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The good for the community in Islam and Buddhist perspectives, a comparative analysis

Francesca Maria Corrao

In his writings Daisaku Ikeda underlines the fact that one of the difficulties in building dialogue among cultures is attachment to differences, and he mentions a sentence pronounced by Shakyamuni in India during a period of turmoil and wars, that runs as follows: "I perceived a single, invisible arrow piercing the hearts of people"[2]. Ikeda affirms that "arrow" could be termed the arrow of a discriminatory consciousness, an unreasoning emphasis on difference, such as those of ethnicity and nationality.

This consideration recalls the thought of the famous Tunisian historian Ibn Khaldūn (1332–1406). Speaking about the Arab tribes he highlighted the point that the strength of their community is the '*asabiya, esprit de corps*, that is their sense of belonging, their ability to collaborate as members of the same community. The author apparently contradicts himself when he states, however, that this strong sense of community can lead to conflict and decline. Furthermore, Ibn Khaldūn states that the Arabs could conquer power only through religion, as government

2 D. Ikeda, "The path of dialogue and tolerance", *Per il bene della pace*, Esperia, Milano, 2001, p. 29. See also D. Anderson and H. Smith, eds., *Sutta-nipata 938*, London, Pali Text Society, 1913; J. Takakusu, ed., *Nanden Daizokyo*, Tokyo, Taisho Shinshu Daizokyo Publishing Society, 1935, vol. 24, p. 358. N. Aramaki, trans. Daijo Butten, Tokyo, Kodansha, 1986, vol. 7, p. 324; Also in D. Ikeda, "Mahayana Buddhism and Twenty First Century Civilization" delivered at Harvard University Conference, 24 September 1993, in http://www.daisakuikeda.org/sub/resources/works/lect/lect-04.html.

based on religion is an institution which prevents injustice[3].

For the Arab historian the decline and fall of the Islamic caliphate was due to the weakening of faith and loss of the spirit of the Arab Islamic community. He believed that if power is not controlled by the government and religion it becomes unjust. Islam recognizes other monotheist faiths but Muslims believe that this is the last revelation, the perfect guidance to correct behaviour in life.

In a comparative perspective it is interesting to note that there are a few fundamental principles emerging from the first caliphs's rule which are close to those promulgated in the Ashoka edicts. As we know, in ancient times Ashoka (304 B.C.–232 B.C.) was the first ruler to adopt Buddhist principles in the administration of his state. He left an important legacy because he assumed that his rule was not of divine kingship, but legitimised by supporting the Buddhist sangha. He built monasteries and stupas, promoted the diffusion of Buddhism and established a close association with the religious hierarchy. He also laid great stress on respect for other religions, as we read in this passage from the 12th Edict:

> His Majesty the Holy King respects all religious doctrines, and desires their followers not to offend one another. All religions should be respected for one or more reasons. Whoever rejects the religion of others is lowering his own belief to exalt it"

In the rule of first Islamic community, the Prophet Muhammad was inspired by the revelation of the Qur'ān, although some practical decisions were the result of his wise administration of the community according to the customs of the age and its relations with other religions. In particular, the "Constitution of Medina" was a fundamental step forward in interreligious relations, as it affirms respect for other faiths

3 Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah. An Introduction to History*, transl. by Franz Rosenthal, Bollingen Foundation, New York 1958, Princeton Univ. Press, 1972, vol. 1, p. 266-7; 295-7; 302-5, 319–20; 427.

4 G. Pugliese Carratelli, *Gli editti di Asoka*, Adelphi, 2003, Ashoka's Edict is in English http://www.cs.colostate.edu/~malaiya/ashoka.html #FOURTEEN; last opened on 2015–10–18.

and establishes freedom of worship for non-Muslims in exchange for payment of a tax, jizya, to ensure their protection[5].

It is not possible to compare the Prophet with the King Ashoka, the former being an extraordinary figure because in contact with the divine, although the point is worth stressing that they both led their community on the basis of sacred laws. As the Italian philosopher Norberto Bobbio stated, until the Middle Ages the good ruler was the one who ruled by observing the laws which he could have no say in because they are transcendent, as are those imposed by God, or established as the foundation of the constitution of the State (fundamental laws)[6].

