The Miracle of Compassion: An Essay on Multi-Religiosity by a Buddhist Muslim

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The term "multi-religiosity," also known as "multiple religious identity," describes the experience of belonging to more than one faith or spiritual tradition. This essay presents a framework for understanding religious identity as potentially non-binary, with the author's own experience as a Buddhist Muslim as an example for how to reconcile sometimes similar, and other times disparate, beliefs and practices within an embodied experience of multi-religiosity. Using Talal Asad's proposal for studying Islam as a "discursive tradition," the essay argues for the consideration of how, rather than whether, multi-religious and spiritual practices may be understood in relation to their traditions. Finally, it offers the term "disposition of devotion" for understanding the embodied experience that occurs when the traditions meet in an individual's multi-religious practice.

Keywords: Multi-religiosity, multiple religious identity, multiple religious belonging, Muslim-Buddhist dialogue, interreligious dialogue

Introduction

One month in early 2020, my wife encountered a series of especially challenging personal events, exacerbated by the unprecedented circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic and other unrelated experiences that had taken their toll on both of us. Like many families who were bottled up in their houses due to shelter-in-place, we were constantly on edge, often short-tempered with and without patience for one another. I have a sitting meditation practice that often includes contemplations on compassion, which encourage me to mentally switch places with another individual to empathize with their position and better understand how to act in a more selfless manner when interacting with others. During the difficult, argumentative period of the beginning of shelter-in-place, I recall sitting with my emotions, attempting to see things from my wife's perspective and determine whether I could gain some insight on her side of the story. The feelings that arose were, to put it mildly, difficult to bear. Contemplating the hardships that my wife had experienced leading up to the pandemic, in tandem with the dramatic shift of life that we experienced with shelter-in-place and the global devastation that it represented, revealed a small glimmer of the anxiety and anguish that she was holding. Without mentioning the meditative experience, I later approached my wife, expressing that I could only guess at the difficulty she was enduring, and how much anxiety must have been pervading her daily life. Almost immediately, she began weeping with relief, as though a barrier had been lifted by the simple act of someone else's recognition of her experience and affirmation that her anguish had been acknowledged. We discussed the various phenomena that influenced her emotional state, as well as mine, and began to move forward with a collaborative plan to address them.

I share this story not as instructional or in self-aggrandizement, as I don't think the experience represents some miraculous technique that I applied with some spectacular finesse. My empathy was clumsy at best, and slow to blossom, given how long it took me to remember, through my own haze of argumentativeness, that my wife has emotions and perspectives that should be valued the same as mine. Still, the experience does point to a transformation, however minor, from a self-centered approach that is only concerned with *my* point of view, and *my*

feelings, to one that is other-centered, rooted in compassion. Given the tendency for human beings—myself very much included—to revel in focusing on our own issues, desires, and delusions, this disposition towards compassion is nothing short of miraculous.

A Little Background

The term "multi-religious" might seem new or strange, given that most of us in the West[1] have grown into settings where religious identity and formation are of a binary nature: we're Christian *or* Muslim, Buddhist *or* Hindu, Jewish *or* Bahá'í. We're atheist *or* agnostic, and spiritual *but not* religious. It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss all of the inner workings of religious formation, and their relation to power, that in turn lend to a binary view of religious identity, but suffice it to say that there is a shift among communities and individuals in the West in beginning to recognize spirituality as being more complex.[2]

Non-binary religious identity is not new to many communities,[3] but it can be difficult for those unfamiliar with the concept to find an entry point into the discussion. How can someone be Muslim *and* Buddhist at the same time? Does not one tradition demand single-minded fealty, at the expense of others? Is not that what the Crusades were about, and pretty much every other act of religious aggression in history?

A lot of work has been done in the field of interreligious dialogue to understand how to get adherents from disparate traditions to talk to one another, in the form of, say, Jewish and Muslim scholars discussing similarities between lunar calendars, or Christian and Hindu organizations collaborating on a public event to feed those in need.[4] Conceptually, interreligious dialogue, or the ability to build bridges between separate traditions, may be easier to grasp than multi-religious identity, which can feel less clearly defined.

In my role as a professor, I teach that there are at least three scopes in studying multi-religiosity: individual, institutional, and pedagogical. In the individual scope, a person can have multiple religious identities that are separate, synergistic, or somewhere in between.[5] I might, for example, identify in most ways as a Christian, yet also belong to a yoga community that feeds me spiritually, in impactful ways that don't conflict with my beliefs or practice. On the other hand, I might have a Candomblé altar that represents a very real, and very realized, embodied practice that incorporates Yoruba and Catholic beliefs in equal measure.

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[1] In this essay, I use the loosely defined term "West" to include, but not be limited to, English-speaking North America and Western Europe.

[2] See Duane R. Bidwell, *When One Religion Isn't Enough: The Lives of Spiritually Fluid People* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018) and Paul F. Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could not be a Christian* (London: Oneworld Academic, 2009). Both of these works provide wonderful entry points into the discussion of multi-religious identity and formation, albeit principally from Buddhist Christian perspectives.

[3] See William Chittick and Sachiko Murata, "The Implicit Dialogue of Confucian Muslims," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*, ed. Catherine Cornille (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

[4] See Catherine Cornille, "Introduction," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*, ed. Catherine Cornille (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

[5] Emily Sigalow's *American JewBu: Jews, Buddhists, and Religious Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019) provides an excellent, thoroughly-researched contemporary examination of this particular dimension of multi-religiosity.

The institutional scope of multi-religiosity encourages us to consider a community that, in its bylaws or general disposition, is welcoming of more than one tradition as integral to the overall identity of its constituents. A Church that allows Muslims to use its space for Friday prayers, for instance, could be commended for making room for other traditions, but would not *de facto* be considered a multi-religious institution without further consideration. Another organization, on the other hand, that actively promotes pluralism in religious practice and belief, might more likely be identified as multi-religious. The latter institution's lifting up of each tradition as having equal say in the formation of its community, rather than simply promoting tolerance or co-existence, would be a defining factor in considering the multi-religious nature of its approach.

Additionally, the pedagogical scope of multi-religiosity seeks to problematize conventional, and often Christian-centric and/or white-centric, modes of studying global religious traditions. Many of us who have come through educational systems in the United States and elsewhere have experienced "World Religions" classes that position, implicitly or otherwise, white Christianity as the point of departure for studying other traditions in relation to its own history, beliefs, and practice. A multi-religious pedagogy interrupts this approach by attempting to study religious and spiritual within their own contexts, and from voices that are steeped within those very traditions, rather than external to them.

