

## Article

# A Comparative Study of Islam and Buddhism: A Multicultural Society Perspective

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**Abstract:** In this article, two great world religions, Islam and Buddhism, are compared. The purpose is to highlight similarities and differences between the two religions. Additionally, this article aims to project elements and teachings that are deemed important by their followers. A neutral stance on their beliefs is especially important in a multicultural society. The study was conducted to promote the harmony and betterment of Malaysian society, and the nation at large; a value process of understanding of each religion is recommended, which can then lead to acceptance, respect and tolerance among the population, and form the basis for developing a paradigmatic Malaysian society that has unity in diversity. This study adopted document analysis as the research method for data collection and data analysis. The conclusions drawn are that, although the two religions appear rather different in terms of principles and practices, the core values of avoiding evil and doing good are similar. In addition, the study proposes that without prejudice and pride, the basics of all commonly practiced religions in Malaysia should be introduced to all Malaysians, with the objective of all understanding, but not necessarily embracing, each other's religion.

**Keywords:** Islam; Buddhism; Malaysia; multicultural society; religion



**Citation:** Yew, Wong Chin, Abd Hair Awang, Sivapalan Selvadurai, Mansor Mohd Noor, and Peng Kee Chang. 2021. A Comparative Study of Islam and Buddhism: A Multicultural Society Perspective. *Religions* 12: 1098. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12121098>

Academic Editors: Roberto Cipriani, Roberta Ricucci and Dilshod Achilov

Received: 17 October 2021

Accepted: 7 December 2021

Published: 11 December 2021

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## 1. Introduction

Both Islam and Buddhism are global religions with many adherents around the world. There are approximately 1.9 billion Muslims worldwide (24.9% of the 2020 global population), making Islam the second largest religion in the world behind Christianity (Pew Research Center 2011). Buddhism, too, is a religion that is practiced worldwide. It is believed that as many as 535 million people around the world practice this religion, which represents between 8% and 10% of the total global population (World Population Review 2021).

Attacks on Muslim minorities in Buddhist countries have escalated in recent years (OHCHR 2014). The most obvious increases in religious conflicts within Southeast Asian countries have been found in Myanmar and Thailand. Violent anti-Muslim conflicts have become an important social phenomenon that cannot be ignored in the process of Myanmar's political transformation, and are an important causative factor in Myanmar's contemporary diplomatic dilemma. The reason why tension between religious communities in Myanmar has not been eased by the political transition is closely related to the rise of Buddhist nationalism (Chiu 2020). In contrast, in southern Thailand, the religious conflict was characterized by divisions between Muslims and Buddhists; in particular, the desire to assume a stronger religious identity than before, encouraging radical Buddhist nationalism in the country (Frydenlund 2015).

What will be the value in comparing these two great religions? The comparison will focus on the most intimate and treasured sensitivities of its adherents; in fact, no trespassing or misrepresentation of religion will be tolerated, especially in attempts to portray the strengths and weaknesses of each religion, to praise or criticize and glorify or demean

practices by either faith. Such moves are bound to create enmity, stoking hatred among adherents. Rather, the sole purpose of this comparison is to promote mutual understanding and steer away from the meaningless pinpointing of faults based on different standpoints or faiths, which are beyond reconciliation, but focus on the wide perspectives of the wholesomeness of religions. Through mutual understanding, the acceptance of each religion will develop (not amounting to belief), which will pave the way for the mutual respect of each religion or belief, the appreciation of the beauty of devotion and noble qualities of each belief or practice, finding common ground and tolerating differences that exist between faiths (Mohamed 2017). The process is shown as below:

Understanding → Acceptance → Respect → Tolerance

The value of this process is especially relevant in Malaysian society, which is multi-racial, multi-cultural and multi-religious, helping the population to live harmoniously and achieve unity in diversity. Malaysian society consists of Malays, Chinese, Indians, and many other ethnic groups maintaining their unique cultural identities and who have lived together in Malaysia for generations. These cultures influence each other, and have shown willingness for tolerance on matters of difference as well as instilling mutual respect within the pluralistic nature of the society (Ahmad 2007).

Indeed, Malaysia as a pluralistic and multicultural society has been accepted and recognized in the region and worldwide. In fact, this has been a trademark of the Malaysian Peninsular since ancient times, being the meeting point of East and West along the trading routes, playing host to Arab, Indian, Western and Chinese merchants, among many others. In fact, in modern times, the world has turned into a global village; this is the value that enables Malaysians to mingle freely among all nationalities and races, forming global relationships and conducting international trade.

## 2. Research Background and Objectives of the Study

This study does not strive to be exhaustive and comprehensive, because it would be cumbersome, difficult to comprehend, and may prove futile to its readers. Rather, this study attempts to focus only on the essence of the two religions mentioned, no doubt representing the bare minimum but constituting the core beliefs of the religions, to portray the critical and important aspects, construed as most representative of the religion by its followers. In its concise form, it promotes easy understanding and provides a cursory insight into the religion. Additionally, in this manner, skirting other peripherals, this can be accepted by all religious followers, independent of the sect or branch, whether they are Sunni or Shia in Islam, Theravada or Mahayana in Buddhism, or follow the different practices adhered to in different regions or races due to the cross-national and cultural adoption of the two great religions, thereby eliminating confusion to the readers.

