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Beyond Communal Coexistence: A Few Critical Reflections on Buddhist-Muslim Civilizational Dialogue

Mohamed Ashath, Mohamed Fouz Mohamed Zacky



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Transliteration Table: Consonants

Arabic	Roman	Arabic	Roman
ب	b	ط	ṭ
ت	t	ظ	ẓ
ث	th	ع	ʿ
ج	j	غ	gh
ح	ḥ	ف	f
خ	kh	ق	q
د	d	ك	k
ذ	dh	ل	l
ر	r	م	m
ز	z	ن	n
س	s	ه	h
ش	sh	و	w
ص	ṣ	ء	ʾ
ض	ḍ	ي	y

Transliteration Table: Vowels and Diphthongs

Arabic	Roman	Arabic	Roman
اَ	a	ان	an
اُ	u	ون	un
اِ	i	ين	in
آ	ā	أَو	aw
وُ	ū	يَ	ay
يِ	ī	أَوُ, يِ (in final position)	uww, ī
		يِ (in final position)	iyy, ī

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BEYOND COMMUNAL COEXISTENCE: A FEW CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON BUDDHIST-MUSLIM CIVILIZATIONAL DIALOGUE

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Mohamed Fouz Mohamed Zacky^b

ABSTRACT

Contemporary Buddhist-Muslim relations are often shaped by ethno-religious nationalism, selective readings of history, Islamophobia, misinformation, and narratives of civilizational conflict. This study proposes a civilizational-dialogue paradigm as an alternative theoretical framework for understanding Buddhist-Muslim relations beyond the binary of conflict and incompatibility. It approaches Buddhism and Islam as dynamic civilizational traditions shaped by historical encounters, trade, migration, political accommodation, intellectual exchange, cultural interaction, coexistence, and conflict. The study further examines parallelism as a comparative method for identifying ethical, philosophical, spiritual, and social correspondences while preserving the distinct theological identities of both traditions. So, it argues that Buddhism and Islam, despite their fundamental differences, offer important resources for reflecting on human well-being, compassion, justice, peace, moral responsibility, and social harmony. Therefore, the paper positions difference not as a barrier to dialogue but as a basis for meaningful engagement and mutual learning. Beyond its theoretical contribution, the study proposes practical applications through more balanced representations of Buddhist-Muslim history in educational curricula, interdisciplinary research, interfaith initiatives, and training programmes for religious and community leaders. Ultimately, a civilizational-dialogue approach

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can challenge essentialist representations of Buddhist-Muslim relations, recover the complexity of their shared history, and provide a constructive framework for acknowledging difference, identifying ethical common ground, and strengthening peaceful coexistence in plural societies.

KEYWORDS: Buddhist-Muslim relations; civilizational dialogue; parallelism; shared ethics; interfaith dialogue; historical interaction; social cohesion; religious pluralism

1. INTRODUCTION

In the twenty-first century, the nature of Buddhist-Muslim relations has become more complex. The shifting dynamics between Buddhist and Muslim communities in the 21st century are being influenced by the rise of ethno-religious nationalism, social media-fueled misinformation, and the changing ways in which local fears and religious identities are represented in public life. Some radical groups frequently amplify local fears by asserting that there is a global agenda to eradicate Buddhism. Similarly, online platforms often spread panic through fabricated narratives, such as alleging Muslim businesses are lacing food with sterilant to reduce Buddhist birth rates (Frydenlund, 2024; Sithy Mahroof, 2023). Also, the existing patterns of coexistence are also being shaped by several social and political developments, including rising Islamophobia, religious nationalism, populist movements, and the continuing effects of colonial legacies (Frydenlund, 2024).

Patterns of ethnic and religious tensions can be observed across South and Southeast Asia, particularly where religious identity intersects with questions of national belonging, political participation, and cultural identity. For example, interactions between Buddhist and Muslim communities in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Southern Thailand illustrate how religious and ethnic identities can become closely intertwined with broader political and social tensions. In Myanmar, the challenges faced by the Rohingya Muslims demonstrate the severe consequences that can emerge when religious identity becomes closely tied to ideas of national belonging, while nationalist movements have contributed to narratives that portray Muslims as outsiders or threats to national identity (Salehin, 2024). Similar dynamics have emerged in Sri Lanka, where nationalist campaigns have portrayed Muslims as a threat to the country's religious, cultural, and economic identity, contributing to discrimination, suspicion, and mistrust between communities in

recent decades (Saekul, 2023; Gamage, 2021). Likewise, in Southern Thailand, Muslim communities have experienced longstanding political tensions, highlighting the complex relationship between religious identity, political participation, and social cohesion (Gumilar et al., 2025). A growing body of scholarship has already explored these dynamics in detail, examining how the intersection of religious identity, ethnic belonging, nationalism, and political exclusion shapes relations between Buddhist and Muslim communities across South and Southeast Asia.

On the other hand, such experiences of discrimination, exclusion, and perceived injustice can also create conditions that extremist actors may exploit to strengthen their narratives within Muslim communities. Experiences of marginalization or unequal treatment do not, in themselves, inevitably lead individuals towards extremism. However, extremist groups may selectively appropriate these grievances, presenting them as evidence of systematic hostility towards Muslims and portraying violence as a legitimate or necessary response. The 21 April 2019 Easter Sunday attacks in Sri Lanka provide a significant example of how violent extremist interpretations within a small segment of the Muslim community can deepen communal mistrust and further strain Buddhist-Muslim relations (Abdul Razak & Mohamed Saleem, 2023). Similarly, in southern Thailand, some Muslim insurgent groups have mobilized ethnic Malay grievances through nationalist and racialized propaganda, portraying the Thai state and Buddhist majority as forces of cultural domination while also employing Islamic rhetoric to legitimize their struggle (International Crisis Group, 2005). These forces have influenced how religious identities are understood and represented in public life. However, these conflicts are further complicated by the persistence of past-conflict narratives and by contradictory interpretations of Buddhist and Islamic teachings, which can be used either to justify hostility or to promote peace, making it difficult to separate genuine religious differences from political, historical, and social factors (Joll & Scupin, 2020). In this way, local experiences of injustice can be reframed within broader narratives of religious persecution, collective victimization, and an alleged conflict between Muslims and other religious communities.

