often a façade for mutual suspicion, to a robust respect that honours the other's sacred right to exist. Ultimately, they can aspire to the prophetic ideal of synergistic coexistence, where the distinct ethical strengths of each tradition, Islam's emphasis on social justice and communal obligation, Buddhism's depth in mindfulness and compassion, are harnessed to create societies where all beings, indeed, experience mercy. In doing so, they move closer to actualising, in a modern pluralistic context, the timeless ideal of being "a mercy to all the worlds."

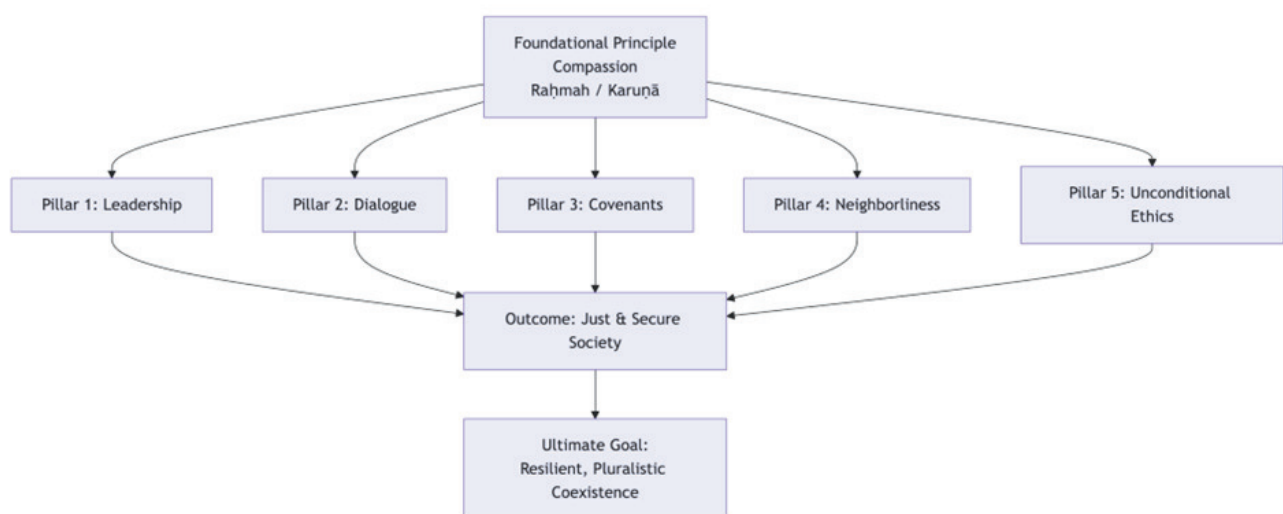


Diagram: 1

Congratulations

Dr. Sherrif!



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