In the aftermath of the Prophet's death, The "Rightly Guided" caliphs of the Islamic community ruled on the basis of the Qur'ān and the model of life of the prophet, as it was recorded in the *hadīth* (sayings on his correct behaviour, that form the sunna). Ever since, the Qur'ān and the *hadīth* have represented the Shari'a, the right path to follow to be a good Muslim, inspiring the political communities[7]. I will not enter into the historical details but wish to focus mainly on some principles, as mentioned above, and compare it to the Budhdhist principles.

Among the major problems the first caliph Abū Bakr (632–634) had to face there was apostasy; on the death of the prophet some tribes thought that the pact of alliance was—as in the pagan previous tradition —on a personal basis; consequently the need arose to explain (sometimes also with help of weapons) to the newly converted that the pact is with God and it is forbidden to break it; at the same time it highlighted the need to write and teach the Qur'ān. The aim was to establish behaviour based on the respect of the divine law which imposed equal rights and duties for everybody in the community.

Ashoka's edicts, too, reveal the intention to teach the law and to

5 G. Endress, *Islam an Historical introduction*, Edinburg Univ. Press (I ed. 1985), 2002, pp. 20; http://www.constitution.org/cons/medina/macharter.htm last opened on 2015–01–23

6 Bobbio, Norberto, *The Future of Democracy*, Bellamy ed., 1991, pp. 174–5.

7 Ashoka decided to put an end to the injustices he committed as a ruler in the first part of his life, and adopted the Buddhist faith; see J. Keay, India a History, New York, Harper Collins Publishers. 2000; G. Endress, *Islam an Historical introduction*, op. cit., pp. 31–3.

keep a check on respect for life (of men and beasts) and Buddhist principles. In particular in the third edict we read:

> "Respect for mother and father is good, generosity to friends, acquaintances, relatives, Brahmans and ascetics is good, not killing living beings is good, moderation in spending and moderation in saving is good. The Council shall notify the Yuktas about the observance of these instructions in these very words"[8]

It is known that the Islamic community used the covenants to spread Islam, even though from the very outset there were many cases of war against the pagans. Again, in the Qur'ān respect for life is clearly spelt out in the following verses:

> "Never should a Believer kill a Believer; but (if it so happens) by mistake, (compensation is due …) If a man kills a Believer intentionally, his recompense is Hell, to abide therein (for ever): and the wrath and the curse of Allāh are upon him, and a dreadful penalty is prepared for him." (Qur'ān, 4: 92–93).

No one else but God can give life and death:

> "There is no god but He: It is He Who gives life and gives death,—the Lord and Cherisher to you and your earliest ancestors" (Qur'ān, 44: 8).

In another important passage of the Qur'ān there are special recommendations to respect the elders and to be generous with almsgiving, as we read:

> "Do not worship except God; and to parents do good and to relatives, orphans, and the needy. And speak to people good [words] and establish prayer and give alms (zakah)." (Qur'ān, 2: 83).

8 http://www.cs.colostate.edu/~malaiya/ashoka.html#FOURTEEN; last opened on 2015–10–18.

The same needs promulgated in the Ashoka's Edict are proclaimed: respect for virtue, social cohesion and piety. The fifth Edict concerns correct behaviours toward slaves. Also the Prophet from the very beginning of his mission liberated slaves, for whom He and his companion, the future first caliph Abū Bakr (d. 634), paid the price of freedom. The Qur'ān affirms:

> "And feed the needy wretch, the orphan and the prisoner, for love of Him". (Qur'ān, 44: 8).

the same subject is present in many other Suras as the following:

> "he should free a believing slave, and pay compensation to the deceased's" (Qur'ān, 4: 92).

Another important principle the two religions share in common is the tolerance for all religions that we find in the seventh Edict[9]:

> "The beloved of the gods, king Piyadasi, desires that all religions should reside everywhere, for all of them desire self-control and purity of heart".

In the Qur'ān we read God is the one who is merciful, and on different beliefs it is stated:

> "O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allāh is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allāh is Knowing and Acquainted". (Qur'ān, 49: 13).

The Qur'an is the major reference for the Muslim, the model for correct behaviour; hence anyone can read it independently and benefit from the teaching. The words of God are considered by the majority of the Muslims, the Sunni, to be *created ab aeternum* (eternal as created by

9 http://www.cs.colostate.edu/~malaiya/ashoka.html#FOURTEEN; last opened on 2015–10–18.