Against this backdrop, one of the crucial dimensions shaping or driving contemporary Buddhist-Muslim tensions is the projection of a civilizational conflict framework onto the relationship between the two traditions. Influenced in

part by Western civilizational-clash narratives, this framework tends to construct Buddhism and Islam as two distinct and competing civilizations whose relationship is inherently characterized by antagonism and conflict. Such a framing has been further reproduced and localized by ethno-religious majoritarian actors in Buddhist societies, who portray Muslims as a demographic, cultural, or civilizational threat to Buddhism, as well as by religious extremist actors within parts of the Muslim world who interpret experiences of discrimination, exclusion, and political marginalization through a broader narrative of confrontation between Islam and other religious traditions. In both contexts, historical episodes of conflict are selectively emphasized and detached from the much longer histories of coexistence, trade, migration, intellectual exchange, cultural interaction, and political cooperation between Buddhist and Muslim communities (Akasoy, 2022; Elverskog, 2010). The problem, therefore, is not simply the existence of genuine theological differences between Buddhism and Islam, but the transformation of those differences into fixed civilizational boundaries and the subsequent interpretation of contemporary political and social tensions through a binary framework of religious confrontation. Such a perspective obscures the complex historical and socio-political factors that have shaped Buddhist-Muslim relations and risks reproducing the very antagonistic identities that contribute to contemporary tensions.

The paper challenges essentialist and conflict-oriented interpretations of Buddhism and Islam as essentially incompatible or inherently opposed civilizations by adopting a civilizational dialog paradigm for analyzing the historical and intellectual relationship between the two traditions. Similarly, the paper argues that their long history of interaction reveals a more complex pattern of encounter, coexistence, contestation, and mutual engagement rather than approaching Buddhist-Muslim relations through a framework of permanent civilizational antagonism. While acknowledging the substantial theological and philosophical differences between Buddhism and Islam, the paper draws attention to areas of overlapping ethical concern, including human well-being, ethical conduct, social responsibility, justice, compassion, and the pursuit of a meaningful and harmonious social order. These areas of convergence are not presented as evidence of religious sameness or as grounds for overlooking fundamental doctrinal differences; rather, they provide important foundations upon which meaningful civilizational dialogue can take place. By bringing historical encounters and shared ethical concerns into analytical focus, the paper seeks to move beyond both narratives of civilizational

conflict and reductive claims of religious compatibility, proposing instead a dialogical framework that recognizes difference while creating possibilities for mutual understanding, ethical engagement, peaceful coexistence, and constructive relations between Buddhist and Muslim communities.

In developing this argument, the work is organized into three sections. Following this introduction, the second section develops the work's conceptual framework by examining the meaning, scope, and significance of civilizational dialogue. It highlights the potential of civilizational dialogue paradigm to unpack the complex processes through which ideas, values, and practices have traversed across civilizations and shaped interactions among them across different historical periods and in contemporary contexts. It establishes civilizational dialogue as an analytical and normative paradigm for engaging differences between religious traditions while identifying areas of shared ethical concern and possibilities for mutual understanding. The third section applies this framework to Buddhist-Muslim relations by examining how theological differences and historical stereotypes have shaped perceptions of the two traditions and how a civilizational-dialogue approach can challenge conflict-oriented narratives and provide a more balanced understanding of their historical relationship. The finally the paper concludes with a few suggestions on how this framework can be translated into practice and offers practical suggestions for developing more constructive, inclusive, and transformative forms of Buddhist-Muslim engagement in global South.

2. CIVILIZATIONAL DIALOGUE: A CONCEPTUAL VIEW

The concept of civilizational dialogue encompasses broader interactions, viewing religion as component of wider historical and social processes. According to Tehranian, Chappell, and K  ng (2002), the Civilizational Dialogue represents a new peace agenda for the new millennium, moving beyond narrow theological boundaries to engage with diverse religious and secular perspectives on global challenges. As a result, it is vital to define civilization and explain how civilizational dialogue differs from previous frameworks.

The idea of civilization has often been understood as more than a collection of religious beliefs, cultural practices, or social institutions. It refers to a broader framework through which communities interpret human existence, organize social life, develop knowledge systems, and establish moral principles (Segesvary, 2000).

So, a civilization is more than a society or a historical period. As civilizations develop, they bring together diverse peoples, languages, cultures, and religions within a common social and political framework. It is a long-term way of life shaped by shared beliefs, values, knowledge, and institutions. They are often characterized by organized governments, developed economies, systems of law, education, science, technology, literature, and the arts. Although a civilization consists of many different cultures, these cultures interact and influence one another, creating a broader civilizational identity. In this sense, a civilization is a dynamic and evolving system that reflects the collective achievements, values, and experiences of human societies over time (Wei, 2011). Even at its initial stage, a civilization has a large population and considerable geographical scope. As it grows, it incorporates a huge number of ethnic groups or peoples and a variety of customs, habits, languages and even religions.¹ When viewed from this perspective, Buddhism and Islam can be understood not only as religious traditions but also as civilizational traditions that have shaped intellectual, cultural, and social developments across different historical periods. Therefore, Civilization is best understood not as a nation-state or a single creed, but as a long historical formation of meanings, institutions, moral codes, and shared ways of life (Segesvary, 2000). Swidler (2015) further emphasizes that religion lies at the heart of every civilization, making civilizational dialogue, defined as a focused conversation across worldviews, both necessary and urgent. Together, these scholars ask not only what civilization is, but why dialogue among civilizations matters for mutual understanding and global peace (Segesvary, 2000; Swidler, 2015).