To achieve the above objectives, the authors focus on the main principles and practices of the religion, minus the rites and ritual aspects. The principles dealt with are what the followers believe, and what are the actions carried out by the believers adhering to the religious ideals or obligations.

In short, Islam in Malaysia can be described as predominantly Sunni Islam, where other forms of Islam are illegal (International Religious Freedom Report 2020) and propagating other forms of Islam can lead to prosecution (Hamid 2006). The presence of Shia followers is largely confined to foreign tourists and student populations (Musaa and Hui 2017). In a very contrasting manner, Malaysia has been described as the meeting point of different Buddhist traditions (Tan 2000). All three branches of Buddhism (Mahayana, Theravada and Vajrayana), as well as different sects of Buddhism (Nichiren, Zen and Pure Land), thrive in Malaysia, and there is no animosity among them. Most Chinese Malaysians can freely join any tradition, determined mainly by their language proficiency and distance to places of worship instead of belief alone. Thus, many Chinese Malaysian Buddhists visit Thai, Sri Lankan and Burmese Buddhist temples, which are of the Theravada tradition, with-

out any hesitation. Nevertheless, due to the high percentage of Chinese Malaysians who are Chinese-educated, they are more inclined towards the Mahayana tradition (Tan 2020).

In Malaysia, religions are divided across ethnic lines. Almost all Malays are Muslims; Chinese are Buddhists; and Indians are Hindus or Sikhs (Rahim et al. 2011). According to the 2010 population census, approximately 61.3% of Malaysians are Muslims and 19.8% are Buddhists. Of Chinese Malaysians, 83.6% identified as Buddhists, making them the largest minority religious group in the country (Census 2011). Additionally, there are many Buddhist descendants of Thai, Sri Lanka and Burmese origin.

### 3. Research Methodology

This study is based on document analysis as a form of qualitative research (Bowen 2009), which is a method of using documents or archives to understand human thoughts, activities and social phenomena.

Documents and archives are readily available materials that are widely distributed and can be obtained from several sources, such as government agency documents and records, private documents, mass media, and social science research archives. Based on the wide range of document and archival sources, the document analysis method is suitable for the following special functions: comparing human thoughts, activities and social phenomena in different regions or cultures.

The study utilized and reviewed secondary sources related to religious principles, religious conflicts and ideas to promote a harmonious social relationship among followers of all religions in general, focusing on Islam and Buddhism in particular, in a multicultural society. The keywords “Islam”, “Buddhism”, “religious conflict”, “multicultural society” and “religious harmony” were used for searching the secondary full-text literature, written and published in English, and uploaded online.

According to Yin (1994), document analysis as a research method produces a rich description of a single phenomenon. Furthermore, as Merriam (1988, p. 118) mentioned, “Documents of all types can help the researcher uncover meaning, develop understanding, and discover insights relevant to the research problem”. In this study, various sources and contents of documents were reviewed based on the research problem, research objective and conceptual framework of the study. In order to determine the credibility, accuracy and representativeness of the selected documents, document analysis is a process of evaluating documents in such a way that empirical knowledge is produced and understanding is developed. In the process, objectivity, sensitivity and balance between both will be emphasized (Bowen 2009).

### 4. Discussion

#### 4.1. Main Principle of the Religion

Similarly to the Torah in Judaism, and the Gospel in Christianity, Islam is also a religion wherein “Books of God” are sacred; the Quran was revealed by God to the Prophet Muhammad (Esposito 2002). In fact, Muslims believe that the one true God revealed the Quran to the Prophet Muhammad, due to the human errors introduced in the scriptures and beliefs of Judaism and Christianity. Thus, despite its relative newness, the Quran is viewed as original and untainted by Muslims (Esposito 2002).

It is believed that the Prophet Muhammad, a wealthy merchant who resided in Mecca and led a pious religious life, received revelations from God through the angel Gabriel over a period of 23 years; a total of 114 chapters (called Surah) were passed on to him from the age of 40 until his death in the year 623 C.E, while he was living in a cave near Mecca. The Prophet Muhammad was believed to have perfectly lived out the revelation he received, putting the guidance of Quran into action, cementing and strengthening his understanding of the Quran (Esposito 2002). Thus, the Prophet Mohammad is the ideal model for Muslims seeking to do God’s bidding. The Prophet Mohammad’s sayings and deeds were compiled into Sunnah or Hadith, and Muslims refer to the Quran and the Sunnah in order to live their life correctly and in accordance with God’s will.

Islam is a religion that is all-pervasive, covering all aspects of life. Islam emphasizes the relationship between humanity and Allah swt, inter-relationships between humans, and humans' relationships with the universe, giving guidance for humans to organize and regulate their life on Earth (Islahi 1998).

There are three important components of Islamic teachings, detailed below.

