

Johan Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Road* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010)

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Against stereotypes, legends, and amnesia, Johan Elverskog has successfully done his historian's duty in discussing the reality of the relationships between Buddhism and Islam in Inner Asia. His periodization is large-scale, ranging from the early medieval contacts to the interactions of the nineteenth century. His ambition is not only to set down a dispassionate narrative of religious history but to consider how religious traditions change when they deal with each other over a long period.

Exploring the earliest contact between Buddhists and Muslims (c. 700–1000 C.E.), the first chapter suggests that, having arisen in comparable contexts of social, political, and economic upheaval, both doctrines promoted the ethics of the urban merchant elite (individual property, responsibility, and thrift); and both communities, when they encountered each other in Northern India and South Central Asia, found common economic interests and even, perhaps, common values. Of course, the history of the Arab conquest of these regions is not the history of two enemies who became best friends. “However, another and perhaps more interesting issue is the obvious parallelism between what Buddhism and Islam imagined themselves to be: a cosmopolitan religion of the merchant elite. Both religions were therefore

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speaking to the issues and concerns of the same audience; and while such a situation may not be by definition untenable, in this case it turned out to be so and ultimately the ‘Islamic international’ beat out the ‘Buddhist international’” (pp. 52–53).

This recourse to a sort of *histoire des valeurs*—to use Jacques Le Goff’s terminology—beyond a simple *histoire événementielle* of the conquest, leads to the second chapter entitled “understanding.” Living side by side for centuries, Buddhists and Muslims had to understand each other; later on, despite the distance, they also had to exchange ideas and technologies. Elverskog analyzes their respective intellectual production regarding each other: from the “positive” *Kitâb al-Fihrist* to the “negative” *Kitâb al-milal wa al-nihal*; and, from the Buddhist side, the *Kâlacakratantra* and its commentaries. Although these works clearly manifest the growing Buddhist–Muslim split, it remains the case that, paradoxically, the two communities continued their exchanges in matters of art, architecture, medicine, and blockprinting techniques. “Rather, by coming into contact both traditions had to assimilate new ideas and products, as well as respond to them as they best saw fit. And in this regard Muslim authors became over time more and more blasé and dismissive of the Dharma. Buddhists, on the other hand, responded frantically to Islam by creating entirely new mythologies and astrological systems” (p. 115).

The Mongol subjugation of entire territories of the *Dâr al-Islâm* reshuffled the cards. Following a Tantric revival in and around Tibet, Buddhism, supported by the Mongol rulers, remained the second major religion in Inner Asia beside Islam. While tensions increased between the two communities, and notwithstanding the violence of the conquest, elites continued to dialogue throughout the thirteenth century, thanks to the Mongol statecraft. In this respect, the example of the Ilkhanid court is emblematic: the kingdom’s official chronicler Rashîd al-Dîn produced the famous *Jâmi‘ al-tawârikh* which contains no less than twenty chapters on Buddhism, drawing parallels between both doctrines. Here it should be added that the *Compendium of Chronicles* often uses Sufi (not simply Islamic) terminology or interpretations to make Buddhist conceptions understood. In addition to Rashîd al-Dîn’s scholarly achievement, the Ilkhanid miniature painting—more precisely, the image of the Prophet Muhammad—represents the result of a Buddhist impetus to Islamic art, rather than a direct expression of Buddhist ideas in Islam. Going a step further than Robert Hillenbrand on this point, Elverskog originally suggests that portraying Muhammad was a means to promote Islam, probably inspired by the Buddhist visual technique

used to propagate their faith.

“With the collapse of the Mongol Empire the cosmopolitan world and the early modern form of globalization it had created had come to an end Within all these enormous changes, however, the one most relevant here was the development of a new divide between the Buddhist and Muslim worlds of Inner Asia—a world split into a Turkic-speaking Muslim half and a Tibeto-Mongol Buddhist half . . . ” (p. 179). The fourth chapter explains this time of *jihâd* as the result of six factors: (a) the reappearance of *jihâd* rhetoric or Muslim solidarity against non-Muslims which replaced the Mongol brotherhood; (b) the Chinggisid principle which quickly lost its consistency; (c) political fragmentation of the Mongol empire; (d) Islamization, with especially the case of Chaghatai Ulus which halved in the fourteenth century; (e) the urbanization which characterized the Timurid part of the former Chaghatai Ulus, contrary to Moghulistan; (f) Naqshbandi revivalism, that is a strong Sunni urban Sufism eager to re-Islamize Central Asia, particularly in terms of law *and* spirituality. Here I think there are two minor flaws.

I would not follow Elverskog when he writes that “having taken up the mantle of restoring Islamic law in the external world, the quiet and internal path of mystical introspection was no longer an option” (p. 203). From the Naqshbandi doctrinal perspective, there is no contradiction, even no difference, between these two dimensions of Sufism.

Joseph Fletcher’s view on Ishâq Walî (pp. 215–16) is not completely accurate: the religiopolitical structure established by Ishâq and Muhammad Khân in the Yarkand khanate was not new; a comparable system already existed in sixteenth-century Mawarannahr with Makhdûm-i Aʿzam and ʿUbayd Allâh Khân.

The last chapter reconsiders Buddhist–Muslim interaction during the Qing dynasty, at a time when, once again, the religious and political landscape greatly changed in Inner Asia: “Namely, rather than Buddhists and Muslims operating within their respective theocratic states, the Qing forged an empire that brought them both together under one regime” (p. 230). Focusing on the question of *halâl*—in the specific sense of lawful food—the author shows that, in a context of anti-Muslim laws and Gansu Muslim rebellion during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Islamic foodways crystallized the Buddhist anti-Muslim discourse. In short, halal slaughtering was the very evidence of the proverbial Muslim violence and fanaticism. This discourse—recalls Elverskog—finds its source in the *Kâlacakratantra* and repeats a millennium of Buddhist polemics against Islam. As a late confirmation of this statement, and by way of epilogue to this review, I may mention the recent

Tibetan boycott of Muslim restaurants in Qinghai: in 2004, after clashes between Tibetans and Huis in Jianzha district, the former decided to boycott the latter's restaurants. Among the most popular arguments used by the Tibetan protesters were the following: Muslims kill a lot of animals and halal methods of slaughtering go against Buddhist principles.