The concept of Civilizational Dialogue examines how different civilizations interact through exchange, learning, negotiation, and mutual influence rather than viewing them only through the lens of conflict. The concept of Dialogue Among Civilizations was proposed by former Iranian President Muhammad Khatami in reaction to Samuel P. Huntington's theory of a Clash of Civilizations. In a letter to UNESCO in 1972, Austrian philosopher Hans K  chler coined the phrase and

¹ In a very straightforward manner, the American anthropologist Rushton Coulborn argues that the differences between a 'civilized society' and 'primitive society' are mainly in the way of 'quantity' or 'amount'. For instance, a civilized society possesses more knowledge about the natural environment than a primitive society; it possesses more wealth not only in terms of absolute amount but on a per capita basis; in addition, the geographical area a civilized society covers are much larger than that of a primitive society. (Rushton Coulborn, *Origins of Civilized Societies* [1959], Princeton: Princeton University Press, 16-17) Highly possibly, Huntington's conception of civilization as 'culture writ large' (see below) might have originated here.

proposed the notion of an international conference on the "dialogue between different civilizations" (*dialogue entre les différentes civilisations*).²

Civilizational dialogue goes beyond the mere tolerance of differences between two communities. Petito (2023) conceptualizes it, drawing on Gadamer, as a "fusion of horizons"³, a dialogical process through which different cultural and historical perspectives encounter one another and generate mutual understanding and a shared perspective. In this sense, civilizational dialogue contributes to the development of a peaceful and multicultural international order. Similarly, Michael and Petito (2009) present civilizational dialogue as an alternative approach to conventional models of global governance. Similarly, Scholars broadly agree that dialogue constitutes a long-term process of mutual understanding across difference, not the erasure or denial of conflict, but its constructive navigation (Dallmayr & Manoochehri, 2007; Kayaoğlu, 2007; Çetin, 2007; Paul, 2001). So, Civilizational dialogue emerged partly in response to critiques of essentialist conceptions of civilizations. Essentialism assumes that social or cultural groups are "homogenous" entities possessing an "underlying essence" with "deep-seated and unalterable properties," whereas non-essentialist perspectives regard such categories as "arbitrary, malleable, and social-political constructions (Nicholas, 2018). This perspective underpins the 'clash of civilizations' theory, which attributes post-Cold War conflicts primarily to religious and cultural differences (Huntington, 2000). However, numerous scholars have challenged this theory, highlighting the historical interconnectedness of civilizations, their internal diversity, and their capacity for transformation in response to shifting political contexts (Algeriani, 2018; Seif-Amirhosseini, 2013).

This work employs civilizational dialogue as an analytical framework for critically examining Buddhist-Muslim relations beyond the narrow paradigm of tolerance. Rather than treating Buddhism and Islam as internally homogeneous and historically self-contained traditions, the paper approaches them as dynamic civilizational formations that have developed through encounters, exchanges,

² "Letter, dated 26 September 1972, to Ms. Marie-Pierre Herzog, Director of the Division of Philosophy, UNESCO, Paris". www.i-p-o.org.

³ The "fusion of horizons," proposed by Hans-Georg Gadamer, is the process through which dialogue between people from different cultural or historical backgrounds creates mutual understanding and a new shared perspective.

contestations, and mutual influences across different historical and geographical contexts. This perspective makes it possible to move beyond narratives that reduce Buddhist-Muslim relations either to episodes of conflict or to superficial claims of religious harmony, while also avoiding the assumption that differences between the two traditions must inevitably produce civilizational confrontation. Accordingly, the paper examines how Muslim and Buddhist communities have historically negotiated religious and cultural differences, interacted through intellectual, commercial, social, and political networks, and responded to changing historical circumstances. Civilizational dialogue is therefore understood here not simply as a normative call for peaceful coexistence or mutual tolerance, but as a critical process of engaging difference, reflecting upon inherited perceptions and stereotypes, recognizing histories of interaction and mutual influence, and identifying areas of shared ethical and social concern.

3. BUDDHIST-MUSLIM CIVILIZATIONAL INTERACTIONS: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

One of the primary drivers of contemporary discourses that sustain communal tensions within ethno-nationalist circles is the selective and decontextualized interpretation of historical relations between Buddhists and Muslims. Historical episodes of conflict are often invoked to construct narratives of enduring civilizational antagonism, portraying the two traditions as inherently incompatible and reinforcing perceptions of a persistent threat posed by the religious “other.” Such narratives privilege episodes of violence, political confrontation, and religious contestation while marginalizing the extensive histories of coexistence, trade, migration, intellectual exchange, cultural interaction, and pragmatic accommodation that also shaped Buddhist-Muslim relations. Consequently, history is not merely remembered but selectively mobilized to legitimize contemporary fears, deepen communal boundaries, and reinforce ethno-nationalist claims. A closer examination of the historical record, however, reveals a far more complex and multidimensional relationship shaped by changing political circumstances, geographical proximity, trade networks, migration, intellectual encounters, and cultural exchange. Although contact was not always extensive and periods of tension and conflict certainly occurred, Buddhist and Muslim communities encountered one another through commercial, administrative, scholarly, and social networks connecting Central, South, and Southeast Asia. These encounters generated not only competition and contestation but also

accommodation, knowledge exchange, and forms of coexistence. Therefore, revisiting this history is essential not to romanticize the past or deny historical tensions, but to contextualize them within their broader political, social, economic, and intellectual settings and to challenge simplified assumptions of an inherent Buddhist-Muslim civilizational divide. Such a historically grounded approach also provides an important foundation for civilizational dialogue by recovering experiences in which differences were negotiated alongside opportunities for mutual learning, interaction, and engagement.

