

Buddhism according to Modern Muslim Exegetes

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Abstract

This paper offers preliminary notes on Buddhism in modern Muslim exegesis with an emphasis on *Tafsir al-Qasimi* by Muhammad Jamal al-Din al-Qasimi (1866–1914) and *al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an* by Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i (1892–1981). The research adopts a qualitative design using content analysis to collect the data. In this paper two main questions regarding both exegetes will be explored. The first question concerns the sources of both scholars for their information about Buddhism by including the discussion in their exegesis. The second question concerns the methodology they used to discuss Buddhism in the Qur'an since this has not been done by any classical exegetes nor among the most modern exegetes. Studies have found that the approach of the two exegetes is different from both the classical and modern exegetes because their work also contains resources from the fields of comparative religion and the history of religion to make their work relevant in the current context and reliable to be referred to by any parties. The author concludes that both al-Qasimi and Tabataba'i used analysis (*tahlil*) in discussing verses related to the position of the Buddha.

Keywords

al-Qasimi – exegesis – Tabataba'i – commentary – Buddha

1 Introduction

The Holy Qur'an is a primary reference for Muslims in learning and discussing religions. However, not all religions are mentioned by the Qur'an. The religions that are mentioned are limited to Judaism, Christianity, Islam, the religion of the Šābi'in, Zoroastrianism, and polytheism. Other religions, including Buddhism, are not mentioned in the Qur'an nor have they been discussed by classical exegetes. In Qur'anic exegesis a commentary often follows a section of the Qur'an. In addition to addressing semantic and syntactic issues, this essay cites various sources, examines their diverse and often conflicting exegetical views, draws on references from other fields (Pink 2017, 480), from theology to jurisprudence and ethics, and finally comes to a conclusion.

Thus, at this early stage, the method of interpreting the verses of the Qur'an that pertain to the religions that exist around the Arab countries was through direct consultation with the Prophet Muhammad. However, nothing has been reported from the Prophet Muhammad's own exegesis of the Qur'an, which occurs in a way we might call "practical exegesis" (Saeed 2006, 9). According to tradition, even in the time of Prophet Muhammad, the apostle and prophet of Islam, the revelation he had received required exegesis. Thus, many examples of Prophet Muhammad's exegesis of the meaning and implications of Qur'anic passages are recorded in traditional literature (Leemhuis 1988, 13). Since the Prophet Muhammad was there to elaborate, misunderstanding of the Qur'an occurred less and that which was stated in the Qur'an was prioritized.

After the time of the Prophet Muhammad, the Prophet's household and the Companions transmitted his exegesis and supplemented it with their own understanding of the Qur'an's language, their comprehension of the circumstances of its revelation, and their personal religious insight (Saeed 2006, 9; Elmi 2014, 264; Leemhuis 1988, 13; Çoruh 2019, 107). In understanding and interpreting the Qur'an, the Companions used sections of the Qur'anic text which clarified other sections; oral and practical knowledge obtained from the Prophet Muhammad; and their own interpretation of what the Qur'anic text means. They also knew the Qur'anic language, the overall social sense of the revelation, the ways of thought of the Prophet Muhammad and the standards, principles, and customs of the Arabs, all of which provided them with a specific basis for interpreting the Qur'anic text within the overall framework of the Muslim community's evolving "developed norm" (Saeed 2006, 9).

Then, the second development of the Qur'an exegesis continued by the "Successors" (*tābi'īn*), who were a more heterogeneous group, ensued. They included children of the Companions brought up in the new religious (Islamic) environment, and both Arabic-speaking and non-Arabic-speaking converts to Islam. As time progressed and the era of the Prophet grew more distant, the need for Qur'anic exegesis increased. Centers of learning became associated with particular interpretations of the Qur'an through the teachings of the respective Companions living there, with Successors based in places such as Medina, Mecca, and Iraq (Masyhuri 2014, 215; Saeed, 2006, 9). As stated by al-Dhahabi (2005, 35), the first and second developments are categorized as the early phase of Qur'an exegesis. In the early phase exegesis was transmitted verbally and was undocumented.