God, and therefore unchangeable). This is a major point of discussion in the Muslim community, first because there is no special person entitled to interpret God will, and able in the case of need to give satisfactory answers to the Muslim community (there is no Pope, as there is for Catholics). The second point is how to find a common understanding in adapting the Islamic principles to modern societies.

The first point concerns respect for human life, and as we read in the Qur'ān this point is firm and clear. It is also true that few verses urge to kill the enemies and threaten terrible punishments for those who betray the pact with God (Qur'ān, 2: 191–2), but these are related to a specific situation: it is not an absolute statement, as mentioned earlier in this paper.

Facing the needs of a modern society, many Muslim scholars over the past two centuries had sought different approaches to provide an adequate interpretation of the shari'a. In particular, with the end of the Ottoman caliphate and the spread of the National modern secular state strong opposition arose from the more conservative Islamist. For instance, the Muslim Brothers, the group established by Ḥasan al-Bannā in 1928, were not satisfied with the idea that the shari'a was simply a source inspiring the Constitution, as al-Bannā expected to be the only reference.

According to the Egyptian judge Sa'īd al-Ašmawī (1932–2013) the Islamic community since its early days had developed theories based on Islamic principles, aiming at building a political theory and in modern times a Public law[10], a mistake that led to disqualification of Islamic religious discourse.

A radical proposal came from the Muslim reformist Maḥmūd Taḥā (Maḥmūd Taḥā, 1909–1985) who envisioned the emergence of a second revelation based on the universal, and more spiritual, Suras of the Qur'ān received by the Prophet at Mecca. Taḥā believed that the more pragmatic Suras belonging to the time Muhammad spent in Medina were influenced by the 7th-century mentality and were an obstacle to the implementation

10 Al-'Ašmawī, Sa'īd, *Muḥammad, L'Islamisme contre l'Islam*, (Cairo, Dār Ṣina al-Islam al-Siyāsī, Cairo 1987), Paris, La Découverte, 1989, pp. 15–16.

of human rights.[11]; for these declarations he was jailed and sentenced to death in Sudan. The tragedy prompted his disciple Abdallah an-Naim (‘Abdallāh al-Na‘īm), to carry on with the teachings of his mentor, bearing in mind the difficulties that the Islamic community is facing with strong internal and external pressures.

Modern Muslim scholars can construct an Islamic normative system appropriate for the present context of Islamic societies, using both the doctrine and ethos of early Muslim scholars. an-Na‘īm points out that the founding scholars of Shari‘a stated what they believed to be an appropriate normative system for their communities in very local terms[12]. Nowadays the Muslim community can accept modern reforms: achieving this requires education in a condition of freedom and cooperation among the different schools of thought.

These ideas are similar to those expressed by Daisaku Ikeda; the Japanese peace philosopher affirms that Buddhism stresses that humanity can advance one step at a time through ceaseless efforts to inspire one another and to understand that, just as Shakyamuni’s awakening sparked awakening in his disciples, what is possible for one is possible for all[13].

More recently, Arab and Muslim intellectuals have debated the causes of the economic and political crises, some stating that these have paved the way to the rise of a possible Muslim state as an alternative to the failure of the western secular model. Some leading intellectuals have found in the values provided in the Qur’ān the answer to the crises of values in modern westernized society. The defence of Islamic universal values, they believe, also serves to facilitate intercultural debate as this must be based on common ground. I will recall here some interesting contributions of an extremely rich production.

The Tunisian historian Muhammad Talbi (Muḥammad al-Ṭālibī, b.

11 Taha, Mahmoud Mohamed, *Il secondo messaggio dell’Islam*, Bologna, EMI Editrice Missionaria Italiana, 2002, p. 29.

12 An-Na’im, Abdullahi Ahmed, ed., *Human Rights in Cross-Cultural Perspectives: Quest for Consensus*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992.