This essay primarily focuses on the individual scope of multi-religiosity, based on my own experience as a Buddhist Muslim, without attempting to speak for *all* Buddhists, *all* Muslims, or *all* individuals who self-identify as being multi-religious. In fact, I don't attempt to speak for *anyone* but myself, in the hopes that my experience will be helpful for others wrestling with what can be a very messy process of understanding non-binary religious formation.

But first, a little background is undoubtedly in order. I was born in London, and raised in the San Francisco Bay Area without much religious instruction. My parents, who themselves grew up in pre-Revolution Iran, had not much spiritual interest for most of my childhood and adolescence in anything but a singular belief in God, which I shared. When I was in high school, my father came across a translation of the Qur'an that was more progressive than what he had previously experienced, and re-embraced Islam as his tradition of practice.

With a heavy dose of teenage skepticism, I agreed to read the introduction to the translation, and was so fascinated by its cosmology of humans, angels, *jinns*, and of course, God, that I began the process of learning how to pray, speak a little Arabic, and generally go about doing the things that Muslims do. It felt new, and vibrant, to me, while also representing a homecoming to something that I could not quite place at the time.

Around my final year of college, I also began training in Japanese martial arts in earnest, locating an Aikido *dojo* near me and attending classes several times per week. I had always been interested in martial arts as a form of exercise and self-defense, having taken Karate and Judo classes as a child, and relished the ability to throw myself—literally and figuratively—into something new with as much gusto as I had with Islam in high school. My training in Aikido eventually led me to make a connection with an instructor of Japanese Jujutsu, and after finishing my Bachelor's degree and having some time before a potential graduate school program, I decided to move into the Monterey Academy of Martial Arts as an *uchideshi* ("inside student")

apprentice. As an *uchideshi*, I studied five martial arts as a full-time student, earning my credentialing as an instructor and steeping myself into what I viewed at the time to be a spiritual path based on *bushido*, the "Way of the Samurai." *Bushido*, as I understood it, was heavily influenced by the Zen Buddhist tradition and the day-to-day, battle-worn lives of feudal Japanese soldiers, to which we'll return in just a bit.

After completing my year-long apprenticeship, I returned to the Bay Area to enter a Master's program in religious leadership for social change. My program included the two foci of Islam and Japanese martial arts as a potential medium for spirituality and social justice work, and required me to return to the Monterey Academy again as a three-month *uchideshi* for fieldwork, this time from the perspective of an instructor.

Fast forwarding through more school and training, I eventually opened my own *dojo*, training adults that included my own apprentice students, and pursued a Ph.D. in Cultural and Historical Studies of Religions, with a focus on the anthropology of Islam, media, and countering stereotypes. Years later, with my increasing vocational responsibilities, along with some political turmoil among the extended community outside of my satellite school, I left the martial arts system and closed my *dojo*, teaching only privately for an extended period. By that time, I had achieved the level of *hachidan*, 8th degree black belt, in Japanese Jujutsu, with black belt ranks in Ninjutsu, a Japanese sword art known as Battojutsu, and Aikido.

It wasn't until I returned to academia as a professor, and began teaching courses on interreligious dialogue and multi-religiosity, that I began to re-examine what I had once perceived to be Zen practice in the martial arts. I discovered, somewhat painfully, that what I had learned about *bushido* was heavily filtered through a Western lens, romanticizing a brutal period of history and privileging the status of Zen among a rich milieu of religious practice.[6] Attempting to not throw the baby out with the proverbial bathwater, I was forced to take a long, hard look at my nascent Buddhist spirituality, relearning the foundational contexts of the tradition and reapplying them to my daily embodied practice.

Like any religious or spiritual formation, the result of all of these converging paths is ongoing, and I am ever becoming more comfortable with my two religious identities of Muslim *and* Buddhist. My Muslim identity is heavily informed by Sunni practice and the spirituality represented by the Naqshbandi Sufi order. Similarly, I have a Zen (Chinese: *Chan*) practice connected to the Dharma Drum Mountain tradition of Chan Master Sheng-yen that I view as a blossoming of the original seed that was planted when I started training in the martial arts. I have a good friend that is a Jodo Shinshu (also known as "Shin Buddhist") minister, and have often felt connected to the Dalai Lama's teachings, leading me to pursue instruction in the Gelug tradition of Tibetan Buddhism through the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT) as well.

As one might expect, there are frequently concepts and practices that clang around in my multi-religious mind that can sometimes be synchronous, and other times, conflicting. How can a

[6] Barbara O'Brien provides a very rich discussion of the Western romanticism of Zen and its propagation through *bushido* in her book *The Circle of the Way: A Concise History of Zen from the Buddha to the Modern World* (Boulder: Shambhala, 2019).

Muslim, devoted to the unity of one God, simultaneously ascribe to Buddhism, which is often positioned as being non-theistic? Incorporating secular meditation might seem innocuous enough to a monotheist, but what happens when that practice is deeply rooted in a religious cosmology that is different from one's own? How does one reconcile the Buddhist view of reincarnation with a Muslim one that aspires to enter paradise through their works and devotion?

This essay attempts to answer some of those questions, and more, from the perspective of one person that continues to wrestle with related lines of inquiry. It is my hope that the process of exploration will be helpful to others on a similar path, and illustrate further how religious identity can be non-binary and embracing of multiple traditions.

A Few Caveats

A handful of disclaimers are needed before diving into topics that may become controversial when viewed through the lens of appropriation. I am a firm believer that a work of comparative religions should require the author to be an expert in all traditions involved, or to rely upon the voices of others to ensure as diverse and authentic of an account as possible. While I do have a Ph.D. in Cultural and Historical Studies of Religions and deep theological ties to Islam, I am a Buddhist by virtue of my practice and personal edification, not by traditional academic or religious qualifications. In many ways, this essay is a response to Buddhist philosophies, epistemologies, and cosmologies from the perspective of a Muslim attempting to embody them authentically, while also remaining true to the same within the Islamic tradition. It is not, however, an investigation that endeavors to provide a broad grounding for the reader as a comparative piece would, and should.