The third phase of exegesis is the writing and compilation phase, which began to emerge during the late Umayyad and early Abbasid periods in the eighth century, parallel to the establishment of other Qur'anic disciplines. This included *qirā'a* (reading and reciting the Qur'an), which discussed the forms the Qur'an could be recited, as well as its valid recitations, their origins, and transmission chains (Graham and Kermani 2006, 116). From the first until the third phase of exegesis there is no discussion at all on Buddhism by classical exegetes such as al-Baghawi (1044–1122), al-Razi (1150–1210), al-Qurtubi (1214–1273), and Ibn Kathir (1300–1373) even though Muslims and Buddhists encountered each other as early as the seventh century (Avari 2013, 22; Elverskog 2010, 47; Nizami 1994, 60; Yusuf 2010, 123; Ramli et al. 2018, 2). Furthermore, Muslim historians, theologians, and bibliographers have discussed Buddhism from the eighth through to the seventeenth century. For example, al-Baladhuri (d. 892), al-Mas'udi (896–956), al-Biruni (973–1048), Ibn al-Nadim (d. 995), and al-Shahrastani (1086–1153) discuss Buddhism in their works. Furthermore, in the eighth century there is record of a Muslim–Buddhist debate organized by Harun al-Rashid (Elverskog 2010, 57). Al-Ṭabarī (838–923) undeniably used to discuss Buddhism but limited this to his work on history rather than exegesis. It is clear, therefore, that classical exegetes were not interested to discuss religions other than Islam, such as Buddhism. In this regard, Abdullah Saeed (2006, 117) stated that the Qur'an was focussed on the cultural world of the Hijaz in particular and Arabia in general. The Hijaz was a reflection of the cultures that existed in Arabia and surrounding areas. These included Mediterranean cultures and religions, especially Judaism and Christianity. However, Buddhism had barely penetrated into Arabia, if at all, despite it being widespread across the rest of Asia at the beginning of the seventh century CE.

The fourth phase of Qur'anic exegesis is the modern phase, beginning in eighteenth century by Shah Waliyullah Dihlawi (1703–1762) in India (Saeed 2006, 9) and later followed by the other exegetes such as Sir Sayyid Ahmad

Khan (1817–1898), Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849–1905), Muhammad Rashid Rida (1865–1935), and Maulana Abu al-Kalam Azad (1888–1958). Modern times have changed the form and content of Muslim exegesis dramatically. The conventional encyclopedic verse-by-verse system remains intact, maintaining continuity with the past. Although such works may be revolutionary in content they follow the defined exegetical form. However, there is an increasing number of works that follow a different model and approach (Wild 2018, 278). Thus, in this phase, the Qur’an exegesis has been both improvised and enriched with various approaches in order to make commentary relevant and universal.

According to Wild (2018, 278), among the methods proffered by modern exegetes is hermeneutics, and this trend coincides with the rise of a new generation of exegetes concerned with issues raised by physicists, engineers, journalists, and academics educated in fields such as literature, history, and the social sciences. For example, modernist exegetes Sir Sayyid and ‘Abduh held discussions on religion and science in their writings. This demonstrates the importance of reason and a positive approach to science in the view of modernist exegetes who attempted to uncover the discoveries of modern science in the Qur’anic text (Çoruh 2020, 3). But even in the modern phase there remain few exegetes that give attention to Buddhism. Rashid Rida is one example of a modern exegete who mentioned Buddhists, averring that they belonged to the category of *ahl al-kitāb* (people of the book) and were followers of the prophets (Sirry 2012, 181).

It was only with the nineteenth century that two modern exegetes started to give attention to Buddhism in their work. The first modern exegesis on Buddhism was *Mahasin al-Ta’wil* by Muhammad Jamal al-Din al-Qasimi (1866–1914). In his magnum opus, he represents exactly this attempt to re-actualize the Muslim intellectual heritage in the modern context. Many aspects of his exegesis remain unstudied, including his view of other religions. As will be discussed throughout this article, al-Qasimi quite surprisingly mentioned Buddhism in a positive way. Most modern exegetes have not been interested in discussion of Buddhism, although Muhammad Abu Zahra (1898–1974) and Ibn ‘Ashur (1879–1973) do mention Buddhism for the purposes of rejecting its theology. However, under the term *al-tīn* in the Qur’an, al-Qasimi refers to the Bodhi tree which related to the founder of Buddhism. He recognizes the Buddha as one of the true prophets which whose original teaching cohered with that of the other prophets, but eventually the teaching became corrupted as was also the case with Judaism and Christianity. What distinguishes al-Qasimi from other modern exegetes is that he discusses the position of the Buddha. On justifying his view he appeals in his exegesis to other modern views without naming them specifically. The second modern exegesis which has included a discussion on