13 D. Ikeda, “Daisaku, Compassion, Wisdom and Courage: Building a Global Society of Peace and Creative Coexistence”. 2013 Peace Proposal, p. 6. http://www.daisakuikeda.org/assets/files/peaceproposal2013.pdf

1921), in his reading of the sacred book, calls for consideration of the major emphasis given in each Sura (chapter) starting from the heading entitled "In the name of God the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful." He underlines that many verses confirm this spirit, as for instance:

> "Those who have faith and do righteous deeds—they are the best of creatures" (Qur'ān, 98: 7).

Talbi argues that our behaviour should be inspired by God's attributes, "Most Gracious, Most Merciful", from the repetition of these words emerges a strong feeling of compassion. Ikeda's position is not far from Talbi's belief, as he affirms that to build a civilization founded upon respect for the dignity of life it is important to develop the compassion that never abandons others to suffer alone[14].

The Tunisian Muslim religious leader Rachid al-Ghannuchi (Rašīd Ġannušī, b. 1941), in the aftermath of the political revolution that put an end to the regime of Ben Ali (Bin 'Ali, b. 1936) in 2011, has been advocating some major compromises among citizens with different political ideas in order to prevent civil war in his country. He believes that Islam is compatible with modern thinking and human rights values. It is evident from his writings that he has been going through an evolution in the last few decades which is the result of his determination to find a common ground of understanding with the more secularized people in his country. Ghannuchi's ideal system for governance must recognize and protect the dignity of man and provide guarantees to curb despotism and create the right climate for the blossoming of man's potential[15].

Among the elements that make the difference, and create difficulties in understanding between many Europeans and Muslims, is the idea that the majority of the latter believe that Shari'a must inspire

14 Ikeda, Daisaku, *A New Humanism: The University Addresses of Daisaku Ikeda*. London and New York, I.B. Tauris, 2010, pp. 52–61.

15 R. Ghannuschi, *al-Hurriyat al-'Amma fi 'l-Dawla 'l-Islamiya* (Public Liberties in the Islamic State), Beirut, Markaz li-'l-Dirāsāt al-'Arabiya, 1993. See also Azzam Tamimi, "Rashid al-Ghannuchi", in *The Oxford Handbook of Islam and Politics*, ed. J. Esposito & E. Shahin, Oxford University Press 2013, pp. 218–9.

the rule of law.

It is interesting to note that the writings of Ghannuchi on secularization affirm that the spread of secularism in Europe is the result of the negative relation between church and state throughout the centuries. Hence Gannuchi says this is no problem for the Muslim, separation between the soul and the body being inconceivable[16].

The first pillar of Islam, the profession of faith in one God, claims the uniqueness and absolute transcendence of God; in the modern words of the Egyptian philosopher Hasan Hanafi (Ḥasan Ḥanafī, b. 1935) it runs as follow:

"The declaration of God's oneness, 'there is no God but God', is not only an expression of language but a twofold act of conscience—in the first place to deny the false divinities that stand in the way of freedom of conscience, and in the second place to affirm the uniqueness of God and the transcendence of the universal principle. To pray is not only effective movement of the body, but to concentrate on the heart as a value. To fast does not mean simply abstaining from food during the day for health reasons but rather is moral acknowledgment of the existence of the poor. To share goods through alms does not mean simply material redistribution of wealth but also moral purification of the wealthy. Finally, pilgrimage it is not only a journey toward a given place at a given time, but the annual meeting of men to share common experiences and take decisions together".[17]

The question of alms giving has become a crucial topic in modern times as it gives a pragmatic answer to the crises of social welfare in the modern secular system, helping the poor and sharing wealth among disadvantaged people. As for alms, the Qur'ān says:

> "Of their wealth take alms, that so thou mightest purify and sanctify them; and pray on their behalf. Verily thy prayers are a source of security for them: and Allah is One Who heareth and knoweth." (Qur'ān: 9, 103).

According to the Egyptian philosopher, as the medieval historian

16 Azzam Tamimi, "Rashid al-Ghannuchi", *quot*., pp. 218–9.

17 H. Hanafy, *Islam in the modern world*, Cairo, The Anglo-Egyptian Bookshop, 1995, vol. I, p. 467.

Ibn Khaldūn believed, those in charge of the government should keep in mind the necessity to help disadvantaged people. When a Government puts their needs in second place it is betraying the religious prescript of justice that makes a human coexistence on earth possible. Behind the abstract need to defend the superior interest of economy lies the absent-minded attitude toward the most basic human needs. In this sense should be understood Gannuchi's words "separation between the soul and the body" is unconceivable. It is an approach close to the words of the Ashoka's edict "for all of them desire self-control and purity of heart." As in the opening of each Sura of the Qur'ān and in the setting up of Stupas by Ashoka, there is the same need to remember constantly the correct basic behavioural attitude in daily life.

