

Pure Land Buddhism and Islam

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What can Muslims learn from Pure Land Buddhism? In my recent efforts to deepen my knowledge of the Pure Land tradition, and in my encounter of an authentic representative of the Japanese branch of this tradition, Rev. Kemmyo Taira Sato, I have been given various answers to this question. One of the most important lessons we, as Muslims, can learn from the Amidist tradition relates to the meaning of the word *islam*. This word, as is well known, means the act of making formal ‘submission’ to God, surrendering our will to what Amidists would call the will of Other-Power. While Muslims talk about the grace or mercy of God, Amidists would talk about the infinite salvific ‘power’ of the Other (*tariki*); in both traditions, one surrenders one’s will to something infinitely greater than oneself.

Rev. Sato stressed in our recent encounter that Amidists do not believe in ‘justification by works’ but in ‘justification by faith’, and asked whether the same was true for Muslims. I replied in the affirmative and cited by way of illustration of this principle the following dialogue between the Prophet and his companions. ‘Not one of you enters Paradise on account of his deeds’, the Prophet declared. One of his companions asked: ‘Not even you, O Messenger of God?’ ‘Not even I’, came the reply, ‘it is only through God whelming me with His mercy that I may enter Paradise,’ he continued.

But given the emphasis placed in Islam upon correct legal and moral action, and thus on the correct application of what Amidists would call ‘self-power’ (*jiriki*), the totality of reliance upon the grace of God, and the focus upon God as the source of one’s salvation can become, in practice, eclipsed by what Rev. Sato calls an ‘ethical’ perspective, rather than a properly ‘religious’ perspective. An ethical perspective reinforces one’s sense of moral agency, and thus entrenches one’s consciousness within the confines of one’s own ‘power’; whereas a religious perspective—a properly ‘Islamic’ one, in the sense of total submission to the Other—will, by contrast, liberate one from self-preoccupation, and allow one to see that one’s very capacity to act ethically derives from the grace of the Other. To fully surrender does not therefore mean that one should transgress ethical *rules*, only that one must transcend the ethical *perspective*, even while acting ethically. The consequence of this simultaneous affirmation of ethical propriety and transcendence of the ethical perspective allows one to see that true *islam* means acknowledging both one’s own impotence in the face

of God, and, paradoxically, the inescapable ‘evil’ constituted by one’s own egotism or one’s sense of being independent of God.

The Qur’an expresses succinctly this point of view in the following two verses:

*Truly man is rebellious;
Insofar as he deems himself independent (96:6–7).*

Rebellion is here equated with self-sufficiency; on the contrary, submission (*islam*) is implicitly identified with total reliance upon God. The deeper existential implication of these two verses—and their concordance with the import of Rev. Sato’s distinction between the merely ethical and the fully religious perspective—is brought out by one of the great woman saints of Islam, Rabia al-Adawiyya. A man came to her and said he had not sinned for so many years. She retorted to him: ‘Your very existence is a sin to which no other can be compared.’ Forgiveness of this sin resides in seeing through one’s existence as one sees through a transparent veil to the one and only Light, that of God. Here we are struck by the similarity of the two traditions, wherein the Absolute reality is merciful Light removing the darkness of ego-bound consciousness. To see one’s own existence as darkness, and to see God as Light is only possible through total submission to God; and this submission is then seen, not so much as the seed of one’s enlightenment, but as the fruit of a pre-existing divine grace:

He it is who blesses you, as do the angels, in order to bring you out of darkneses into the Light. And He is ever-merciful to the believers (33:43).



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