This complexity is particularly evident when the history of Buddhist-Muslim interaction is traced to its earliest stages. In the past, early Buddhist-Muslim interaction was limited because of the great geographical distance between their communities. However, trade routes connecting Arabia with Central and South Asia may have created some awareness of Buddhism in the Arabian Peninsula. The Prophet Muhammad's teachings on respecting other religious communities also provided an important foundation for later interreligious relations. During the caliphates of 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb and 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān, Muslim expansion reached Khurasan, Sistan, and Bactria, where Buddhist communities had long existed. Although there are no clear records of direct Buddhist-Muslim encounters during the Prophet's time or the period of the first four caliphs, historical sources suggest that some interaction may have taken place, particularly during the time of 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (al-Baladhuri, 892/1866, p. 406; al-Tabari, ed. 2001; Gibb, 1923; Akbar Ali, Shehzada Afzal, Rahmat ullah, 2022)

Even during the Umayyad period (661-750 CE), interactions between Buddhists and Muslims remained limited because of geographical and cultural differences. The Umayyad Caliphate expanded into Central Asia, where Buddhist communities existed alongside other religious traditions. However, the early Muslim presence in these regions was mainly military. But contact with Buddhists was largely limited to trade and political relations, while meaningful intellectual or religious exchanges were still rare (Biran, 2024, pp. 13-64). Thus, the Umayyad period can be seen as a period of initial contact that later provided a basis for deeper Buddhist-Muslim interactions. During this period, about three decades after the Prophet Muhammad, the first identifiable encounters between Buddhist and Muslim communities took place in Buddhist-influenced areas under Umayyad rule in Central Asia. Early Muslim movements into northwest India were mainly driven

by economic interests rather than religious conversion. Islam was still largely associated with Arab communities, and debates over the role of non-Arabs created internal tensions within the Muslim community. Therefore, Arab forces were more focused on dealing with internal political challenges than on converting local Buddhist populations (Elverskog, 2010, p. 44).

The early Muslim expansion into Central Asia led to the annexation of parts of the Indian subcontinent, bringing Arabs into contact with ancient civilizations in Persia, Transoxiana, Afghanistan, and Sindh, where Hinduism and Buddhism had long spread. Trade between India and the Arab world had existed for centuries, particularly in spices, with Arab merchants playing a key role in transit trade between Indian ports, Yemen, Syria, Egypt, and Europe. The rise of Islam did not create new relations with India but added a religious dimension to existing trade networks. The first major conflict between the Indian subcontinent and Islamic Arabia occurred due to issues related to Arab sailors in the Indian Ocean trade. Arab merchants travelled as far as Ceylon, and when some died there, the local ruler sent their widows, children, and gifts to Arabia. However, the vessels were attacked by pirates near Debut (modern Karachi), who looted the gifts and captured Muslim women and children. The Umayyad viceroy, Hajjaj demanded their release from King Dahar of Sindh, but his request was ignored. In response, Hajjaj convinced Caliph Walid to launch a military campaign against Sindh. Two initial expeditions failed, but a third, led by the young general Muhammad Ibn Qasim, succeeded. With a well-equipped force of cavalry and camel corps, Qasim captured Sindh, marking the first time the Muslim flag was raised on the Indian subcontinent (Ramli, Awang, & Ab Rahman, 2020).

General Muhammad Ibn Qasim discovered the existence of Buddhists and considered them as idol worshippers (Yusuf, 2010a), since not mentioned in any verses in the Qur'ān nor in the Ḥadīth or *Ijmā* (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 a 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). Muslims presented these terms to the Buddhist community, who accepted them on the condition that they were granted complete freedom to practice their religion and that their monasteries remained safeguarded.

During the time of Muhammad bin Qasim, individuals were permitted to practice their respective faiths freely and without restriction (Awang, Ramli, & Ab Rahman, 2022). These inclusive policies reflected the Muslim community's tolerance toward Buddhists, which in turn fostered amicable relations and even led some Buddhists to embrace Islam. Notably, Buddhist monks, who had previously lived under Hindu rule, chose to support and align themselves with Muhammad bin Qasim against the Hindu governor. This shift in allegiance was influenced by widespread discontent with Hindu rule and, at the very least, a lack of loyalty toward Hindu authorities, which significantly contributed to the success of the Arab conquest. At the time, a large segment of the population in Sind and Multan was Buddhist. However, Chach, a Brahmin minister who had usurped the Buddhist throne in 622 A.D., was widely unpopular among various social and political groups. As a result, many politicians and officials rapidly transferred their allegiance to the Arabs (Ikram, 1969, p. 9). Berzine offers that, "During the early centuries following the time of the Buddha, Buddhist teachings had spread from the Indian subcontinent to present-day Afghanistan, eastern Iran, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan. Both lay and monastic Buddhist communities flourished there. Beginning with the first three decades after the time of the Prophet, these regions came under Arab Islamic rule under the Umayyad and then the Abbasid Caliphates, at which time Buddhists received dhimmi ['People of the Book'] status (Berzin, n.d., Esposito, 2005, p. 35). Granting dhimmi status to Buddhists under Islamic rule was a significant recognition of their religious identity. Although the Qur'an primarily refers to Jews, Christians, and Sabians as eligible for this protected status, Islamic authorities at times extended it to Buddhists, especially during the early Islamic conquests in Central and South Asia. This status allowed Buddhists to practice their religion, maintain monasteries, and live under Muslim rule in exchange for paying the jizya tax. Recognising Buddhists as dhimmis reflected a degree of religious tolerance and acknowledged their structured belief system within the broader framework of Islamic governance.