The notion of qualifications itself leads us to the questions of authenticity in speaking about and authority in representing a tradition. Put more plainly, we are encouraged to ask: who has the authority to speak authentically for a tradition, as do John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed in titling their book *Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think* (2008). Is a Muslim scholar able to adequately represent the Islamic tradition to other Muslims as well as to the general public, or must they have the qualifications of a *shaykh*? Can a Buddhist provide teachings on compassion and meditation without the conferral of authority by the appropriate governing body?

In attempting to navigate through these important topics of authority and authenticity, I find Talal Asad seminal paper, *The Idea of An Anthropology of Islam* (1986), to be especially helpful. In it, he posits that we should study Islam as "neither a distinctive social structure nor a heterogeneous collection of beliefs, artifacts, customs, and morals,"[7] but rather as "a discursive tradition that includes and relates itself to the founding texts of the Qur'an and the Hadith."[8] Asad's view, which I find beneficial as a framework for studying religion in general, is that it behooves us to consider Islam as a tradition of active discourse between Muslims and the foundational sources of the Qur'an and the collected sayings and experiences of the Prophet

[7] Talal Asad, "The Idea of An Anthropology of Islam," *Georgetown University Center for Contemporary Arab Studies Occasional Papers Series*, March (1986), 14.
[8] Talal Asad, "The Idea of An Anthropology of Islam," 14.

Muhammad. Commensurately, we are encouraged to refrain from asking questions about *whether* a person or an act is Muslim, and instead consider *how* they are Muslim.

In this essay, I endeavor to utilize this ethos of considering *how* practices of multi-religiosity can be viewed as Muslim and/or Buddhist, without making quantitative statements about *whether* they should be considered as representative of Islam or Buddhism in their totalities. Both traditions are rich in history and diverse in expression, neither being monolithic in belief nor in practice. I argue, however, that in my multi-religious experience of being Muslim and Buddhist, I often find the two traditions to meet in what I call a *disposition of devotion* that, when applied to the phenomenological world, is rooted in compassion.

Additionally, the name of this essay is a direct homage to Thich Nhat Hanh's *The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to the Practice of Meditation* (1987). It is in no way suggestive that the present work is at all on caliber with the classic treatise that has helped so many enter into the practice of mindfulness. Instead, it is a reflection of how deeply Thich Nhat Hanh's writing, as well as that of others, has affected my understanding of my own religious formation, along with an indication that for me, an attitude of compassion and altruism also incorporates a divinely inspired component.

One final note: this essay presumes some familiarity with basic concepts and terminology in Islam and Buddhism, although I have provided a handful of suggested resources in case supplementary readings are needed to provide further context.

God and Ultimate Reality

In considering a Muslim Buddhist multi-religious experience, we should probably begin with the biggest topic: the seemingly incompatible subject of monotheism in Islam *vis-à-vis* the absence of a creator deity in most Buddhist cosmologies.

Muslim belief and practice most often finds itself in discourse with the Qur'an, considered to be the divine word of God as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad through the angel Gabriel (Arabic: *Jibreel*), and the *hadith*, the codified sayings and traditions of the Prophet and his Companions. The Qur'an unequivocally illustrates a monotheistic cosmology, with *Allah*, the Arabic term for "God," being the sole Creator of the cosmos, humanity, and everything in between.[9]

Conversely, most Buddhist traditions have no place for a creator deity, instead placing emphasis on embodied experience and epistemology. As indicated in sutras attributed to the sayings of the Buddha, ordinary existence is characterized by the three marks of impermanence, no-self, and suffering, with an emphasis on the interdependence of all things.[10] To become free of

[9] For an accessible entry point into Muslim belief and practice, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islam: Religion, History, and Civilization* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003). A more in-depth, "textbook" approach can be found in John L. Esposito's *Islam: The Straight Path* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[10] One of the most accessible introductions to Buddhism from a Buddhist perspective that I have found is Thich Nhat Hanh's *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching: Transforming Suffering into Peace, Joy, and Liberation* (New York: Harmony Books, 2015). Donald W. Mitchell and Sarah H. Jacoby's *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) is also an excellent textbook resource.

suffering, in the Buddhist view, is to embody the realization of this interdependence in a state of non-attachment known as *nirvana*.

One tenet of Mahayana Buddhist philosophy is that of emptiness, a sort of inversion of interdependence supported by texts such as the Heart Sutra and expounded upon by the philosopher Nagarjuna and others.[11] In the Buddhist cosmology, every single phenomenon, from humans and animals, to chairs and light bulbs, are interdependent, without a static "self" of their own. I am a person, for example, by biological virtue of my parents, their parents, and so on, and my identity of self is comprised of a number of aggregates, such as my body, emotions, sensations, cognitive processes, and a host of other bits and bobs. A table, in similar fashion, is a piece of wood supported by other pieces of wood, which were chopped by a machine or axe, themselves fashioned from materials that were cultivated by humans or nature. The table—and my *self*, for that matter—is "empty" of its own unique, permanent existence, dependent as it is on everything around it to become whole. This radical view of emptiness was synthesized by philosophers like Nagarjuna into a philosophy of two overlapping realities: a "conventional" one that allows you and me to go about our business and interact like normal people, and an "ultimate" one, where we recognize that all phenomena and concepts are inherently empty and thus not worthy of attachment.

Through meditation, sutra recitation, and other practices, Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhist religiosity often seeks to embody emptiness and touch this ultimate reality. Whether by the direct meditative applications of Zen or the complex, sequential Tibetan path to enlightenment of the *lamrim*, Buddhists are encouraged to experience the ultimate reality of emptiness through embodied practice.

Whereas Buddhist belief doesn't ordinarily have reason to refer back to a creator God, which would presuppose a divine being that is separate from the cosmos and thus incongruous with the natural law of emptiness, the majority view in Islam is that human beings, and indeed, the cosmos, are created by and dependent upon Allah. Furthermore, although one finds a plethora of devotional practices to buddhas and others among Buddhist schools of thought, one can say that the Muslim experience *consists of* the devotional relationship between oneself and Allah. The whole point of being Muslim, in effect, is to recognize Allah in all things and "worship God as if you see [them], for even if you do not see [them], [they see] you."[12]

As a Muslim, then, I view my existence as given to me by Allah, a Creator that is both omniscient and omnipotent. Yet, the Qur'an (2:115) indicates that "wherever you turn you are facing towards Allah. Surely Allah is All-Encompassing, All-Knowing."[13] Within a cosmology where God created all phenomena, the substance with which everything has been created must

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[11] See David Burton, "Emptiness in Mahāyāna Buddhism: Interpretations and Comparisons," in *A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy*, ed. Steven M. Emmanuel (West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2016) and Jay L. Garfield, "Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (*Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way*): Chapter 24: Examination of the Four Noble Truths," in *Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings*, eds. William Edelglass and Jay L. Garfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[12] This passage appears in the "Hadith of Gabriel," quoted in Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (St. Paul: Paragon House, 1994), xxv.