Buddhism was *al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an* by Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i (1892–1981). After ten years teaching in the Islamic seminary, he began work on his exegesis which took eighteen years to complete. In his exegetical work Tabataba'i always begins his commentary on a verse or group of verses by first elucidating them (*bayān*) before turning to discussion of relevant transmitted materials, that is, relevant hadiths from both Shi'i and Sunni sources. Oftentimes, Tabataba'i provides supplementary philosophical, historical, and sociological discourses. What makes this exegesis an important contribution to the Buddhism discussion is Tabataba'i's dynamic engagement with both medieval texts and modern contexts in addition to supporting his argument with historical texts such as *al-Athar al-Baqiyya* by al-Biruni (973–1048). Moreover, he also discusses Buddhism the religion, historically and theologically, from various sources including from Western sources.

In this study, we limit ourselves to discuss two modern exegetes who cover Buddhism in their work. The justification for this should now be clear. We only take into account extensive exegesis, that is, works that comment on Buddhism of the Qur'an at length, including the explanation and description of exegetical issues.

The research design is qualitative using library research that emphasizes textual analysis of the reading materials. Among the selected materials in Qur'an exegesis are *Mahasin al-Ta'wil* and *al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an*. Both discussions on Buddhism will analyze, based on earlier Muslim work, historically and theologically and will compare to classical exegeses such as *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Adhīm*, *Jami' al-Bayan*, *al-Jami' li-l-Ahkam al-Qur'an*, and *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Adhim*.

1.1 *Muhammad Jamal al-Din al-Qasimi*

Muhammad Jamal al-Din al-Qasimi (full name: Muhammad Jamal al-Din b. Muhammad Sa'id b. Qasim b. Salih b. Isma'il b. Abu Bakr al-Qasim al-Dimashqi) was born in 1866 in Damascus to a family of 'ulama' (Commins and Lesch 2014, 276). In due course he became the most vocal proponent of religious reform in late-Ottoman Syria. He was educated by his father and by leading scholars of his day such as Bakri b. Hamid al-Baythar and Muhammad b. Muhammad al-Khani al-Shafi'i al-Naqshbandi, and Hasan b. Ahmad b. 'Abd al-Qadir Jubayna. Al-Qasimi grew into a pious, knowledgeable, and eminent family. His father was an expert in literature. His paternal grandfather, Qasim al-Hallaq (1806–1867) was the first in the family to gain entry to the scholarly elite.

Al-Qasimi conducted various studies in the private library founded by his grandfather which he inherited him from his father. The library contained many books on exegesis, hadith, Islamic jurisprudence, language, mysticism,

literature, history, religion, society, comparative law, classical and contemporary philosophy, books about Islamic sects, and books on other religions. Al-Qasimi began his scholarly life as a teacher and when his father died, he filled his position at the Mosque of Sananin, Damascus, the second most prestigious mosque in the city (Commins and Lesch 2014, 276). He developed his knowledge by compiling, reviewing, criticizing, and publishing no less than eighty publications in theology, hadith, jurisprudence, and history. In developing his scholarly value, instead of spending times in listening and mastering the hadith tradition, he completed his review, revision, criticism, and comments on Ibn Hajar's *Taqrib al-Tahdhib* (Mahmud 2000, 295). He began establishing an intellectual network with a number of reform-minded scholars not only in Syria but also abroad.