After the Abbasids overthrew the Umayyads in 750, they installed their own administrators to oversee the province of Sind (in present-day India and Pakistan). The relationship between Muslims and Buddhism grew during the Abbasid period (775-809 AD), especially in an intellectual aspect. In the 8th century CE, during the Abbasid period, the earliest meaningful interaction between Buddhist and Muslim scholars started. Caliph al-Mansur established a Bayt al-Hikmat (House of

Knowledge) in Baghdad at that time for the study and translation of literature from Greek and Indian cultural works, particularly (Ramli, Awang, & Ab Rahman, 2020). As part of his intellectual and cultural initiatives, Caliph al-Mahdi extended invitations to Buddhist monks from monasteries across the Indian subcontinent and Afghanistan to participate in the scholarly activities of the Bayt al-Hikma. He commissioned them to translate significant Sanskrit works (Selim, 2011).

During the 8th-century Abbasid period, intellectual exchange grew, especially under the Barmakids, a family from Balkh with Buddhist roots, who supported the translation of Sanskrit medical, scientific, and Buddhist texts into Arabic (Elverskog, 2009). During the Mongol Ilkhanid era, rulers commissioned comprehensive works like Rashid al-Din's history, which objectively documented Buddhist beliefs with the help of monks (Elverskog, 2009). These interactions were highly significant, sparking the Islamic Golden Age's translation movement, facilitating Silk Road commerce, and establishing a lasting legacy of Eurasian cultural synthesis (Elverskog, 2009).

Buddhist and Islamic civilizations possessed unique strengths that historically enriched one another. While Muslims excelled in trade, governance, and urbanization, Buddhists offered profound advancements in mathematics, medicine, and rational logic (Ramli et al., 2020). Historically, this uniqueness fostered mutual benefit for instance, the Abbasids invited Buddhist scholars to the House of Wisdom to translate texts, integrating the Buddhist mathematical concept of *sunya* (zero) into Arabic numerals (Ramli et al., 2020). Furthermore, Buddhist logical frameworks challenged Muslim scholars to refine their rational theology during intellectual debates in Baghdad (Ramli et al., 2020).

These broader patterns of commercial, administrative, and cultural interaction also created spaces for more direct forms of intellectual and religious engagement. While economic exchange and pragmatic accommodation constituted important dimensions of early Buddhist-Muslim relations, encounters were not confined to material or political interests. Over time, increased contact brought Buddhist and Muslim scholars, travellers, and religious representatives into intellectual proximity, generating curiosity about each other's beliefs, practices, and systems of thought. The earliest recorded interfaith debate occurred during the reign of Harun al-Rashid. A Buddhist pandit, apparently from northwest India, challenged scholars at the Caliph's court, questioning the logic of divine

omnipotence in Islamic doctrine. Although accounts differ on the outcome, and this encounter illustrates the intensity and seriousness of early interfaith exchange (Elverskog, 2009). Similarly, some scholars, such as al-Ṭabarī, al-Mas'ūdī, and al-Muqaddasī, documented Buddhist rituals, monasteries, and doctrines without obvious polemics, conveying a tone of respect and universal interest (al-Muqaddasī, 1897; al-Ṭabarī, 1991). Later thinkers such as al-Bīrūnī and al-Shahrastānī included the Buddhist tradition in their theological compendiums, often classifying it within Islamic categories, such as *ahl al-bid'a* (al-Bīrūnī, 2008; Berzin, 2010). It is worthy to mention that "...as noted by modern scholarship, al-Biruni utilized terminology such as 'Sāhib al-Hamra al-Shumania' (owners of the red robes) and 'al-Bud' to identify Buddhists and their institutions (Sachau 1910: 158; see also Elverskog 2010)." Edward C. Sachau's authoritative translation, Alberuni's India, the primary reference to the Shumaniyya (Buddhists) appears in Volume I, Chapter IX, where al-Biruni describes the historical presence of Buddhism in Western Asia before the rise of Islam:

"In former times, Khurasan, Persis, Irak, Mosul, the country up to the frontier of Syria, was Buddhistic, but then the Zarathustrians rose... Then followed Islam... The followers of Buddhistic doctrines are called Shamaniyya." (Sachau 1910: 158)

On the Buddhist side, engagement with Islam was minimal. One remarkable text act as the *Kālacakra Tantra* (10th-11th centuries), which refers to Muslims as Tāyi mlecca. Although frequently framed in eschatological terms, this study acknowledges aspects of Islamic practice, including monotheism, ethics, and the five daily prayers (Berzin, 2010). In the modern era, regions such as Malaysia and Thailand demonstrate intense Buddhist-Muslim social interaction. This historical precedent of scholarly curiosity, coexistence, and openness delivers a valuable springboard for future interfaith engagement (Elverskog, 2019; Ramli et al., 2020).

Taken together, these historical encounters challenge the stereotypical representation of Buddhists and Muslims as members of inherently antagonistic and mutually exclusive civilizations. The historical record instead points to a relationship characterized by multiple and sometimes contradictory forms of interaction, including trade, migration, political negotiation, intellectual curiosity, cultural exchange, accommodation, and, at certain moments, conflict. Recognizing

these diverse experiences does not require romanticizing Buddhist-Muslim relations or denying episodes of violence and contestation; rather, it requires placing such episodes within the wider historical contexts in which they occurred. The evidence demonstrates that religious difference did not inevitably produce civilizational hostility and that boundaries between Buddhist and Muslim societies were often negotiated through sustained contact and mutual adaptation. Consequently, the notion of an enduring Buddhist-Muslim civilizational divide is historically reductive. Recovering this complexity is important not only for correcting selective interpretations of the past but also for establishing a historically informed foundation for civilizational dialogue in the present, in which difference can coexist with engagement, mutual learning, and shared ethical concerns.