[13] "Surah Al-Baqarah – 2:115," Quran.com, accessed January 19, 2021, https://quran.com/2/115?translations=131.

be of God themself.[14] It stands to reason that any single phenomenon in question is perhaps acting out the will of God, without a permanent self of its own.

With this line of reasoning, the Buddhist view of ultimate reality becomes, for me as a Muslim, a phenomenological representation of the active *experience* of Allah in my life. I may pray to a Creator that I view as separate from me on a conventional level, but in the ultimate case, I can orient myself towards God *here and now* by experiencing the interdependent nature of all things. The cosmos likewise embodies the Oneness of Allah known in Arabic as *tawhid*,[15] dependent on everything around it without an inherent identity of its own. In essence, realizing ultimate reality is synonymous with embracing the indescribable ever-presence of God, and my Buddhist practices of embodying emptiness represent one pathway for experiencing it as such.

A related concept in the Mahayana tradition is that of the *dharmakaya*, the "dharma body" of a buddha which, in "its realization….is described as wisdom and compassion filling the entire cosmos."[16] In Zen, the *dharmakaya* can be synonymized with ultimate reality and "Buddha-nature",[17] to be discussed in more detail below. In a multi-religious context, and to further our exploration of ultimate reality, I might consider the *dharmakaya* as the epistemological potential for all beings to experience God, in the here and now, to the best of their ability.

The Bodhisattva Vicegerent

Central to the Mahayana Buddhist experience is the concept of the *bodhisattva*, a compassionate being that holds themselves back from complete enlightenment to ensure the liberation of all sentient beings. The altruism inherent in taking such a position is integral to the Buddhist path as seen by Mahayana and Vajrayana practitioners.[18]

Sachiko Murata, in *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought* (1992), paints a wonderful picture of the Muslim vicegerent (Arabic: *khalīfa*), Allah's human representative on earth. In this Islamic tradition, God's transcendence (Arabic: *tanzīh*) is contrasted with their immanence (Arabic: *tashbīh*), and it is Allah's divine mercy (Arabic: *raḥma*) that allows human beings to exist and make meaning within their domains. As the human being is receptive of Allah's mercy, so too is the cosmos receptive to the human. Thus, the human being is exhorted to be compassionate towards the cosmos as Allah's vicegerent or deputy on earth.[19]

This disposition of compassion, across the religiously rooted ideals of the bodhisattva and vicegerent, provides for an inherent responsibility on the part of the practitioner to act in

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[14] Throughout this essay, I use gender neutral pronouns for God, replacing "he," "him," or "his" with "they," "them," or "their" where appropriate.
[15] *Tawḥīd* generally refers to three qualities of Oneness: that of Allah as the Creator, of Allah's message(s) to humanity in its most pluralist representation, and that of humanity.
[16] Mitchell and Jacoby, *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience*, 143.
[17] O'Brien, *The Circle of the Way*, 44.
[18] See Tenzin Gyatso, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, *The World of Tibetan Buddhism: An Overview of Its Philosophy and Practice* (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2015), 24.
[19] See Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 8-9 & 54-55.

accordance with altruism and natural law. If I am to embody the benevolent path of the bodhisattva, I necessarily must put the needs of others before those of myself, which, if acting in accord with the interdependence of an ultimate reality, is empty of its own inherent existence in any case. Similarly, if I as a human being am entrusted with the care of the phenomenological world by a merciful Creator, it is incumbent upon me to treat everything around me with the same care and caution.

The idealized states of bodhisattva and vicegerent are actualized through *embodiment*, somewhat analogous to what Pierre Bourdieu calls "*habitus*."[20] I neither walk the bodhisattva path nor act as God's vicegerent by sitting on the couch and reading about spirituality. Rather, I embody both ideals by acting with a disposition of compassion towards others in my daily life and with everything that I do.

Commensurate with the ideals of the bodhisattva and vicegerent are the concepts of *bodhicitta* and *iḥsān*, respectively. The former refers to "the genuine altruistic aspiration to attain full enlightenment for the sake of all beings,"[21] whereas the latter is an expression of "doing what is beautiful,"[22] particularly in a Sufi[23] Muslim context. One aim within Mahayana Buddhism is to generate *bodhicitta* in a type of active, embodied compassion towards all sentient beings that informs all of one's actions, whereas for some Muslims, the goal of *iḥsān* is to utilize one's spiritual formation to drive positive, sustainable change in the world. *Bodhicitta* and *iḥsān*, along with the bodhisattva and vicegerent, have much more nuance among Buddhist and Muslim traditions and several points of difference between them, but their shared disposition of compassion towards others could not be more resonant.

Mindfulness and *Taqwā*

The Buddha's teachings indicate the Four Noble Truths that existence is characterized by suffering, that this suffering is caused by attachment, that such suffering can be ceased by renouncing this attachment, and that this path of renunciation is comprised in the Noble Eightfold Path.[24] "Right Mindfulness" is one category within that Path;[25] it has become popularized by the meditation approach of Thich Nhat Hanh and clinical applications such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction.

Even for the reader that has very little background in either tradition, it must already be apparent that the religious practices of Buddhism and Islam could not be more different. Islam shares certain theological components with Judaism and Christianity, yet in terms of orthopraxy, observance of Islamic religiosity is divergent from both of its Abrahamic counterparts. Practice

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[20] See Randal Johnson, "Editor's Introduction: Pierre Bourdieu on Art, Literature and Culture," in *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).
[21] Tenzin Gyatso, *The World of Tibetan Buddhism*, 24.
[22] Murata and Chittick, *The Vision of Islam*, xxxii.
[23] For an overview of Sufi practices and beliefs, see William C. Chittick, *Sufism: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: OneWorld, 2000).
[24] See Mitchell and Jacoby, *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience*, 48–52.
[25] The Noble Eightfold Path includes Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. See Mitchell and Jacoby, *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience*, 53–61.

within the Islamic tradition is also diverse and not any more monolithic than that within Buddhism, although the majority of Muslims will at least observe one or more of the Five Pillars of Islam as an expression of their religiosity.[26]

Common to most, if not all, Muslim practices, however, is the concept of *taqwā*, which translates somewhat to "God consciousness." It is the ability to see God in all things, and be mindful of God at all times. The salat prayer that many Muslims observe as the second Pillar of Islam, for example, encourages *taqwā* by removing oneself from one's activities to prostrate in front of Allah in ritual prayer at least five times per day. All Muslim religious practice, when viewed through the lens of *taqwā*, can be thought of as providing for fertile ground to worship Allah and be mindful of Allah's presence at all times.