Among the reformist circles of Damascus at that time, al-Qasimi was the most prolific writer. It is reported that he wrote more than a hundred books, chief among them a Qur'an commentary called *Mahāsīn al-Ta'wīl* and a hadith work entitled *Qawā'īd al-Tahdith*. One of the distinct features of al-Qasimi's works is the synthesis between his engagement with the classical sources and the project of re-thinking Islam in the modern context. This is mainly done through the emphasis on *ijtihād* (personal reasoning) and *ra'y* (reason). In fact, al-Qasimi was accused by a number of official 'ulama' for advocating an independent *madhhab* (legal school) other than the four recognized *madhhabs* which was deridingly referred to as "*madhhab jamālī*" (i.e. the school of Jamal [al-Din al-Qasimi]). One should also notice from al-Qasimi's intellectual legacy that an instrumental conception of reason pervades his writings. As Commins (1986, 409) puts it, "Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qasimi's thought shows how a Muslim thinker came to grips with the contemporary European stress on reason by reviving dormant elements of the Islamic intellectual heritage."

A leading figure in the Salafiyya movement of the early twentieth century, al-Qasimi was a prolific writer in various fields of religious knowledge, history, and contemporary affairs. The central themes in his works were the essential rationality of Islam and the need for Muslims to overcome divisions between followers of different legal schools. Al-Qasimi believed that Muslims would remain backward in relation to Europe until they rediscovered Islam's true nature as a religion that is based on reason so that it encourages a positive attitude toward science and technical progress. With respect to divisions among Muslims, he argued that it was necessary to return to Islam's sources (the Qur'an and the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad) to provide a common ground, and to abandon beliefs and practices that had developed during the long course of Muslim history but were not part of Islam's essence. More

conservative ‘ulama’ attacked al-Qasimi’s ideas because they represented a strong criticism of their own view of Islam (Commins 1986, 409).

Consequently, on several occasions, they stirred the Ottoman authorities to harass him and incited mobs against him. Although al-Qasimi did not win a wide following during his lifetime, contemporary Salafis hold him in high regard, and his works continue to circulate among reformist Muslims in the Arab world. Both Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (c. 1838–97) and Tahir al-Jaza’iri had a great influence on al-Qasimi (Fatihunnada 2017, 6). The son of a religious scholar, al-Qasimi studied a traditional curriculum of texts, exegesis, and glosses on religious subjects and Arabic. He became prayer leader at a minor mosque in 1886, and at that time he began to frequent the circles of a few reformist scholars in touch with ‘Abduh, the renowned Egyptian reformer, and Rashid Rida. By 1895, al-Qasimi had emerged as a leading Salafi in Damascus. In January 1896, some conservative ‘ulama’ succeeded in instigating local and Ottoman officials against al-Qasimi by insinuating that he used his study circles for his secret political agenda. The Ottoman governor charged a jurisconsult with the task of interrogating al-Qasimi and his followers. The jurisconsult missed the political angle of the incident and he harangued al-Qasimi for proclaiming *ijtihād*, which nearly all ‘ulama’ in Damascus considered forbidden, and for wanting to establish a new legal school (*madhhab*) (Commins 1986, 409).

1.2 *Muhammad Husayn Tabataba’i*

Muhammad Husayn Tabataba’i was a Muslim philosopher and prominent scholar in Qur’an exegesis in Iran in the twentieth century. Tabataba’i was born in Tabriz on March 17, 1904 into a family claiming descent from the Prophet Muhammad which for fourteen generations has produced outstanding Islamic scholars. After completing his study of Arabic and religious education in Tabriz in 1923, he traveled to Najaf, Iraq and mastered the so-called “transmitted sciences” (foremost of which is the principles of Islamic jurisprudence) besides the “intellectual sciences” such as mathematics and traditional Islamic philosophy. His further education in Islamic philosophy was overseen by the most celebrated philosopher of his day, Sayyid Husayn Badkuba’i (Sirry 2012, 35; Medoff 2007, 5; Hajhosseini 1999, 34; Algar 2006, 5).