#### I. Aqidah (Belief)

This is the most essential element in Islamic teaching, and relates to the beliefs and faiths of a person. Islam simply means submission, obedience and surrendering oneself to Allah swt. Islam is monotheist, whereby its followers believe in one God, the creator, sustainer, ruler and judge of the universe. Aqidah is a set of beliefs, which is beyond the thinking process of humanity, and the Quran is the source of guidance for the followers. There are six aspects of Aqidah, known as the Pillars of Faith in Islam (Sheikh Obid and Demikha 2012), in which there must be no doubt or suspicion from the believers:

- a. Belief in Allah swt;
- b. Belief in the Angels;
- c. Belief in the Books of Allah;
- d. Belief in the Messengers of Allah;
- e. Belief in the Day of Judgement;
- f. Belief in the Qada and Qadr (the divine decree or predestination).

The Pillars of Faith mentioned above are the core beliefs for Muslims, in which belief itself qualifies as one, and form the basis of their behavior and practices in life. Conversely, disbelief in them will chart an incorrect path and affect one's behavior, disqualifying them as a Muslim.

Belief in the oneness of Allah is the most important among the six pillars, because Muslims believe in only one God, and it is their duty to carry out Allah's will, to submit and surrender themselves to Him. Belief in the Angels means acceptance of the existence of angels, who are without their own free will but have complete obedience to Allah's commands; in many instances, angels play the role of a conduit between Allah and humanity. The third pillar of belief is in the Books of the Allah, which encompasses not just the Islamic holy book, but holy books from the other Abrahamic religions of Judaism and Christianity. The Quran is deemed the final message from Allah in guiding Muslims in living their lives according to the wishes of Allah. The following pillar is the belief in the messengers of Allah; again, messengers include prophets such as Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad.

The Prophet Muhammad is bestowed a very distinguished place in Islam, as a founder of Islam, a living example, and a figure for Muslims to emulate in fulfilling the expectations of Allah. Belief in the Day of Judgement is another important Muslim belief, whereby Muslims believe that this world and this life are only temporary. It is in the afterlife, on Judgement Day when the world ends, that permanent reward or punishment will be dispensed to every individual who has ever lived based upon their actions in their life on Earth, elevating them into heaven or condemning them to hell. The last pillar of faith is belief in the Qada and Qadr (the divine decree and predestination). In this belief, each individual has the capacity, as well as the limitations, to act on his or her own free will and be judged as a result of their actions. Nevertheless, believers with faith in God are guided (God's foreknowledge of all events) in their acts and deeds for final salvation (Zakaria 2015).

Shariah (a set of laws) is the system of Islamic laws and rules that govern all aspects of human life. Shariah is an Islamic way of living life. In other words, these are the dos and do nots of Islam. This is to preserve the well-being of human life and avoid evil, and are thus meant for one's own protection (Emerick 1997). There are four elements in Shariah:

- a. Ibadah (Servitude), acts or practices towards Allah swt;
- b. Mu'amalat (Commercial Transactions), law governing business dealings, natural resources, wealth management and others;

- c. Munakahat (Marriage or Family Laws), law pertaining to marriage, family and other related matters;
  - d. Jinayat (Concept of Offences, Crimes and Punishment), laws pertaining to wrongful actions and behaviors towards another human and their property.
- II. Akhlak (code of ethics)

Akhlak is human behavior, or a conduct and value system. In Islam, Akhlak encompasses both physical and spiritual aspects. In the physical aspect, it determines behavior towards other humans. All Muslims are expected to behave decently, refined and with dignity. Additionally, they should practice good behavior when greeting others, being kind to and respectful of other people. Thus, cursing, foul language and gossiping are much condemned. Adab comes from the Quran and Sunnah; therefore, any cultural practices must not controvert these two sources (Emerick 1997). In the spiritual respect, this applies to the relationship between humans and Allah.

The founder of Buddhism was Gautama Siddhartha, who was born in around 560–480 B.C.E. to the king of a minor republic in the north-eastern region of India: a minor kingdom of the Sakyas (Conze 1959). It is said that the young prince lived in luxury, away from life's vicissitudes. When the young prince encountered the sights of old age, sickness and death during excursions out of the palace, it aroused great disturbances and torment in him, leaving him in constant contemplation of the transience and impermanence of life—something that unites all living beings, without exception. At the fourth sight of a sage, it provided the prince with a glimmer of hope out of this predicament. Thus, at the age of 29, Prince Siddhartha bade farewell to his wife and his newborn son, left the palace, and entered a homeless life in search of salvation. In the ensuing six years, he learnt from various sages, practiced extreme austerities, and finally chose the Middle Path, of neither indulgence in sensual pleasures nor severe asceticism, and finally gained enlightenment under the great Bodhi tree. He became Buddha at the age of 35. For 45 years, from enlightenment until his Parinibbana (The Great Passing), he preached to all, old and young, rich and poor, peasants and monarchs, traversing the length and breadth of then-North India on foot for the benefit of many (Thera 1986).

Unlike Islam, where the truth was revealed by Allah swt to the Prophet Mohammad, Buddha gained enlightenment through His own effort and overcame the limitations of mankind (Thera 1986). He understood the natural laws at work: all living beings are caught in the Samsara (cycle of birth and death) according to their karma, determined by their own inherited past actions and present doings, and this is a natural law that operates independently and without interference (Dhammananda 2002).