Mindfulness has quite a different connotation throughout most Buddhist practice, in that it signifies the ability for a person to be cognizant of their actions, thoughts, emotions, and environs at all times, without thought for a creator deity, but with the impetus to see things *as they are*. If I can be mindful of my friend's emotions as they describe to me an incident in which I may have harmed them, for example, I can then also be mindful to respond with compassion, without clouding the discussion with what I *think* has happened or what I *meant* to have happened. With mindfulness, I can welcome things as they are, rather than as I am conditioned to see them.

The same wakefulness to the present reality is very much alive in *taqwā*. If, in the same situation, I am mindful of God with the same devotion as my mindfulness to the interdependence of all things, I can see that my friend, who is experiencing emotional pain, has the same right to happiness as I do. In that heated moment of confrontation, I can step outside of the ego-centered "I" that is focused on my own feelings, and realize that we both come from the same Source. My preoccupation with myself, my desires, and my view of the world, is surpassed by my devotion to experiencing an ultimate reality that is far more interconnected than I can readily ascertain. Perhaps my friend is truly angry at something else, or perhaps I committed an action that had no meaning to me, but has affected them deeply. With mindfulness and *taqwā*, I can easily say *Allahu a'lam*—"God knows best"—and move forward with compassion.

The Pure Land and the Kingdom of God

With some exceptions, the concept of heaven in Islam is more or less analogous to that within Christianity and Judaism. The Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet are clear about the existence of heaven and hell, in the way to which most Westerners will be accustomed, and that our actions as human beings will be weighed in the determination of where we'll wind up after this life.

In the three Mahayana Pure Land Sutras, we're exposed to the story of the bodhisattva Dharmakara, who made a series of vows to create a "pure land" for all sentient beings, becoming Amitabha (Chinese: *Amituofo*; Japanese: *Amida*), the Buddha of infinite light and life, in the

[26] The Five Pillars of Islam include the *Shahāda*, the proclamation of faith that there is "no God but the one God and that Muhammad is their Messenger"; Salat, the five daily ritual prayers; Zakat, almsgiving that is incumbent upon every Muslim that can afford it; Sawm, fasting during the month of Ramadan; and Hajj, ritual pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca.

process. Notable among his vows was the Primal Vow to not attain complete Buddhahood until all sentient beings are able to do the same.[27]

It would be reductive to equate the pure land with an Islamic vision of heaven, and Amitabha Buddha with a celestial deity that approximates to a "Buddhist God." Descriptions of the pure land are admittedly commensurate with the types of idealist iconography that would resonate with most visions of heaven, and some more devotional lived expressions of Pure Land Buddhism do indeed offer that practitioners will be reborn in Amitabha's pure land after this life. I have even heard the word "worship" used in reference to Amitabha, rather than the more popular disposition of appreciation to the celestial Buddha for the compassion inherent in his Primal Vow. Still, it's important to note that Buddhist notions of the pure land are diverse and not monolithic.[28]

As a multi-religious practitioner, there are two main avenues of inquiry for me regarding Amitabha Buddha and the pure land. In the first, more literal reading of the cosmology, I can see similarities in the concept of Amitabha as light, in parallel to *al-Nūr*, one of the Ninety-Nine Names of Allah. *al-Nūr* translates to "*the* Light," with a connotation of absoluteness that is the primordial light from which all other sources of illumination draw their power, or as the Qur'an (24:35) says, "Light upon light!"[29] As a monotheist, and sensitive to Buddhist cosmology, I'd be uncomfortable with any type of suggestion that tries to line up Amitabha with *al-Nūr*, but I can certainly appreciate the similarity in light-based imagery. Furthermore, I can delight in the kindred natures of heaven and the pure land, although in practice, Muslim and Buddhist understandings of them prove to be very different.[30]

In the second, more philosophical understanding, I can draw upon educators such as Thich Nhat Hanh, who, drawing upon Zen teachings, suggests that "the Pure Land lies in our mind and Amitabha is our true nature."[31] Moreover, he posits that "perhaps the Kingdom of God, like the Pure Land of the Buddha, can also be located in the East, in the West, in the North, in the South, above and below."[32] He suggests that "when we come to our church, to our synagogue, to our mosque it is not only to benefit from the peace...and love we find but to contribute our part in living the spiritual ideals of our community."[33] In the Zen view, Amitabha represents the conceptual understanding of our original, infinite potential to become enlightened, known as "Buddha-nature," and the pure land is the undefiled mind that is awakened to ultimate reality.

This view of the pure land as a state of mind that anyone can aspire to generate, and of Amitabha Buddha as our original nature, encourages me to experience the Kingdom of God

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[27] See Taitetsu Unno, *River of Fire, River of Water: An Introduction to the Pure Land Tradition of Shin Buddhism* (New York: Doubleday, 1998).
[28] See Georgios T. Halkias and Richard K. Payne, eds., *Pure Lands in Asian Texts and Contexts: An Anthology* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2019).
[29] "Surah An-Nur – 24:35," Quran.com, accessed January 19, 2021, https://quran.com/24/35?translations=131.
[30] Islamic theology, for example, presupposes a singular rebirth during the Day of Judgement to account for one's deeds during this life, whereas Buddhist belief often refers back to the natural law of karma that determines one's destination among sequential rebirths.
[31] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Finding Our True Home: Living in the Pure Land Here and Now* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2003), 49.
[32] Ibid., 85.
[33] Ibid., 136.

here and now, and return to the God consciousness of *taqwā* in the present moment. For other Buddhists, the understanding of Amitabha and the pure land might be quite divergent from this more philosophical exploration, yet for many Muslims, even the hint of equating another deific figure with Allah will be a strong cause for concern. For me, encountering topics of difference such as this one with nuance and inquiry often illuminates a path forward, and in this case, provides for a richer approach to realizing the pure land and Kingdom of God in everyday life, rather than only in frames of eschatology.