Tabataba’i completed his study of texts such as the *Kitab al-Shifa’* of Ibn Sina, the *Aṣfar* of Mulla Sadra, the *Tamhid al-Qawa’id* of Ibn Turka, and the *Sharh-i Manzuma* of Sabzavari. Tabataba’i also received guidance in Islamic gnosis from Mirza ‘Ali Qadi, who became his spiritual mentor under whom he studied texts such as Ibn al-‘Arabi’s *Fuṣuṣ al-Ḥikam* (Sirry 2012, 35; Medoff 2007, 5; Hajhosseini 1999, 34; Algar 2006, 5). He later returned to Tabriz in

1934 and stayed for almost a decade, delivering his lectures to a small number of students. With the outbreak of World War II and the subsequent Russian occupation of Tabriz, Tabataba'i migrated to Qum in 1945, and began to teach shortly after his arrival by focusing on Qur'anic commentary as well as traditional Islamic philosophy and gnosis. During his stay in Qum, Tabataba'i made frequent visits to Tehran, where he was introduced to Marxism and atheism. Following significant development of Marxist philosophy in his society, he engaged in intellectual debate with Marxists, which subsequently led to his magnum opus entitled *Usul-i Falsafah va Ravish-i R'ialism* (The Principles of Philosophy and the Method of Realism) (Mokhtari 2007, 121; Thomas 2015, 472).

Another most important work for Tabataba'i was his monumental commentary on the Qur'an, *Tafsir al-Mizan*. This work uses the interpretative method and interpretative narrations (Delafkar and Khosravi 2013, 365) together with commentary in the traditional Islamic sciences of scientific, philosophical, historical, sociological, technical, literary, aesthetic, spiritual, and traditional (hadith) matters. Tabataba'i adopts a certain style of approach by including several expressions of opinion with comparison and criticism (Mokhtari 2007, 122). Tabataba'i died in Qum on November 15, 1981 and was buried in the city (Thomas 2015, 472).

2 Buddhism in Mahasin al-Ta'wil

Al-Qasimi (2003, 9:499) begins his discussion of Buddhism with commentary on the Qur'anic term *al-tin* (Q 95:1–3)¹ by quoting the views of classical exegetes such as Qatada, Ka'b, Ibn Zayd, al-Tabari, and Ibn Kathir. These exegetes considered *al-tin* to refer to the Damascus mosque, a tree, a hill, or the fig. Fascinatingly, instead of quoting views from Muslim exegetes, al-Qasimi (2003, 9:499) also included views from contemporary scholars that *al-tin* refers to the tree of Buddha, the founder of Buddhism. Buddhism was eventually corrupted from its early teaching since no authentic writings of Buddha were recorded during his life. The Buddha's teaching was delivered through oral narration and then recorded only after its followers grew in number.

For al-Qasimi, the most accurate interpretation after revising the exegeses on this verse is that the Buddha was a prophet named Shakyamuni or Gautama. He was a person who received revelation while sitting under the al-Tin tree.

1 God says: "By the fig and the olive. And [by] Mount Sinai. And [by] this secure city [i.e., Mecca]" (Q 95:1–3).

Since then, Allah appointed him as a Prophet. A devil came to deceive him but was not successful. Thus, this tree is crucial for the Buddhists and was named as the Sacred Fig Tree. Justifying his views, al-Qasimi (2003, 9:502) stated in this sura 95 of the Qur'an that Allah has referred to four major religions, specifically, Buddhism (*al-tīn*), Christianity (*al-zaytun*), Judaism (*tūr al-sīnīn*), and Islam (*al-balad al-amīn*). The position of each religion was based on the level of authenticity. Allah started with an oath (*yamīn/qassām*) on Buddhism since it has little authenticity and its original teachings are corrupted. When Allah swears on something, it shows the significance of the object and toward it our attention is drawn. This was followed by Christianity, which is more authentic than Buddhism, followed by Judaism, and ending with Islam as the most authentic religion free from corruption. Islam is based on the Qur'an and hadith which have had successive narrations (*al-mutawatira*) that protect it from corruption by the promise of Allah.

The verse refers to religions of kindness (Buddhism and Christianity), followed by religions of justice (Judaism and Islam), as a signal of wisdom. It is recommended to treat people with kindness and tolerance followed by formal rules of justice. Islam also started with softness and forgiveness, followed by rules and legal punishments. Another wisdom that is identified in this verse is the similarity of the character of Buddha and Jesus, as Buddha and Jesus were claimed as immortal and being worshipped by their followers after they died. It also suggests a special affinity between Moses and Muhammad. Therefore, in the opening verse of sura 95 religions and their founders were grouped (Buddhism/Buddha with Christianity/Jesus and then Judaism/Moses with Islam/Muhammad) (al-Qasimi 2003, 9:502).