On the concept of social justice the Pakistani Fazlur Rahman (Faḍlūr al-Raḥmān Malik, d. 1988), in his *Major themes of the Qur'ān* (1980), affirmed that much importance is given to the redistribution of money and wealth not only among the rich but also among the poor.[18] The whole of mankind is equal and must live equally during their life and before God. This is the concept of social justice that makes Islam a source of inspiration and hope. The Moroccan writer Fatima Mernissi (Fāṭimah Marnissī b. 1940) has re-read the Qur'ān from feminine perspectives, and has arrived at the conclusion that man and woman are ontologically equal in God's creation and judgement. There is no superiority given to one over the other in creation[19].

As Ikeda stated in his last Peace Proposal, Buddhism stresses the importance of having a non-discriminatory attitude; Abdallah an-Naim, like Ikeda, has pointed out that education provides the opportunity to acquire awareness of human rights. Knowledge and dialogue can help oppose the spread of prejudice and hatred.

Tariq Ramadan (Ṭāriq Ramaḍan, b. 1962), professor of Contemporary Islamic Studies at Oxford University, in a comment on the Paris attacks (January 2015) said that they were to be condemned but added

18 Fazlur, *Major themes of the Quran*, The University of Chicago Press, (Ist 1980) 2009.

19 F. Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in a Muslim Society* (1st ed. 1985, reprinted London: Saqi Books, 2011;Id., *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Islam*. New York, Basic Books, 1992.

that there was a need to attribute the same value to all human life[20].

The social mission of religion in our age must be to bring people together in an ethos of reverence for life's inherent dignity and worth, as Ikeda writes in his peace proposal (2013)[21]; he also underlines the need to protect, at all costs and despite whatever differences, the dignity that is inherent in each of our lives.

Rahman and Hanafi's hermeneutics of Islam are close to Ikeda's position; in fact, they link their projects of reform of Islam with the social benefits such interpretations bring to society. Divine prescriptions are good as long as they are good for society's public welfare (*al-maslaha al-'amma*).

As we have seen, Buddhism an Islam share in common many important principles that make the construction of sincere dialogue and understanding possible. To take action in this direction is a duty for a true believer in Islam; to respond to the need to live faith in daily life is the correct understanding of Islam. The lack of tolerance and acceptance of differences is contrary to the spirit of plurality that permeates some Suras, as is evident from the reading of the sacred text by Hasan Hanafi. Furthermore, the use of violence and lack of human respect respond to a behaviour far from the pure spirit of the faith as is indicated in the opening of each Sura of the Qur'ān, as Talbi pointed out.

Through education it is possible to expand human solidarity based on respect and a shared concern for the threats faced by all of us. We can build the solidarity needed to generate a broader network of friendship through dialogue.

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20 http://www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2015/01/tariq-ramadan-west-terrorism-islam-201519101423177599.html, last visited January 10, 2015

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The good for the community in Islam and Buddhist perspectives, a comparative analysis

Francesca Maria Corrao

This paper is intended as a contribution to the ongoing dialogue between Buddhism and Islam initiated by Daisaku Ikeda and Majid Tehranian. I will emphasize some elements of classical Islam which are also in Ashoka's edicts[1], comparing some social policies (alms, care assistance) that are common to both the Buddhist and the Islamic religions. These elements are the most important reasons why poor people, in the past, and even today, are looking to Islam as an answer to their miserable conditions. I will also highlight the importance of these elements for some contemporary Muslim intellectuals and compare them with some Buddhist principles as explained in Ikeda's peace proposals.

1 The inscription in Brahmi script of the Delhi Topra pillar, which was deciphered by James Princep, a renowned scholar in Indian antiquarian studies in 1837, conveys the same message as the other Ashokan Pillars displayed high upon the other Ashokan Pillars such as "code of dharma: virtue, social cohesion and piety" but with one difference that on this pillar there is also a reference to issues related to taxation.