

Book Reviews

Kieko Obuse. *Buddhism and Islam: Mutual Engagements in Southeast Asia and Japan.* Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2025. 303 pp. ISBN: 9789004704541.

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The academic study of diverse religious traditions, along with their comparison and evaluation, was significantly influenced by nineteenth-century Christian missionaries who sought to understand the beliefs of the people they aimed to reach. This pursuit led to challenges and defenses of various exclusivist claims within Christianity.¹ So, the typology of religious diversity—Exclusivism, Inclusivism, and Pluralism—was introduced by Alan Race, primarily within the context of Christian engagement with other faiths.² Consequently, theories of religious diversity have often emerged from debates surrounding such claims, with discussions continuing within Christian theological discourse.³ So, these three categories are identified as limited and problematic when applied to the broader comparative study of Buddhism and Islam. Their Christian-centric origins fail to account for the unique theological and historical dimensions of these traditions. Therefore, new approaches and methodologies are necessary to foster a more refined and contextually appropriate understanding of Buddhist-Muslim relations.

Kieko Obuse's *Buddhism and Islam: Mutual Engagements in*

¹ See Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith and Mission* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

² See Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (London: SCM Press, 1983).

³ See Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions: Biblical, Historical, and Contemporary Perspectives* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

Southeast Asia and Japan explores Buddhist-Muslim engagements across historical, doctrinal, and socio-political dimensions. Obuse challenges traditional narratives of incompatibility between Buddhism and Islam by demonstrating that their interactions have been dynamic, and context-driven and introducing parallelism as a unique approach to tackle Buddhist-Muslim Understanding. To elaborate on this argument, the author organizes the work into six key sections that cover theoretical frameworks, historical interactions, doctrinal similarities, and contemporary implications.

Initially, the book discusses key existing theoretical foundations in examining Buddhist-Muslim engagements (pp. 3-9). Obuse critiques it as they are rooted in Euro-Christo-centric methodologies prevalent in comparative religious studies. She argues that these approaches often obscure native or own frameworks of interfaith interaction, ultimately leading to a misrepresentation of the dynamics at play. Building on these critical notes, Obuse introduces the methodological concept of *parallelism*, an approach that emphasizes structural similarities rather than theological syncretism (pp. 9-15, 32-48). Drawing from the leading works of the famous authorities in the field such as Alexander Berzin, Shah-Kazemi and Imtiyaz Yusuf, she argues that Buddhism and Islam share overlapping conceptual frameworks, despite their doctrinal differences. To substantiate her argument, she discusses some teachings focusing on similarities, like between the Bodhisattva doctrine of Buddhism and the Islamic concept of prophethood (pp. 35-41) and doctrines of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) in Buddhism and divine unity (*Tawḥīd*) (The Oneness of God) in Islam. Here, she points out that these concepts function as analogous metaphysical constructs and serve as a prime example of how each tradition interprets spiritual authority and soteriology. However, Obuse mentions that Buddhists are generally skeptical of the concept of an omnipotent, creator, and judging God, as well as the Islamic principles of *Tawḥīd* and divine revelation. This skepticism arises from the Buddhist worldview, which is based on dependent origination, karma, and rebirth, leaving no need or space for such a deity (p. 53).

The work next moves to explore the historical encounters between Buddhism and Islam in detail (pp. 58-90). It focuses on early encounters (632–1256) and explains how Muslim travelers and scholars to Southeast Asia documented Buddhist practices, often interpreting them through an Islamic lens (pp. 58-67). It also notes that during the post-classical period (1256–1585), the Mongol Empire played a crucial role in facilitating intellectual exchanges, leading to new doctrinal reinterpretations in engaging with Buddhist tradition (pp. 71-77). In the modern era (1585–1947), colonialism significantly reshaped Buddhist-Muslim dynamics, simultaneously intensifying conflicts and fostering dialogue (pp. 78-90). The book effectively illustrates how these interactions have influenced mutual perceptions, shaping interfaith engagement over time.

In chapter three, the author explores the dynamic interplay between Buddhist-Muslim relations in Thailand and Malaysia, emphasizing both conflict and cooperation dynamics (pp. 93-116). Although Buddhist-Muslim relations have reached a positive peak, there may still be a possibility that negative narratives are used by some extreme elements (p. 99-100). Similarly, in Malaysia, the growing influence of Islamic ideas on Buddhist scholarship signals a shift in religious discourse, highlighting the adaptability and interconnectedness of these traditions (pp. 100-104). Beyond Southeast Asia, Obuse extends the analysis to Japan (pp. 166-232), where the historical reception of Islam transitioned from exoticism to a more profound interfaith intellectualism, challenging rigid monotheism- polytheism binaries.

The book's main arguments are constructed In Chapter Four, where Obues explains Buddhadasa's contribution significantly to Buddhist-Muslim understanding by proposing that all religions share the same "Absolute Truth," citing the Qur'anic verse, "For every nation there is an apostle (10:47)," as a unifying principle. He interprets "apostle" as a universal truth-preacher found in all traditions, including Buddhism, while acknowledging a hierarchy in conceptions of God, from personified to abstract (p. 119-120). However, his approach leans toward religious pluralism, which can

be problematic as it risks oversimplifying doctrinal differences and undermining the distinctiveness of each tradition. Similarly, Obuse explains the position of K. Sri Dhammananda, who advocated mutual respect and unity among religious groups, emphasizing cultural understanding and rejecting excessive proselytism as barriers to harmony. Additionally, a more direct comparative treatment of Buddhism and Islam has recently been contributed by See Hoon Peow from the Buddhist side, who emphasizes more similarities than differences. However, Islam's social nature fosters active engagement in societal improvement, contrasting with Buddhism's generally non-engaged approach (pp. 125–127).