3 Buddhism in al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an

Tabataba'i (1997, 1:193) explains his view of Buddhism in his exegesis in four separate places. Tabataba'i generally finds that verses of the Qur'an are strongly interrelated with each other and demonstrates that they clarify and interpret one another because of the intrinsic unity of the scripture. In other words, Tabataba'i brings to light some parts of the Qur'an to interpret some other parts. On the topic of Buddhism, the discussion appears under the *bayan* (exposition) section by taking a group of related verses and commenting on it. After finishing the *bayan* discussion, he usually offers four sections called *baḥth rāwi* (hadith discourse), *baḥth tārikhī* (historical discourse), *baḥth 'ilmī* (scientific discourse), and *baḥth falsafī* (philosophical discourse). In these sections, he presents the relevant hadith with occasional remarks.

Tabataba'i (2007, 1:193) first broaches the subject of Buddhism when discussing the "Ṣābi'īn" in the Qur'an (Q 2:62, 5:69, 22:17). He quotes al-Qummi on the narration of Imam al-Rida: "The Ṣābi'īn are a people, neither Zoroastrian nor Jews, neither Christians nor Muslims; they worship the stars and planets." It is idol worship of a special type; they worshipped only the idols of the stars, while others worshipped whatever idol caught their fancy. Although the Ṣābi'īn are regarded as worshippers of stars and planets some verses in the Qur'an suggest that the Ṣābi'īn are not idol worshippers because they are mentioned alongside the followers of other revealed religions.² There is a view that they are a people with a belief between Judaism and Zoroastrianism, and have scripture related to John the Baptist (i.e., Yahya b. Zakariya). Among them are monotheists (*muwaḥḥidīn*) by referring to the general meaning of "ṣabi'" as stated in verse Q 2:62.³ In elaborating his view on polytheist idol worshippers, Tabataba'i (1997, 1:193–194) categorizes them into three: Ṣābi'īn, Brahmins (*al-barhamāniyya*, i.e., Hindus), and Buddhists. Other groups also worshipped idols like the Hijazi Arabs and sects on the periphery of the globe (Tabataba'i 1997, 17:359).

The Ṣābi'īn are regarded as people of spirituality and devotion to idols. Under the historical and philosophical section, he categorizes Buddhism and Hinduism as idol worshippers together with the Ṣābi'īn. Although the Ṣābi'īn do not believe in prophethood there are different ways to reach the perfect knowledge of the soul, the ways of Hindus and Buddhists are not much different. Tabataba'i (1997, 7:300) argues that the Ṣābi'īn and Buddhists are at times quite similar and identical as they both worship angels and jinn, believing that angels are God's daughters. On this point, Tabataba'i also suggests that Buddhists may have influenced the pre-Islamic Arab idol worship of jinn and angels.

However, although he recounts with some respect Buddha's spiritual life, teachings (e.g., the Four Noble Truths), his attempts to overcome moral vices (e.g., vanity, enjoyment of the material and impermanent world), and

2 See, for example, Q 22:17 where God says: "Indeed, those who have believed and those who were Jews and the Ṣābi'īn and the Christians and the Magians and those who associated with Allah – Allah will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection. Indeed Allah is, over all things, Witness."

3 God says: "Indeed, those who believed and those who were Jews or Christians or Ṣābi'īn [before Prophet Muhammad] – those [among them] who believed in Allah and the Last Day and did righteousness – will have their reward with their Lord, and no fear will there be concerning them, nor will they grieve" (Q 2:62). See also Q 5:69 where God says: "Indeed, those who have believed [in Prophet Muhammad] and those [before Him] who were Jews or Ṣābi'īn or Christians – those [among them] who believed in Allah and the Last Day and did righteousness – no fear will there be concerning them, nor will they grieve."

his overall asceticism, he still supports the view that Buddhism was, from its inception, polytheistic even though the Buddha was not. He then discounts Buddhism from being a divinely revealed religion (and, therefore, Buddhists from being among the *ahl al-kitāb*) on account of Buddhism not having the required qualities. But his opposition to Buddhism as a divine religion does not stop here. He also goes so far as to blame Buddhism (and Hinduism equally) for corrupting Christianity from its original monotheistic message, in addition to converting the original monotheistic faith of the pre-Islamic Arabs into an idol-worshipping cult. He also said that Buddhism inspired the devious Sufi movements and practices in Islam. He writes, for example, that Sufi attempts to attain supernatural powers through spiritual exercises were the direct product of Buddhist influences (Tabataba'i 1997, 6:191).