The Buddha expounded His teachings from His supreme insight; the scope of Buddha's teachings differs from those in Islam. As told in the Simsapa Sutta, where Buddha resided in the Simsapa Grove at Kosambi, Buddha compared the few leaves in his hand to those in the grove; those disciplines to whom Buddha expounded are like the few leaves in hand, compared to His vast knowledge symbolized by the grove. He taught only those that were conducive to the goal of enlightenment and Nibbana (Piyadassi 1964). Thus, Buddhism deals exclusively with showing the path to liberation (Conze 1959).

In the Deer Park at Isipatana near Benares, the Buddha taught his first and key discourse on the four noble truths (Thera 1986):

- (i) The Noble Truth of Dukkha or Suffering (Dukkha Sacca)—simply put, there is no lasting happiness in all life, man is subjected to his form, feeling, perception, volitional activities and consciousness, and clinging or grasping to these will bring untold suffering to humanity;
- (ii) The Noble Truth of the Origin of Dukkha (Samudaya Sacca)—it is craving, such as the attachment to sensual pleasures, to existence and non-existence, which leads to innumerable rebirths and deaths in Samsara;
- (iii) The Noble Truth of the Cessation of Dukkha (Nirodha Sacca)—eradicating cravings will lead to the cessation of suffering and attaining Nibbana;



- (iv) The Noble Truth of the Path leading to the cessation of Dukkha (Magga Sacca)—the Middle Path, avoiding self-indulgence and self-mortification, or the Noble Eightfold Path, which consists of right view, right intentions, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration, leading to the cessation of suffering—Nibbana.

Buddhists are neither monotheist nor polytheist, as they believe in 31 planes of existence that can be grouped under six realms (Thera 1986). Briefly, there are four states of the unhappy realm, known as Duggati:

- (i) Niraya, woeful states where beings suffer in hell. However, Buddhists do not believe in eternal hell—beings will be reborn in another plane of existence once the bad karma that binds them to hell has depleted;
- (ii) Tirachana Yoni, the animal kingdom;
- (iii) Peta Yoni, the planes of petas or ghostly beings;
- (iv) Asura Yoni, the planes of asura demons.

The human realm and heavenly realm, Sugati, where beings enjoy sensual happiness:

- (i) Manussa, the realm of human beings;
- (ii) Realm of Devas, which consists of Catummaharajika, the lowest heavenly realm, and Tavatimsa, the celestial realms of the thirty-three Devas. Sakka is the king in this realm. Yama, i.e., the realm of Yama Devas, destroys pain. Tusita is the realm of delight. Nimmanarati is the realm of Devas, who delights in creating mansions. Paranimmita Vasavatti is the realm of Devas, who makes others' creations serve their own ends.

Buddhism has never denied the existence of personal gods (deva), only negated the existence of an eternal creator and ruler of the world (Von Glasenapp 1970). Beings in these six realms are still within the Samsara, where, upon the depletion of karma, beings are subjected to rebirth. Only by achieving Nibbana will one escape the sufferings of rebirth and death in Samsara. Nibbana, the ultimate goal of all Buddhists, literally means "blowing out"; it is the banishment of hatred, greed and delusion. It is the extinction of suffering. It is a state of permanent, stable, imperishable, ageless, deathless and perfect bliss and happiness (Thera 1986).

Thus, from the above explanation of the essence of both Islam and Buddhism, faith in Islam and putting that faith into practice is of utmost important to Muslims. It is a contract between the divine and the human. However, to Buddhists, no one can or may induce another into Nibbana; each man has to work for his own salvation, by his own exertion and effort alone, in order to attain Nibbana. Buddhas are merely teachers who show the way (Von Glasenapp 1970).

#### 4.2. Main Practices of the Religions

Islam places great emphasis on putting beliefs into practice and action. In meeting the requirements or obligations of the five Pillars of Islam, its followers have to be steadfast and mindful, and dedicate time, energy and monetary resources to this purpose. Thus, by fulfilling the obligations, the followers constantly feel and live in the presence of God in the midst of their daily worldly affairs.

The five Pillars of Islam (Esposito 2002) are:

##### I. Declaration of faith (shahada)

In the first Pillar of Islam, all Muslims shall declare, "I bear witness that there is no deity but God and I bear witness that Muhammad is the messenger of God". This declaration is the uncompromising stance for every Muslim of the Oneness or Unity of God, which must be upheld. Additionally, Muhammad is not only a prophet, but also a messenger of God, and he is the bringer of the last and final revelation from God.

##### II. Prayer (solat)

The second Pillar of Islam is prayer. Muslims are mandated to perform prayers five times a day—at daybreak, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset and evening. Through these daily prayers, followers are mindful of God and abide to His teachings. Additionally, in performing the prayers, the movement sequence of standing, bowing, kneeling and touching the ground with the forehead are acts of obeisance that constantly remind them of submission, humility, and adoration of God.

### III. Zakat (tithe)

The third Pillar of Islam is the paying of tithes as part of community responsibility and thanksgiving to God. This is not considered as an act of charity, because wealth is bestowed by God. The Zakat collected will be used to support the poor, orphans, widows, as well as causes of God, such as the building of mosques and hospitals. Additionally, Zakat is collected to help and support Islam, the cause of Allah (Islahi 1998).