Mantras and *Dhikr*

Central to the expression of Pure Land Buddhism found in Jodo Shinshu is the practice of *nenbutsu* (Chinese: *nianfo*), the recollection of Amitabha Buddha, known in Japanese as Amida Butsu. The mantra used in *nenbutsu*, "*namo amida butsu*," conveys the meaning of paying homage to or saying the name of the Buddha of Infinite Light and Life, and ties back to the celestial Buddha's Primal Vow of compassion.[34] When one recites the *nenbutsu*, one is mindful of the incredible compassion of Amida to make such a vow that intends to save all sentient beings, while being empowered to act with the same compassion in their own corners of the world.

Nenbutsu is one mantra of many that appear throughout Buddhist traditions, each of which having their own related practices and interpretations. The popular Tibetan six-syllable mantra, "*om mani padme hum*," for example, is thought to contain the heart of Buddhist teachings, while also referring back to the bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokiteśvara (Tibetan: Chenrezig; Chinese: Guanyin; Japanese: Kannon).[35] Like most other religious practices, the observance of Buddhist mantras—even down to the use of *mala* or counting beads—is not monolithic, but there are some similarities in terms of disposition which also overlap with Islam.

Within Islam, and particularly Sufi circles, prayer beads called *tasbīḥ* are often used to engage in *dhikr*, "remembrance" of Allah. Muslims will count as they recite prayers, the Ninety-Nine Names of Allah, or even the word "Allah" itself in an attempt to reach a state of purity where they can *know* God, rather than simply *worship* God. The recitation of *dhikr* can lead to a trance-like state of ecstasy, to which we will return in a moment.

First, we must spend some time investigating a few critical questions that reveal the nature of resolving difference within the personal scope of multi-religiosity. We have seen that at the center of Islamic theology is the unequivocal proclamation of the Oneness of God. When first encountering Buddhist mantras such as the *nenbutsu* and six-syllable mantra, we are encouraged to understand their original contexts of relating back to buddhas and bodhisattvas such as Amida and Avalokiteśvara. Questions such as the following naturally arise: can a Muslim authentically

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[34] See Taitetsu Unno, *River of Fire, River of Water*, 26–28.

[35] The most succinct explanation I have seen of the six-syllable mantra can be found on page 63 of Jon Landaw's course notes for the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition's *Discovering Buddhism* series subject area 13: "Introduction to Tantra." Landaw interprets teachings by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and His Holiness Sakya Trizin to explain, "the mantra OM MANI PADME HUM can be interpreted as follows: May our ordinary body, speech, and mind (OM) become transformed, through the unified practice of compassionate method (MANI) and wisdom (PADME), into the purified body, speech, and mind of unshakeable enlightenment (HUM)!" See "Course: Module 13. Introduction to Tantra," FPMT Online Learning Center, accessed January 20, 2021, https://onlinelearning.fpmt.org/course/view.php?id=13.

incorporate Buddhist mantras in their practice, even if those mantras are contrary to the monotheism inherent in *dhikr*? Are devotional practices that involve buddhas and bodhisattvas like Amida and Avalokiteśvara at odds with the Islamic witnessing that there is "no god but the One God?"

I would argue that a multi-religious investigation of religious difference, commensurate with Asad's treatment of Islam as a discursive tradition, needs to take discourse and inquiry as its starting points, rather than either essentialism or relativism. The former would suggest that Islam and Buddhism, as monolithic and disparate traditions, may diverge in ways that are irreconcilable, while the latter would indicate that anyone can say anything about either tradition, and we have to take all positions at face value. Instead, if we look at *how* practices may be Muslim, and *how* they may be Buddhist, rather than *whether* they are one, the other, or neither, we're better enabled to find a path that more authentically works for our own multi-religious identities, without rejecting seemingly incompatible cosmologies wholesale or equating them interchangeably without nuance.

There are many levels of superficial engagement, for example, in which a Muslim can make metaphysical and actual space for theological diversity among other religions. On the one hand, a Muslim universalist, who believes in pluralism between all traditions, must be prepared to make room for what they may initially perceive to be polytheistic practices in other religions, even if in so doing they have to—in their own mind or otherwise—rationalize those practices as being emblematic of a multi-faceted one true Source. On the other, the practitioner can make room for different forms of expression that feel authentic to both traditions by wrestling with the ethos behind the seemingly divergent practices.

Emblematic of this wrestling, we will turn to three different examples of how to approach the reconciliation of mantras within a multi-religious framework that includes monotheistic belief as its point of departure.

Beginning with Master Sheng-yen's teachings on Amitabha and the pure land within a Chan context, we see an affirmation of the aforementioned Zen perspective by Thich Nhat Hanh:

> Chan Buddhism does not sanction the idea of seeking rebirth in the Pure Land or relying on the power of the Buddha for one's salvation. In Chan, the emphasis is on not being attached to anything. The goal is to use meditation to actualize directly the enlightened Buddha-nature that is within us all. Nonetheless, Chan Buddhists do often practice Buddha-mindfulness and meditation on Amitābha Buddha or Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (Guanyin); but the emphasis is really on the Buddha as being identical with the dharma-body and our intrinsic Buddha-nature, rather than on rebirth in the western Pure Land. Thus, in Chan circles there is a saying that "Amitābha is our original nature, and the Pure Land is none other than the mind"...Buddha-mindfulness, or *nianfo* practice, is directed toward the realization of our Buddha-nature within.[36]

[36] Master Sheng-yen Chang and Dan Stevenson, *Hoofprint of the Ox: Principles of the Chan Buddhist Path as Taught by a Modern Chinese Master* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 77.

Rather than emphasizing Amitabha or Avalokiteśvara as entities separate from us that receive worship in exchange for blessings, the Chan/Zen approach is to view them as emblematic of our original nature or states of our mind. Viewed from this perspective, mantra recitation may not necessitate divergence from monotheistic belief and practice, but let's continue the thread of investigation for the next two examples.