Tabataba'i begins by tracing the concept of the Trinity and the Redemptive Sacrifice in Christianity back to Buddhist influence. He points to that the *trimurti* doctrine of Hindus which holds that God is divided into three sections and the Buddhist belief that the Buddha had "three bodies." In addition, Buddhists claimed that the Buddha was a perfect human being (*al-insān al-kāmil*) and manifested himself in physical form from an earlier divine form to sacrifice himself to save mankind (Tabataba'i 1997, 3:369). Through the salvation of the Buddha mankind was willing to make up for, and be forgiven for, his sins. Tabataba'i justifies his view by appealing to the translation of *A History of Ancient Sanskrit Literature* by Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900). As Tabrizi (2012, 462) says, none of Tabataba'i's ideas on Buddhism are original and it seems he has not analyzed the sources to which he refers himself.

In a second discussion on Buddhism, Tabataba'i attempts to relate the Ṣābi'īn to a prophet in India named Yudhasaf.⁴ In a section titled "historical discourse," Tabataba'i (1997, 1:194) quoting from al-Biruni's (2008, 243) *al-Athar al-Baqiyya*, which identified the Ṣābi'īn as the religion of buddhas:

The earliest known among them (i.e., the claimants of prophethood) was Yudhasaf. He appeared in India at the end of the first year of the reign of Tahmurth; and he brought the Persian script. He called to the Ṣābi'īn religion, and a great many people followed him. The Bishdadian kings and some of the Kayanis who resided in Balkh held the sun, the moon, the stars, and the planets together with other elements in high esteem

4 The story of Yudhasaf was later Christianized to the story of St Josaphat in "Barlaam and Josaphaat". Josaphat is the Latinized form of Yudhasaf, and the latter is most likely an Arabized version of the Sanskrit word *bodhisattva* which, in the context of Muslim sources, refers to the Buddha.

and believed that these luminaries were very sacred. It continued until Zoroaster appeared at the end of the thirtieth year of Peshtasav's reign. The remnants of those Ṣābi'īn are now in Harran, from which they have got their new name, al-Harraniyya. Also, it is said that this term refers to Haran son of Tarukh (Tarah) and brother of Ibrahim (p.b.u.h.), as he allegedly was one of their religious leaders and its staunchest follower. In this regard, Ibn Sinkala, the Christian, has written a book against the Ṣābi'īn, attributing many ridiculous things to the Haran. He describes that the Ṣābi'īn claimed: Ibrahim (p.b.u.h.) was expelled from his community because of a vitiligo disease on his foreskin, since in the beliefs of the Ṣābi'īn, those who have vitiligo were impure (*najas*), and need to be avoided. To remove that defect, Ibrahim (p.b.u.h.) cut his foreskin (i.e. circumcised himself). Then he entered one of the idol houses and heard a voice say to him: "O Ibrahim, you went away from us with one defect and came back with two; get out and do not ever come back to us." Ibrahim was enraged then broke the idols in pieces and left his community.

TABATABA'I 1997, 1:194 citing AL-BIRUNI 2008, 243

After quoting the description of the Ṣābi'īn from al-Biruni, Tabataba'i (1997, 1:194) concludes that they are followers of a religion which mixes Judaism and Zoroastrianism and is flavored with some element of the Harraniyya belief. He recognizes that these groups at one time were "divinely inspired" (Tabataba'i 1997, 1:195). Tabataba'i's view of the Ṣābi'īn is in fact not far from what has been elaborated by classical exegetes. For example, the position of Ṣābi'īn in the Qur'an as a religion between Judaism and Zoroastrianism has been mentioned by Mujahid (1989), al-Tabari, (2001, 2:34), and Ibn Kathir (2000, 1:432). Recognizing the Ṣābi'īn as followers of a "divinely inspired" religion also has antecedents in Ibn Abi Hatim (1997, 1:127) who regards the Ṣābi'īn as adherents of a religion that originated in Persia. Ibn Abi Hatim says the Ṣābi'īn received a prophet and followed his teaching until his death, then followed another prophet, as was the case with Judaism and Christianity.