### IV. Fast of Ramadan (saum)

The fourth Pillar of Islam is fasting during the entire month of Ramadan. Ramadan is the ninth month in the Arabic calendar and it is significant to Muslims, because it is the month when the first verse of the Quran was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. In the whole month of Ramadan, Muslims are required to fast from dawn to dusk, abstaining from eating, drinking, smoking and sexual activities. The act of fasting in Ramadan has the spiritual goal of bringing oneself closer to God; by strengthening self-restraint and refraining from submitting to the whims of the heart, it brings an acute awareness of God and promotes spiritual development. Muslims also perform charitable acts and strive for freedom from impurities in words and deeds.

### V. Pilgrimage of Hajj to Mecca (Hajj)

The fifth Pillar of Islam is for every adult Muslim to perform a pilgrimage, or Hajj, to Mecca in Saudi Arabia at least once in their lifetime, as long as they are physically fit and financially able. Mecca is the most sacred place in Islam: it is the birth place of the Prophet Muhammad and the site of the Grand Mosque, which houses the Kaaba or the first house of worship of the one God; it was restored by the Prophet Muhammad upon his triumphant return to Mecca. The meaning of Hajj is to promote unity among Muslims, renewing one's purpose in life and establishing a fresh start without the blemishes of past mistakes or sins. It is the ultimate act of worship to God.

Apart from adhering strictly to the five Pillars of Islam, which are straightforward and clear to every Muslim, the Pillars of Faith are a very important concept for Muslims in carrying out their daily life in order to live religiously according to God's will (Belief in Allah swt). Every Muslim believes that the way they live, their conduct and every action will be judged on the Day of Judgement (Belief in the Day of Judgement), which will determine their afterlife, or Hereafter, where the outcome is permanent heaven or hell. Their acts are captured by the angels (Belief in the Angels) and used to determine the verdict. Thus, Muslims must develop a proper and accurate understanding of Islamic teachings by learning from the Quran (Belief in the Books of Allah) and the Sunnah (Belief in the Messenger of Allah).

The Quran is the word of God, which was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, consisting of instructions from God, commandments to be followed, prohibitions to be avoided, the social and moral behavior required in this world, and references on all aspects of life. In order to live righteously and correctly, every Muslim must have a correct and accurate understanding of Islamic teachings; thus, constant and regular reference to the Quran and listening to discussions of the verses are necessary to enhance this understanding, to ensure that actions and practices of followers are carried out correctly. Due to this, the recitation of Quran verses is performed during prayers and most activities of the Muslim community (Esposito 2002).

In Islam, the recitation of Quran verses is similar to reading the Bible in Christianity or the Torah in Judaism; in promoting understanding of the teachings, reciters and listeners

can experience the effect of feeling the presence of God, being connected to God, and gaining a peaceful sensation. Additionally, there is an additional meaning to Muslims because the Quran was derived from the Prophet's recitation through angel Gabriel; thus, to every Muslim, they are repeating the act of the Prophet, and the ability to recite the full Quran is held in high esteem in the Muslim community.

The role that the Prophet Muhammad has played in influencing every day Muslims' life cannot be over-exaggerated. His deeds and sayings are deeply imbedded in every Muslim's psyche. Every Muslim looks upon the Prophet as the role model in their life (Ramadan 2007). This behavior is only natural, as advocated in the fourth Pillar of Faith: Belief in the Messengers of God—he is the founder of Islam religion; he was chosen to receive the revelation; and he is the messenger and prophet of God. In fact, the Quran asserted that the Prophet Muhammad was a man who possessed the highest moral excellence, and that God made him a good example or model for Muslims to follow (Ramadan 2007) and emulate in order to become successful in life. In addition to the religious assertions, historically, he was a great social, legal, political and religious reformer, and extremely successful in his endeavor.

Indeed, Muslims look upon the Quran and Sunnah (deeds and sayings of Prophet Muhammad) as commands and guides in all matters pertaining to their daily mundane life, adherence of which will not lead them astray, and a happy and successful life will be assured. Thus, Sunnah is often scrutinized, something that all Muslims are obliged to follow and practice. From another perspective, Muslims view the Prophet Mohammed as *al-insan al-kamil*, one who possesses all virtues and a perfect human being to be emulated.

#### Noble Eightfold Path

In Buddhism, it is very clearly stated that life is suffering in the first Noble Truth, and Buddha only teaches the way to salvation (Nibbana); stated in the fourth Noble Truth is that following the eight Noble Path, or finding the Middle Path, is the practices required to achieve the goal of salvation (Thera 1986). The eight Noble Path consist of:

- i. Right View or Right Understanding (*samma ditthi*);
- ii. Right Thought or Right Intention (*samma sankappa*);
- iii. Right Speech (*samma vaca*);
- iv. Right Action (*samma kammantha*);
- v. Right Livelihood (*samma ajiva*);
- vi. Right Effort (*samma vayama*);
- vii. Right Mindfulness (*samma sati*);
- viii. Right Concentration (*samma samadhi*).