Modern interfaith dialogue has largely developed within Western, and particularly Christian, theological and intellectual contexts (Masuzawa, 2005). Consequently, many of its concepts, methods, and institutional frameworks carry Western and Christian-centric assumptions about religion, religious identity, and the encounter between “self” and “other.” Although interfaith dialogue has promoted important goals such as tolerance, mutual understanding, and peaceful coexistence, its dominant models have often treated Western and Christian categories as universal standards for understanding religious traditions (Cornille, 2013). This has sometimes marginalized Asian and other non-Western traditions by positioning them primarily as objects of dialogue rather than as equal producers of religious knowledge and frameworks for interreligious engagement. Therefore, a decolonized approach to interfaith dialogue should challenge this imbalance by sharing epistemic authority, recognizing the lived histories and agency of communities affected by colonialism, and allowing different traditions to shape the purposes and terms of dialogue. In the context of Buddhist-Muslim civilizational dialogue, this requires moving beyond a limited focus on coexistence toward a more reciprocal process of historical recovery, critical self-reflection, and shared world-making. Buddhists and Muslims should engage one another not as representatives of fixed or homogeneous civilizations, but as participants in historically interconnected traditions that can learn from one another, critically reflect on their own traditions, and cooperate on shared human concerns.

4. SHARED ETHICAL COMMITMENTS IN BUDDHISM AND ISLAM: EXAMINING PARALLELISM AS AN APPROACH TO INTERRELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDING

Recent scholarship on Buddhist-Muslim relations increasingly focus on ethical similarities, shared human concerns, and possibilities for mutual understanding rather than only doctrinal differences and historical conflicts (Ashath, 2021, 2024; Yusuf, 2007). These studies highlight common concerns such as compassion, justice, peace, human well-being, and social harmony (Ashath 2022). One important method identified in this scholarship is parallelism, which highlights similar ethical principles, values, and practices while recognizing their distinct theological and philosophical foundations (Obuse 2024). This approach avoids treating Buddhism and Islam as identical traditions and instead respects their distinct identities. It also provides a useful basis for interreligious dialogue, mutual learning, and cooperation while challenging stereotypes that portray the two traditions as incompatible.

Several scholars have actively contributed to fostering Buddhist-Muslim understanding through distinct methodological approach of parallelism. This approach seeks to overcome doctrinal differences while identifying possible grounds for dialogue and mutual recognition (Ashath, 2021, 2024). Although these scholars differ considerably in their theological orientations, intellectual traditions, and practical objectives, their approaches can broadly be understood through the analytical lens of parallelism (Obuse, 2024). Parallelism, in this context, does not necessarily imply that Buddhism and Islam are doctrinally identical or that their fundamental theological claims can be reconciled into a single religious framework. Rather, it provides a comparative space in which similarities, resonances, and functional equivalents can be explored while acknowledging enduring differences. This approach is particularly significant for Buddhist-Muslim dialogue because it avoids the assumption that meaningful interreligious engagement requires theological consensus. Instead, it allows dialogue to proceed through the recognition that different religious traditions may articulate comparable ethical, spiritual, philosophical, or socio-political concerns through distinct conceptual vocabularies.

Among the scholars identified by Obuse (2024), Alexander Berzin (2007, 2008) employs doctrinal parallelism to establish a relatively comfortable dialogic environment between Buddhist and Muslim interlocutors without claiming absolute dogmatic sameness. Doctrinal parallelism is concerned with identifying comparable ideas, concepts, or teachings within different religious systems while carefully recognizing that their theological foundations may remain distinct. In this sense, Berzin's approach demonstrates that doctrinal comparison can function as a bridge for communication rather than as an attempt to prove that the two religions teach exactly the same things (Berzin 2007, 2008). By drawing attention to conceptual correspondences, this approach creates a basis for dialogue while maintaining the integrity of each tradition's doctrinal identity.

Similarly, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu adopts a comparative inclusivist approach to Buddhist-Muslim relations by looking beyond the external differences between religions to identify their shared spiritual essence. He explicitly includes Islam among traditions that, at their deepest level, point toward the same ultimate truth, particularly through overcoming attachment, egoism, and selfishness. Thus, rather than viewing Buddhism and Islam as inherently opposed, his methodology emphasizes common ethical and spiritual principles as a basis for interreligious understanding (Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, 1969). Its value for interreligious dialogue therefore lies in shifting attention from doctrinal competition toward common spiritual and ethical aspirations, although such an approach also raises questions about whether distinctive theological claims may be overly generalized.

Masao Abe likewise employs an inclusivist framework to explore the underlying unity of world religions. His approach is concerned with identifying a deeper religious or philosophical ground that can accommodate diverse traditions without requiring them to abandon their particular identities. Inclusivism, in this sense, provides a framework through which apparent differences can be interpreted within a broader horizon of religious interconnectedness (Masao Abe and William R. LaFleur, 1985). For Buddhist-Muslim dialogue, this creates the possibility of seeing religious diversity not simply as a source of division but as an opportunity to explore different manifestations of broader human and spiritual concerns. Nevertheless, the emphasis on underlying unity requires careful consideration because Buddhism and Islam possess significantly different understandings of ultimate reality, revelation, God, selfhood, and salvation.

Other scholars extend parallelism beyond explicitly theological or metaphysical concerns. Rikyū Kono utilizes socio-politically inspired parallelism to facilitate grassroots communication and mutual respect between religious communities (Obuse, 2024). This approach focuses on practical social relationships rather than attempting to resolve complex theological disagreements. It recognizes that Buddhist-Muslim understanding can develop through everyday interaction, community cooperation, and shared responses to social problems. Such an approach is particularly relevant in plural societies where interpersonal trust and community-level engagement can contribute to reducing suspicion and strengthening social cohesion.

Toshihiko Izutsu develops a structural parallelism of mystical experiences, examining common metaphilosophical structures through which different religious traditions articulate spiritual experience (Izutsu, T. 1983). Structural parallelism is concerned less with whether two traditions use identical theological language and more with whether comparable patterns or structures can be identified within their philosophical and mystical thought. Izutsu's approach therefore allows Buddhist and Islamic mystical traditions to be placed in conversation at the level of experience, consciousness, and metaphysical reflection. Rather than asserting that Buddhist and Islamic mysticism are identical, it investigates whether their different conceptual systems respond to comparable questions concerning human existence, transcendence, and spiritual transformation.