Exploration of the six-syllable mantra will inevitably lead us to the study of *tantra* in Tibetan Buddhism. The tantric approach often includes the practice of "deity yoga," the identification of one's self in meditation with one or more buddhas or bodhisattvas, most clearly explained by Lama Thubten Yeshe:

> Tantric meditational deities should not be confused with what different mythologies and religions might mean when they speak of gods and goddesses. Here, the deity we choose to identify with represents the essential qualities of the fully awakened experience latent within us. To use the language of psychology, such a deity is an archetype of our own deepest nature, our most profound level of consciousness. In tantra we focus our attention upon such an archetypal image and identify with it in order to arouse the deepest, most profound aspects of our being and bring them into our present reality.[37]

Commensurate with Lama Yeshe's explanation, the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, one of the tantric deities and to whom the six-syllable mantra is connected, can be considered in the tantric context to be none other than the archetype of compassion within our own mind. Avalokiteśvara no longer appears to us as an object separate from us to be worshipped, but rather an exemplar within us to be attained.

Finally, Taitetsu Unno discusses the importance of the *nenbutsu* in Jodo Shinshu:

> Philosophically speaking, the ne[n]butsu is the self-articulation of fundamental reality...the Name, namu-amida-butsu, is the source of creative life, the power that affirms reality-as-is. Each time it is intoned, vital life is experienced. What does this mean? Through the working of the Name, we are made to become aware of ourselves as limited, finite beings (*namu*), yet secure within the sustaining power of boundless compassion (*amida-butsu*). As human beings we are made to become true, real, and sincere through the operative functioning of the Name. When we thus em-*body* the Name, Amida is right here. Apart from intoning the Name, there is no Amida. The Name is Amida Buddha. The Name is reality-as-is.[38]

In Unno's work, we see that the *nenbutsu* is an affirmation of an ultimate reality that is rooted in compassion, which requires human articulation to be experienced. Rather than paying homage

[37] Lama Thubten Yeshe, *Introduction to Tantra: The Transformation of Desire*, ed. Jonathan Landaw (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2005), 29.
[38] Taitetsu Unno, *River of Fire, River of Water: An Introduction to the Pure Land Tradition of Shin Buddhism* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 27–28.

to a Buddha that exists apart from us, the *nenbutsu* is a discursive response to universal compassion that is represented in the teachings of Amida Buddha and alive in each one of us.[39]

Within the first two investigations of Amitabha and Avalokiteśvara in Chan and *tantra*, a space emerges where a monotheist Muslim can make room for religious expression and practice that may have *a priori* appeared irreconcilable. If one believes, from the start, in a progenitor God that created everything, including humans and minds, one must also make room for the possibility that there are a multitude of philosophies and psychologies that examine that mind in multifaceted ways. Treated in this manner, a Buddhist cosmology and practice that includes buddhas and bodhisattvas as idealized states of the mind is just as compatible with monotheistic belief as is Western psychology. Furthermore, if we take the third example of *nenbutsu*, we can conceptualize the practice religiously as the embodied articulation of an interdependent, ultimate reality, which we have already seen to be consistent with an Islamic theology that takes Allah as all-encompassing.

Put more plainly, through a Chan lens, if the pure land is the mind and Amitabha is our original nature, then the Primal Vow can be thought of as an allegorical representation of our original nature vowing to liberate all sentient beings. The *nenbutsu*, in turn, illustrates our taking refuge in or returning to this ultimate reality of our original nature. Through the lens of *tantra*, Avalokiteśvara represents the archetype of compassion that we seek to emulate, and the six-syllable mantra is an embodiment of that aspiration. And finally, viewed through a Jodo Shinshu lens, the *nenbutsu* is a response to the call of the fundamental self-articulation of reality-as-is, represented by the compassionate teachings of Amida Buddha. Hence, the six-syllable mantra can represent our aspiration to act accordance with the awakening of wisdom and compassion, whereas the *nenbutsu* is an affirmation that awakening has already occurred, an invitation to realize wisdom and emulate compassion as we make our way through the world.

In this discursive fashion, unpacking different perspectives on mantra as we wrestle with them, we arrive at a place of reconciliation between seemingly divergent belief and practice. Instead of rejecting the practice of mantra recitation wholesale because of its potential theological underpinnings, we have pushed ourselves to go deeper, to make space for difference with the intention of finding resolution. The investigations allow us to consider a multi-religious practice where I, as a Muslim, can *worship* God as *the* Ultimate Reality,[40] and benefit from Buddhist practice *experiencing* the interdependence that points to that Ultimate Reality while training my mind in wisdom and compassion.

It may appear that, with the above logic, I am privileging specific approaches to Buddhist practice over others, appropriating as I like to make them "fit" within a framework of Islamic belief and cosmology. On the contrary, and to which I have previously alluded, the basis of pluralism is to make room for other traditions, even if their religious beliefs are diametrically opposed to one's own. Buddhist traditions that view buddhas and bodhisattvas as separate entities, even deities, must be provided with the same lens of discourse in the spirit of dialogue,

[39] A wonderful illustration of this call and response is available in Reverend David Matsumoto's dharma message, available on Berkeley Buddhist Temple, "Dharma Family Service 17 January 2021," January 17, 2021, 32:50, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q9wk6mc5ELg.

[40] The topic of "Absolute Reality," or *al-ḥaqīqa al-muṭlaqa*, as it is understood in the Islamic tradition, is beyond the scope of this paper, but brilliantly described by Sachiko Murata in *The Tao of Islam*, 18 and 62.

even if they don't fit neatly within a monotheistic framework with which one might be comfortable. Yet, in the case of multi-religiosity, it is the practice of investigation, of discourse and inquiry, that one can discern what works for one's own identity and formation.

It is likewise important that within this discussion, we return to the idea of *how*, and not *whether*, a person's practices are Muslim or Buddhist. Examining the observance of mantras and *dhikr*, for instance, reveal a similar disposition of devotion that resonates across both traditions. With the former, I may be devoted to the teachings, to the will to become enlightened for the sake of all sentient beings, to our original nature, or to the compassionate self-articulation of reality-as-is. In the latter, I may be devoted to Allah alone, to the Ultimate Reality, or to one of the 99 names that include archetypes like *al-Nūr* or *al-Ra'ūf*, "the Compassionate." Either way, a disposition of devotion illustrates *how* I practice as a Buddhist, Muslim, or both, discussed below.

Selflessness and *Fanā'*

At the heart of Buddhist practice is *anatman*, the "selflessness" or "no-self" discussed earlier. In the Mahayana view, not only is every phenomenon empty of an inherent self because of interdependence (also known as "dependent origination" or "codependent arising"), practitioners can have an embodied experience of that selflessness through meditation and compassion.