The eight factors of the Noble Eightfold Path can be grouped into the three essential elements of Wisdom (*panna*), Morality (*sila*) and Concentration (*samadhi*). Wisdom consists of the first two factors of Right Understanding and Right Thought. In Right Understanding, at the mundane level is the knowledge or ability to understand or intellectually grasp a subject, such as to tread the path, and at a higher level is the awareness of things as they truly are; in the words of Conze, this is the “methodical contemplation of Dharmas” (Esposito 2002). Dhammas are natural laws, such as Doctrines of Karma, in which all beings are the owners of their own karma. This involves penetration into the true nature of our mental and physical processes, as well as penetration to their root causes and the subsequent understanding of the three characteristics of life: *Dukka* (all beings are subjected to suffering), *Anicca* (all compounded or conditioned things are bound to decay and transient in nature) and *Anatta* (without a self).

Upon knowing the nature and the causes of ignorance, greed and delusion that bind us in the cycles of rebirth and death, in order to steer our direction towards liberation, it is absolutely vital to set some fundamental guidelines that will not lead us astray (Dhammananda 2002). Thus, Right Thought, also known as Right Intention, Right Resolution or Right Aspiration, is the second Wisdom factor in the Buddhist path. Conceptually, Right Thought is not the process of thinking or contemplation; rather, it is the intention, as-



piration or compass that guides us towards our ultimate goal. There are three fundamental rules advocating this aspect (Thera 1986):

- (i) Renunciation, i.e., not attaching oneself to sensual pleasures in order to curb craving desires. To achieve a higher level of spiritual life, monkhood typically involves a life of homelessness and owning few basic necessities, such as two set of robes, an alms bowl and a few other items. Nevertheless, for a householder, it is preferable to maintain an attitude of detachment to worldly properties;
- (ii) Lovingkindness, i.e., understanding the operation of the Doctrine of Karma, whereby one reaps what they have sown. Buddhists are encouraged to maintain love and compassion towards all living beings and refrain from killing and injuring;
- (iii) Harmlessness, as stated in the Metta sutta (Lovingkindness), i.e., Buddhists must strive to be free from ill-will, hatred, anger, cruelty, and not deceive another, and they must be harmless to all living beings.

After establishing the Wisdom factors of knowing and laying the fundamental guidelines towards liberation, the following Morality factors of Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood are considered indispensable; without moral purity, practitioners cannot progress along their spiritual path. By practicing the three moral factors, in words and deeds, practitioners will keep themselves constantly in-check, exhibiting qualities of kindness, compassion, consideration and tolerance, while refraining from causing harm to another. In this manner, they will cultivate lovingkindness and harmlessness, which will benefit them and contribute to a harmonious society as a whole.

In practicing Right Speech, one will: (a) refrain from false speech and lies; (b) refrain from slanderous speech; (c) refrain from using harsh words and abusive language; and (d) refrain from frivolous, idle or vain talk. Indeed, the importance of words cannot be overstated—kind and soothing speech can pacify, soothe and calm the minds of many, just as a devious and rousing speech can stir up unrest, hatred and anger in listeners and cause untold harm.

Right Actions are acts carried out to promote moral, honorable and peaceful conduct. The Buddha specifically outlined five precepts for householders to (a) refrain from killing or taking a life, be it human or another living being, because every life is precious, and something we should be fearful of losing; (b) refrain from stealing, taking what is not given, and appropriating the property of another; (c) refrain from sexual misconduct and adulterous activities; (d) refrain from false speech; and (e) refrain from consuming intoxicants.

The last moral factor is Right Livelihood, which refers to the mode of earning a living or sustenance that is not contradictory to correct moral conduct or may be injurious to other living beings. Five occupations were highlighted in which practitioners must not participate: the trading of (a) weapons, (b) human beings for slavery or prostitution, (c) meat or flesh, because it causes the slaughtering of living beings, (d) intoxicants, such as drink or drugs, and (e) poisons (Thera 1986).

The element of concentration or mental discipline consists of another three factors, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration, which exclusively address the development and purification of the mind. In Right Effort, there are four aspects that practitioners must observe, discern, and guide and focus their mind towards, exerting great energy upon: (a) rejecting evil or unwholesome thoughts that have arisen; (b) preventing evil or unwholesome thoughts from arising; (c) developing good or wholesome thoughts that have not arisen; and (d) maintaining good and wholesome thoughts that have arisen. Clearly, good moral discipline is the prerequisite, and is indispensable for progress in mental discipline.

Right Mindfulness is the development of the state of acute awareness or consciousness of present or moment-to-moment thoughts in the mind via meditation. In the practice of this factor, practitioners are taught the four foundations of mindfulness, with the application of mindfulness to (a) the body, such as breathing (anapanasati), body postures, etc., (b) feelings, whether pleasant, unpleasant or neutral, (c) mind, the state of mind of greed, hate, anger, and observing the rising and passing of different states of mind, (d) mind-

object, the awareness of mental hindrances, five aggregates of clinging, and other subject matters. An accomplished practitioner is a master over the mind, directing or focusing the mind at will, and focusing attention wherever they choose.