Sulak Sivaraksa champions socially engaged activism as a means of promoting harmonious coexistence (Obuse, 2024). This approach shifts interreligious dialogue from intellectual discussion toward practical engagement with social realities. Its central premise is that religious traditions can build mutual understanding by cooperating in addressing injustice, inequality, violence, environmental concerns, and other forms of social suffering. In this sense, dialogue becomes something practiced through shared action rather than something confined to theological conferences or academic discussions. Such socially engaged parallelism is especially significant because it provides opportunities for Buddhists and Muslims to discover common ethical commitments through concrete social participation.

Imtiyaz Yusuf utilizes socio-political parallelism to ease regional communal tensions and cultivate empathetic understanding between Buddhists and

Muslims (Imtiyaz Yusuf, 2009, 2010, 2017). This approach places religious relations within their broader political, historical, and social contexts and recognizes that communal tensions cannot always be resolved through theological comparison alone. Socio-political parallelism therefore seeks to identify shared historical experiences, social concerns, and political interests that can create opportunities for mutual recognition. Its importance lies particularly in contexts where religious identities have become entangled with nationalism, political mobilization, or communal conflict. By emphasizing shared social realities, the approach can contribute to reducing perceptions of the religious “other” as an inherent threat.

Reza Shah-Kazemi adopts metaphysical parallelism and perennialism, emphasizing deeper spiritual and mystical affinities between religious traditions (Shah-Kazemi, 2010). Metaphysical parallelism seeks to identify similarities at the level of ultimate questions concerning reality, transcendence, spiritual knowledge, and human transformation. Perennialism further assumes that different religious traditions may contain manifestations of a deeper or universal truth, even when their doctrines and symbols differ. Within Buddhist-Muslim dialogue, this approach attempts to move beyond surface-level theological differences and explore deeper spiritual correspondences. Its strength is its capacity to challenge perceptions of complete religious remoteness, although its universalist orientation must be applied carefully so that genuine differences between Buddhist and Islamic metaphysical frameworks are not overlooked.

The first official Buddhist-Muslim dialogue in Southeast Asia, titled “Alternative Politics for Asia” and held in Penang, Malaysia on 11-13 October 1996, featured Chandra Muzaffar (1947), a Malaysian Muslim scholar and president of the International Movement for a Just World (just), and Sulak Sivaraksa (1933-), the president of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (ineb) as main speakers. Chandra Muzaffar focuses on shared social ethics and solidarity as resources for responding to global challenges (Muzaffar, 2021). His approach emphasizes the practical ethical responsibilities that religious communities may share in confronting injustice, conflict, exploitation, and other global problems. Rather than beginning with the question of whether Buddhism and Islam possess identical theological doctrines, this approach asks what ethical commitments can motivate Buddhists and Muslims to work together for the common good. Shared ethical concerns consequently become a foundation for

solidarity and collective action. This perspective is particularly valuable because it demonstrates that meaningful interreligious relations can be constructed around common human concerns even when substantial doctrinal differences remain.

Osman Bakar advocates intra- and inter-religious dialogue centered on the universal principle of mercy. His approach places ethical and spiritual values at the center of dialogue, treating mercy as a principle capable of generating communication across religious boundaries (Osman Bakar 2020). Rather than requiring agreement on all theological questions, mercy provides an ethical orientation through which religious communities can recognize their shared responsibility toward human dignity, peaceful coexistence, and social harmony. In this respect, Bakar's approach illustrates how an Islamic ethical concept can serve as a point of engagement with other religious traditions while remaining grounded in the conceptual resources of Islam.

Ashath Siraas proposes a dialogical-parallelist framework for the comparative study of Buddhism and Islam that avoids both superficial romanticism and theological reductionism (Ashath, 2021, 2024). The framework recognizes the distinct theological and philosophical foundations of both traditions while exploring their functional, ethical, and practical similarities. Drawing on phenomenological comparison, it examines each tradition on its own terms and avoids treating concepts such as Buddhist *anattā* (non-self) and *dukkha* (suffering) as equivalents of Islamic concepts such as *tawhīd* (divine oneness) and *kabad* (struggle or hardship). Instead, it focuses on possible ethical and existential parallels without denying fundamental doctrinal differences. Therefore, Buddhism and Islam are understood as distinct but parallel religious trajectories that can meet at dialogical points without merging into a single worldview. This approach promotes mutual understanding, ethical cooperation, and constructive engagement while preserving the religious identity and integrity of each tradition.

Taken together, these approaches demonstrate that parallelism operates across several interconnected levels- doctrinal, inclusivist, philosophical, mystical, ethical, social, and political. Their diversity indicates that parallelism should not be understood as a single, uniform methodology. Rather, it represents a family of comparative strategies that share a common objective: identifying meaningful correspondences between religious traditions while preserving their particularity. The central analytical value of parallelism therefore lies in its attempt to negotiate the tension between similarity and difference. It avoids the first extreme of treating

Buddhism and Islam as completely incompatible and the second extreme of reducing their differences to an assumed universal religious sameness.

However, although Keiko Obuse provides an important analytical account of parallelism as an alternative approach to Buddhist-Muslim dialogue, her discussion leaves an important conceptual question insufficiently developed. Obuse demonstrates how different scholars employ parallelism, but she does not provide a sufficiently comprehensive explanation of what parallelism fundamentally entails as a comparative concept. More importantly, the framework requires further examination of how the possibility of parallelism is understood from within Buddhism and Islam themselves. If parallelism is to function as more than a methodological technique imposed externally upon the two traditions, it is necessary to investigate whether Buddhist and Islamic intellectual traditions contain their own conceptual resources for recognizing similarity, correspondence, ethical convergence, and meaningful difference.