A similar concept of selflessness exists in Islamic tradition in the form of *fanā'*, the "annihilation" of the *nafs*, or "ego," into Allah. Sufi gnostic practices such as *dhikr*, or the "whirling" of Mevlevi dervishes, are said to lead to an ecstatic experience of being one with God, where the self becomes a drop that dissolves in the ocean of Allah.[41]

If there could be an archetypal meeting point between the gnostic aspects of Buddhism and Islam, one would have to say it would be within the spaces shared by *anatman* and *fanā'*. In a Buddhist context, selflessness is a mark of ultimate reality, and it is up to the practitioner to experience the wisdom of emptiness for themselves to touch enlightenment. In Sufi Islam, one instead dissolves the insignificant droplet of the ego into the unfathomable depths of Allah. From a multi-religious perspective, the objective is the same.

A Disposition of Devotion

At the beginning of my time as an *uchideshi* at the Monterey Academy of Martial Arts, I lived in a modest room of about twenty-one square feet in size, adjacent to all of the other apprentice students. We could roll off of our simple sleeping cushions and wander onto the much thicker training mats in the *dojo*, practicing our techniques with one another or grabbing one of sundry swords, staves, or other martial weapons to demonstrate our *kata*. To a student, we were overwhelmingly devoted to training our bodies and minds in the spirit of *bushido*, however it was construed for us in that time, with an ethos of what we called *hibi tanren*, "everyday training."

Throughout all of the inquiries offered in this essay is an unspoken, but nonetheless prevailing, common thread that asks the multi-part question: what *is* multi-religious practice, and

[41] See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002).

where can one find home within it? Even if we utilize Talal Asad's framework to determine how, rather than if, someone is Muslim, Buddhist, or Muslim and Buddhist, we still might want for some kind of resolution, a tool to help us make meaning out of different practices that sometimes overlap, and other times pull us in diverging directions.

My approach to this problem of defining my own multi-religious practice is to consider what I call a disposition of devotion, and one that is rooted in an ethos of compassion. For me, multi-religiosity is an indicator that I am willing to "do the work" in resolving difference between diverse religious traditions to understand and embody them as I am able, while also being willing to let go of other parts that I cannot reconcile or even comprehend. I may not have an answer for everything, and I may still be taken aback when encountering a belief or practice in one tradition that seems wholly at odds with another. Yet, my disposition of devotion—to Allah, to experiencing ultimate reality, to the teachings, to compassion—allows me to investigate with discourse and inquiry, with the object of making meaning for my own understanding and embodied practice.

It is important to note that this disposition is not static or reified. It is an active, hermeneutical process that reasserts a willingness to be open to religious similarity as well as difference, and to push oneself out of one's comfort zone for the sake of spiritual growth. It represents a dedication to *hibi tanren*, everyday training in reconciling my love for and worship of Allah with my determination to experience reality-as-is and act with compassion towards all sentient beings. It's also an acknowledgement that in all things, *Allahu a'lam*, "God knows," but I can help change the things around me by acting with compassion at all times. Or, in Buddhist Muslim terminology, God is the cause, but I may help in supporting the conditions.

This multi-religious disposition of devotion may also not be as tidy as one might prefer. When people ask me about my religious identity, for example, I often mention that I embraced Islam as an adolescent, and have taught martial arts for many years, which sowed the seeds for my growing identity as a Buddhist. Yet, my wife is Christian, and I believe what she believes, and we also have Jewish, Hindu, and Sikh friends. It may be difficult to categorize one's religiosity or spirituality by putting it into a box, even if one has adhered to a singular tradition for most or all of their lives. If one experiences belonging in more than one tradition, the problem of categorization becomes even messier.

In setting my intention towards a disposition of devotion, I am better able to embody what I perceive to be the ethos of the Buddhist and Islamic traditions, whether I'm dedicated to my meditation practice and reciting mantras, or engaging in daily prayers and remembering the name of Allah. Moreover, when I seek to enact those practices in relation to other sentient beings and the cosmos, I am encouraged to do so with compassion of the bodhisattva and vicegerent ideals, acting in coordination with an ultimate reality that is interdependent and emblematic of the Kingdom of God.

The Miracle of Compassion

Some months after the original conversation with my wife about the hardships she had encountered in early 2020, she experienced a frightening altercation while taking our dog for a walk. Another woman had left her own two dogs off-leash, and they ran into the street to harass

our pup while my wife fended them off. I happened to be on a run at the time and took a call from her on my mobile phone, diverting my path to find my wife and our dog shaken, and out of sorts, but thankfully unharmed.

After walking home together and spending some time discussing the situation, our tempers receded. Curiously, my wife mentioned that she worried for the other woman and her dogs, concerned that because they were willing to run into the street, they could have easily been harmed in the confrontation. Even in my state of distress over hearing about the altercation secondhand, I was deeply moved by my wife's ability to respond with compassion, especially so soon after the event occurred. I was still experiencing my own anger at the carelessness of leaving one's dogs off-leash, but my wife, likely more adrenalized than I, was able to look past her emotions and react with empathy.

From this experience, I am moved to see compassion not only as a miracle in the sense that it can help us to bridge barriers and empathize with others, but also in the sense that to act with altruism in the face of adversity is truly remarkable. It is easy—or at least easier—to empathize with a friend or family member when there's not much at stake. To be compassionate with a perceived enemy or in a situation that doesn't immediately suit us is nothing short of a miracle.

As a multi-religious practitioner, cultivating a disposition of devotion is one step towards finding a home among multiple traditions, but it is hollow without compassion. I can be the best Buddhist, or the best Muslim, in terms of adhering to precepts or in worshiping God, but if I can't embody those teachings or that devotion in my relation to others, I may have peeled some of the rind, but ingested none of the pith. Meditating on the wisdom of emptiness and engaging in my daily prayers may allow me to touch an ultimate, interdependent reality, to prostrate my body and mind in accordance with a Creator who counts *al-Ḥaqq*, "the Absolute Truth," among their Ninety-Nine Names. Yet, to make true meaning out of the ideals of the bodhisattva and vicegerent, I am motivated to actively embody the altruism inherent in the lived expression of mindfulness and *taqwā* among other beings, an embodiment that is informed by and rooted in compassion.

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