Right Concentration is the sustained application of the mind to a subject matter, either physical or mental, without wavering or getting distracted. In the development of one-pointedness of the mind, practitioners will enter into various jhanas, or states of mind, and experience wellness, calm, comfort, joy and tranquility. As mentioned by Sri Aurobindo, “In the calm mind, it is the substance of the mental being that is still, so still that nothing disturbs it. A mind that has achieved this calmness can begin to act, even intensely and powerfully” (Conze 1959). With such a calm mind, practitioners can see things as they truly are and attain insight and wisdom.

The Noble Eightfold Path is thus named as tenets that should be practiced simultaneously and not stage-by-stage; the learning of each factor will enhance the cultivation of other factors with synergistic effects.

When exploring Buddhist communities, there is a small group of people who wear yellow or brown robes, which feature prominently in most Buddhists religious activities. They are the sangha community, otherwise known as monks. The sangha are a small cluster of people who aspire to achieve and attain a higher level of spiritual life. In their pursuit, they forego the householder life, living in a homeless manner, in poverty, and depending on others for their basic necessities (Conze 1959).

In fact, there are three essential elements of monastic life, i.e., poverty, celibacy and harmlessness (Conze 1959). By renouncing the worldly life, monks either live in a community or in solitude with few possessions (alms bowl, two sets of robes and a razor to shave), practice celibacy in curbing sexual desires, and perfect their moral values by being harmlessness towards all humans and other living beings. Far from being idle, monks severing any family ties are devoted to a strenuous life, in which they learn to have few desires, are in a constant watch over their body, control their senses, curb desires and unwholesome thoughts, and develop their meditations. It is held that living a monastic life is most conducive to attaining a higher level of spiritual life.

Sangha only constitutes a minority in the Buddhist community; the majority are householders who still have many attachments to worldly life, commitments and responsibilities. Nevertheless, in addition to securing a comfortable life, the Buddha envisaged moral living with spiritual development as crucial for a happy, peaceful and contented life.

The five precepts are designed for householders to discipline and purify their actions. The first precept is to abstain from taking a life. In Buddhism, one is prohibited from taking life, be it human or animal. This is a virtue of respecting life, because life is precious and dear to all. The second precept is to abstain from stealing. This precept teaches honesty and the control of greed by respecting others’ properties and possessions. The third precept is to abstain from sexual misconduct, and the fourth precept is to abstain from false speech. Curbing lustful urges and promoting truthfulness are both important for maintaining social order. The final precept is to abstain from consuming intoxicants such as alcohols and drugs, because these can delude the mind and impair mindfulness.

The sangha life is advantageous in spiritual development and attainment, although those following the householders’ life, treading the Noble Eightfold Path, are capable of spiritual attainment. Indeed, there are records in the scriptures that householders have achieved various stages of sainthood; there are four stages of sainthood: sotapanna, sakadagami, anagami, and arahant (Thera 1986).

#### 4.3. Co-Existence of Islam and Buddhism in a Malaysian Society

As discussed above, fundamentally, there are vast differences between beliefs in Islam and Buddhism. The salient aspects of Islam are the belief in One God and that Muhammad is the messenger of God, and belief in the Day of Judgement, where the deeds of each individual in devotion to God and abiding to God’s laws, instructions, commandments and prohibitions in the current life in this world will determine the individual’s final

destination—whether to live eternally in heaven or in hell. In contrast, Buddhism teaches about natural laws and how each individual is caught in the perpetual cycle of rebirth and death, the Samsara. Thus, Buddha advocated that each individual must focus on self-salvation by following the Noble Eightfold Path in order to extricate oneself from the Samsara and no longer suffer indefinitely in the cycle of rebirth and death.

Practices spring from these beliefs. Islam requires its followers to put the beliefs into action and focus, here and now, as well as in the hereafter, without delay (Ahmad 2002). What is at stake is each individual and their relationship with God. Thus, absolute devotion to God is warranted by abiding to the five Pillars of Islam; in the declaration of faith, daily prayers, paying tithes, fasting in Ramadan and the pilgrimage of Hajj. Each individual must uphold their faith (Aqidah), live by the law (Shariah), and abide by the code of ethics (Akhlaq). Doing good deeds, having a good character and upholding highly moral values are paramount in Islam. In Buddhism, in stressing self-salvation, every Buddhist should walk the Eightfold Path, although some prefer intensive effort and others opt for progressive effort, culminating in the monkhood and householders. As mentioned, the Eightfold Path consists of three elements of Morality, Concentration and Wisdom; clearly, Buddhists should develop and practice highly moral values, without which they cannot progress further to develop and enhance mental well-being, and finally to attain insight and wisdom.

It may seem that Islam and Buddhism are vastly different. However, by looking at their core values, they are strikingly similar. The core values of Islam are:

- (i) Do no evil;
- (ii) Promote goodness;
- (iii) Devotion to God.

The core values of Buddhism are:

- (i) To cease from evil;
- (ii) Cultivate goodness;
- (iii) Purify the mind (Dhammapada, verse 183).

The first two core values of Islam and Buddhism are the same. From a general stand point, both practices of Islam and Buddhism strive for self-improvement and betterment as a human being, whereby followers are expected to cultivate good values or virtues: do good unto others and avoid acts that constitute evil to fellow human beings. Thus, even though the beliefs are different, the practices or objectives are quite compatible.