With this background, Obuse introduces parallelism as a methodology that highlights the analogical compatibility between Buddhist and Islamic concepts, such as *dukkha* (suffering) and *kabad* (hardship), which are alleviated through *mettā-karuṇā* (loving-kindness) and *rahmah* (mercy). She argues that Imtiyaz Yusuf's Buddha-Prophet parallelism, rooted in their transformative experiences—*nirvāṇa* for the Buddha and *wahy* (Revelation) for Muhammad—draws from Sufi traditions and Mahāyāna Buddhism. The Sufi ideal of *al-insān al-kāmil* (the perfect human) as a morally enlightened guide aligns with the Buddhist bodhisattva, who, despite attaining enlightenment, remains in *saṃsāra* to aid others through selfless compassion (p. 134-140). Although Obuse states that Alexander Berzin is a pioneer of parallelism and Kazemi is a metaphysical parallelist, she attempts to highlight Imtiyaz Yusuf as a champion scholar in utilizing parallelism. However, she acknowledges that the methodology remains unexplained, yet she credits Imtiyaz Yusuf's contribution with advancing the framework of Buddhist-Muslim parallelism, which underscores the potential for mutual understanding and dialogue between these traditions (pp. 133-141).

As an overall note, it can be argued that Obuse's work demonstrates several key strengths that contribute to the study of Buddhist-Muslim relations. One of its notable contributions is its comprehensive comparative analysis, which explores the internal

diversity within Buddhism and its interactions with Islamic teachings. This approach aligns with Johan Elverskog's observation that historical Buddhist-Muslim encounters were often marked by mutual exchanges rather than inherent hostility, challenging the dominant narratives of conflict. Furthermore, the book serves as a valuable resource for inter-religious dialogue, focusing on shared values rather than theological divergences, introducing parallelism as a new methodological approach, a stance crucial in countering right-wing extremists and religious exclusivism of both sides. Additionally, the book's theological flexibility in interpreting the category of ultimate reality (*dammah*) and "People of the Book" (*ahl al-kitāb*) align with efforts to broaden religious inclusivity, which is vital in Buddhist-majority and Muslim-Majority contexts. Given the historical reservoir of anti-Muslim sentiments in Buddhist societies, particularly those stemming from colonial narratives and post-independence Ethno-religious nationalism, the book's emphasis on historical engagement provides a counterbalance to monolithic interpretations of Buddhist-Muslim relations.

Despite its contributions, the book has notable limitations that may weaken its impact. A significant shortcoming is its lack of socio-political context, as it does not sufficiently engage with contemporary socio-political issues that influence Buddhist-Muslim relations. Frydenlund (2018) emphasizes that anti-Muslim sentiments in Buddhist societies are often shaped by national security discourses and economic competition, as seen in Sri Lanka's *halāl* controversy and Myanmar's concerns over Rakhine as a frontier state.⁴ Nirmal Ranjit and Benjamin Scontal argue that Buddhist aspirations to bring the Buddhist state are the major concern of Buddhist-Muslim conflicts in Sri Lanka.⁵ Additionally, with its foundations in *wahy* and *'aql*, Islamic epistemology supports interfaith engagement that

⁴ See Iselin Frydenlund, "Buddhist Islamophobia: Actors, Tropes, Contexts," in *Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion*, ed. Asbjørn Dyrendal, David G. Robertson, and Egil Asprem, 2018, 279–302, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004382022>.

⁵ See Benjamin Schonthal, "The Impossibility of a Buddhist State," *Asian Journal of Law and Society* 3, no. 1 (2016): 29–48, <https://doi.org/10.1017/als.2016.4>.

honors both truth and shared values. The book, however, presents an inconsistent theological lens, alternating between parallelism and pluralism, which risks obscuring the nature of the Buddhist-Islamic dialogue. More importantly, the proposed parallelism approach remains unexplained and lacks a consistent framework from both Buddhist and Islamic perspectives. Its scope, content, implications and limitations should be reassessed in future research. Both religious traditions may critically receive Obuse's parallelism proposal if it goes to the religious compromise as Buddhists do not recognize the Buddha as a prophet, nor do Muslims consider Muhammad an enlightened being. Therefore, this approach should be reevaluated and redefined within the framework of Buddhist-Muslim studies.

In conclusion, Obuse's work is a valuable resource for scholars of comparative religion and interfaith studies, offering a unique approach to addressing the longstanding methodological challenges in the comparative study of Buddhism and Islam. By highlighting historical depth and doctrinal intricacies, this book expands the understanding of Buddhist-Muslim relations beyond the conventional focus on conflict.

Jasser Auda, *Re-envisioning Islamic Scholarship: Maqasid Methodology as a New Approach*. London: Claritas Books in association with Maqasid Institute, 2021. 282 pp. ISBN: 978-1-80011-977-2.

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Over the past three decades, Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah has emerged as a vibrant and evolving field of inquiry. It has expanded beyond its classical legal applications to engage with diverse epistemological, ethical, and sociopolitical dimensions. Jasser Auda's *Re-envisioning*