Therefore, the approaches identified by Obuse provide an important foundation while simultaneously revealing a significant conceptual gap. The central issue is not simply whether Buddhism and Islam possess similarities, but how similarities can be recognized without collapsing fundamental differences, and how differences can be maintained without preventing meaningful comparison. Examining this question requires moving beyond the cataloguing of contemporary scholars toward a deeper analysis of the comparative possibilities embedded within Buddhist and Islamic worldviews. Such an approach can strengthen the theoretical foundations of Buddhist-Muslim dialogue by demonstrating that parallelism is not merely a strategy for bypassing theological disagreement, but a potentially substantive framework for understanding how distinct religious traditions can encounter one another through shared ethical concerns, philosophical resonances, and historically situated forms of human coexistence.

5. ANALAYTICAL CONCLUSION

This paper argues that Buddhist-Muslim relations should be understood through a civilizational-dialogue paradigm rather than a framework of civilizational conflict. This approach views Buddhism and Islam as dynamic traditions shaped by encounters, exchanges, negotiations, and mutual influences. Their shared history includes trade, migration, political accommodation, intellectual exchange, cultural

interaction, and, at times, conflict (Elverskog, 2009). Therefore, episodes of conflict should not be treated as evidence of an enduring Buddhist-Muslim divide. A dialogue-based approach does not deny historical conflict or romanticize the past; rather, it places such events within their specific political, social, economic, and historical contexts. This perspective shows that religious differences did not inevitably lead to hostility and that Buddhist and Muslim communities often found ways to negotiate differences and maintain meaningful interaction.

This reading of history also helps identify shared ethical commitments between Buddhism and Islam. The concept of parallelism highlights ethical, philosophical, social, and spiritual similarities without claiming that the two traditions are doctrinally identical. Although Buddhism and Islam have different theological and metaphysical foundations, both address human well-being, moral responsibility, compassion, justice, peace, and social harmony. Identifying these shared concerns does not erase religious differences; rather, it shows that such differences do not prevent meaningful dialogue. Parallelism provides a space for Buddhists and Muslims to explore how their traditions address common human challenges. This is especially important today, as nationalism, misinformation, Islamophobia, and narratives of civilizational conflict influence perceptions of the religious “other.” Thus, the civilizational-dialogue paradigm shifts the focus from whether Buddhism and Islam are compatible to how two distinct traditions can engage differences and promote coexistence, mutual learning, and cooperation.

The implications of these findings should extend beyond academic discussion and be translated into concrete educational and institutional projects. One of the most important areas for intervention is the revision of school and university textbooks dealing with religious history, Asian civilizations, interreligious relations, and social studies. Textbooks should incorporate historically grounded accounts of trade networks, intellectual exchanges, cultural interactions, political accommodation, migration, and everyday coexistence alongside episodes of conflict. Such an approach would allow students to understand that civilizations are historically interconnected rather than isolated entities. It would also help prevent the selective use of history to construct contemporary narratives of religious threat. Educational reform should not replace one simplistic narrative with another; rather, it should cultivate the ability to recognize complexity, plurality, historical context, and both difference and convergence.

Research institutions and universities can further institutionalize this approach by organizing conferences, research programmes, public lectures, comparative seminars, and collaborative projects specifically devoted to Buddhist-Muslim civilizational relations. Such initiatives should bring together scholars from religious studies, history, political science, sociology, anthropology, peace studies, and international relations, as well as Buddhist and Muslim intellectuals and community representatives. Conferences should move beyond merely discussing religious tolerance and instead examine concrete themes such as historical memory, shared ethics, religious nationalism, misinformation, social cohesion, peacebuilding, and the role of religion in addressing contemporary global challenges. Similarly, university courses can similarly incorporate Buddhist-Muslim relations into modules on comparative religion, civilizational studies, Asian politics, peace and conflict studies, and interfaith dialogue. This would transform civilizational dialogue from an abstract intellectual concept into an interdisciplinary field of inquiry through which students critically examine how religious identities are historically constructed, politically mobilized, and potentially reconfigured through dialogue.

The findings can also be incorporated into interfaith initiatives and professional training modules. Interfaith programmes frequently concentrate on dialogue between religious representatives, but a civilizational-dialogue approach suggests a broader model that combines historical literacy, comparative ethics, critical thinking, and practical cooperation. Training modules for religious leaders, teachers, youth leaders, civil society organizations, journalists, and community facilitators could include sections on the shared history of Buddhist-Muslim interaction, identifying stereotypes and misinformation, distinguishing theological difference from political conflict, understanding the consequences of civilizational essentialism, and developing shared ethical responses to social problems. So, practical exercises could encourage participants to compare ethical concepts, discuss contested historical narratives, analyse media representations, and design collaborative community initiatives. In this way, dialogue becomes not simply an event or a formal meeting but a sustained process of learning, relationship-building, and social engagement.

Ultimately, the contribution of a civilizational-dialogue paradigm lies in its capacity to connect historical reinterpretation with contemporary transformation. It

demonstrates that the past can either be mobilized to reproduce antagonism or reinterpreted to create possibilities for mutual understanding. A more balanced history of Buddhist-Muslim relations, combined with systematic attention to shared ethical commitments, can challenge stereotypes without denying differences. The task ahead is therefore not to construct an artificial narrative of Buddhist-Muslim sameness, but to develop intellectual and institutional spaces in which difference, historical complexity, ethical convergence, and mutual learning can coexist. Incorporating these insights into textbooks, university curricula, research programmes, conferences, interfaith initiatives, and training modules can help transform civilizational dialogue from a theoretical paradigm into a practical resource for social cohesion. In societies where religious identities are increasingly politicized, such an approach can contribute to weakening narratives of inherent civilizational antagonism and strengthening more historically informed, ethically grounded, and constructive forms of Buddhist-Muslim engagement.

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