Many older Malaysians still reminisce about the cordial and excellent racial relationships in the 1950s and 1960s, whereby good and lasting friendships among races were woven and there were high levels of tolerance around racial and religious issues in the Malaysian Peninsular, unlike in the contemporary scenario. Several factors and issues have driven wedges among the races. Chief among these are political conflicts within the Malay community, which are often articulated as religious issues (Lee 1988). Additionally, there are widespread disparities in terms of economic development between states on the west coast and east coast (of Peninsular Malaysia), between urban and rural areas, and among races.

Winning the support of the Malay community was paramount to seizing control of the state and federal governments. Thus, the Malay-dominated political parties championed the rights of the Malay and displayed piousness in religious practice to win over the minds of the Malay community. With dominance in politics and administration, they have sought to implement Islamic elements and push an Islamic agenda (Abdullah 2005), triggering the process of Islamization. According to Ramli et al. (2020), the implementation of Islamization has caused unease among Buddhists and is perceived as interference in religious beliefs. Thus, in such a socio-political landscape of the country, there have been several ugly episodes of religious conflict, culminating in the Kampung Medan incident, a cow head parade in Selangor, the placing of pig heads in mosques (Rahim et al. 2011), the

desecration of Hindu temples by conservative Muslims in Kerling, and bombs thrown in church yards.

There is no recourse in history to avoid and prevent future religious conflicts in Malaysia; according to Yusuf (2017), “an intra and interfaith dialogue approach to foster mutual understanding between adherents of both religions, a granting of basic rights to followers of a minority religion” is necessary. Intra-religious dialogue will equate to an “inclusive Islamic discourse to be practiced and for universal values and ethics to be embraced. The observation and practice of good conduct and civility so as to ensure that diversity will nurture peace and serve the common good” (Malik 2016). Interfaith dialogue will foster understanding and tolerance across religions’ followers, and ideally, in times of major disputes or actions by religious zealots, the interfaith religious heads should individually or collectively be able to dispel the misguided actions or remarks of their religion adherent(s), and bring calm to the society or the country at large.

## 5. Conclusions

A source of wonder to foreigners who first visit Malaysia has always been provided by the unique blend of different races, cultures and religions in Malaysian society, living together side by side in harmony, while in other nations with similar races but different religions, or different races and similar religions, they have fought one another to the death. Malaysia has had its fair share of ups and downs in racial relationships, however, particularly in May 1969 (Comber 2009), when politically motivated racial riots broke out, and there were the occasional destruction of and arson attacks on temples, churches, kuils and mosques by religious zealots or other radicals. Fortunately, the trust, friendship and spirit of the neighborhood remained largely intact.

To believe that such trust, friendship and spirit of neighborliness will forever remain in Malaysian society without making an effort to nurture it is indeed foolhardy, and outright irresponsible. The Malaysian government must take an active role in promoting racial harmony among all races, along the model of:

Understanding → Acceptance → Respect → Tolerance

Without prejudice and pride, the basics of all religions (commonly practiced religions in Malaysia) should be introduced to all Malaysians, with the objective that all will understand, but not necessarily embrace, each other’s religion. Areas likely to arouse animosity should be emphasized and explained, in order for all to accept the differences. For example:

- (i) The practice of the Call of Prayer by Muslims, which is well accepted by locals but strange and disquieting to practitioners of other faiths, should be explained as one of the five vital Pillars of Faith;
- (ii) The practice of constantly reciting the Quran should be explained due to the importance of reiterating the word of God, acting as a constant reminder to adhere to every Muslim commitment;
- (iii) The practice of monkhood in Buddhism should be explained, emphasizing the importance for each individual to strive for their own goal in life and to teach other faithful Buddhists.

It is through such explanations that followers of other faiths will come to understand other’s practices; surely, rational humans will accept the differences and learn to appreciate other’s resolve in their religious pursuits, and even respect them. People with more bigotry and prejudice should be taught increased tolerance.

In conclusion, this study does not purport to project any superiority of one religion over the other, because it is the view of the authors that both Islam and Buddhism are great religions of the world that bring enormous value, not only to their followers, but to the world at large. Upon reading this study, if such a notion of imbalanced views has been aroused in the readers, bear in mind it was never the intention of the authors, who tried as much as possible to be impartial and neutral in the subject matter. It was the

greatest intention of this study to portray a comparative study of both religions from the perspective of a multi-cultural society.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, W.C.Y. and M.M.N.; methodology, W.C.Y.; validation, W.C.Y., A.H.A., S.S., M.M.N. and P.K.C.; formal analysis, W.C.Y.; investigation, W.C.Y. and S.S.; resources, W.C.Y.; data curation, W.C.Y., A.H.A. and S.S.; writing—original draft preparation, W.C.Y.; writing—review and editing, W.C.Y., A.H.A., S.S., M.M.N. and P.K.C.; funding acquisition, W.C.Y. and M.M.N. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research was funded by Research Project “Memahami Kepelbagaian Keagamaan Dan Kehidupan Malaysia”, grant number DCP-2017-012/2. And the APC was funded by MPOB-UKM Endowment Chair, Research Grant number: EP-2019-054.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** This study was based on secondary literature, which did not involve primary data collection. Thus, ethical approval was exempted.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** No primary data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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