In his hadith discourse, Tabataba'i (1997, 15:204) states that Yudhasaf was the founder of the Ṣābi'īn who fell into idol worshipper. Yudhasaf invited his followers to be ascetic as well as to worship and prostrate to idols. The Buddhists, whose religion is based on cleansing of the soul and opposition to its desires, forbid the desires of the soul to achieve real wisdom. This was the path which Buddha himself trod in his life. It is reported that he was a prince or a son of a noble man; he rejected the ornaments of life and discarded the throne for a desolate jungle at the height of his youth. He left aside worldly affairs and denied the basics of life to himself.

He went on to train his soul and think about the mysteries of life until, when he was thirty-six years old, he became enlightened. Then he went out to the people, asking them to train their souls and to achieve wisdom. As the history books state, he stayed in this mission for about forty-four years (Tabataba'i 1997, 7:182). Tabataba'i did not discuss Buddhist philosophy in his philosophical discourses but confined himself to discussing Buddhism in his scientific and additional discourses. He identified Buddhism with the Brahmins and Ṣābi'īn and said that they attest to the prophecy and resurrection of a man called Buddha and Yudhasaf to guide and reform the people (Tabataba'i 1997, 15:204).

4 Discussion

Tabataba'i and al-Qasimi discuss the topic of Buddhism as part of their Qur'anic exegeses. Both exegetes did not limit themselves to the discussions of classical exegetes but further enriched their works by including historical and theological perspectives. On discussing Buddhism, al-Qasimi discussed the word *al-tīn* from author to author and quotes them without fanaticism. Although none of the classical exegetes relate the term with Buddhism, al-Qasimi took the initiative to refer to contemporary sources. Many of his sources are unnamed although elsewhere in his exegesis he regularly quotes from al-Shahrastani who identifies the Buddha with the Qur'anic figure of Khidr. Unfortunately, al-Shahrastani does not explain his view.

Thus, two Muslim scholars are possibly among the contemporary exegetes upon whom he bases his argument. Obuse (2010, 228) for instance suggests that he gets information from Maulana Abu al-Kalam Azad (1888–1958), an Urdu scholar and political figure who fought for India's independence. There is no record of direct contact between al-Qasimi (who was based in the Middle East) and Azad (who was based in South Asia) and so perhaps the influence was through Rashid Rida. According to Willis (2010, 711), Rashid Rida and Azad entered a lengthy written exchange in which they debated matters concerning the caliphate. Azad was an Indian nationalist struggling for self-rule and working for a Hindu–Muslim political alliance. As we know, India was the birthplace of both Buddhism and Hinduism. Perhaps, the sentiment of nationalism motivated Azad on his view of the prophethood of the Buddha, then was received by al-Qasimi via Rashid Rida.

Berzin (1996) suggests the view that *al-tīn* is the Bodhi tree was based on Hamid 'Abd al-Qadir (1895–1966) who, in his work *Buddha al-Akbar Hayatuhu wa Falsafatuh*, proposes that the Qur'anic mention of the fig tree in sura 95 refers to Buddha as well, since he attained enlightenment at the foot of one.

However, the proposition came together with the term “Dhu al-Kifl” which is stated twice in the Qur’an (Q 21: 85, 38: 48). ‘Abd al-Qadir (Berzin 1994; Yusuf 2013, 363; Obuse 2010, 216; Schmidt-Leukel 2010, 358) together with Maulana ‘Abd al-Haqq Vidyarthi (1888–1977) justified his position based on the word *kiflī*, which means “someone from Kifl.” The word *kifl* is the Arabicized form of “Kapila,” which is a contraction of “Kapilavastu,” the birthplace of the Buddha, hence he is named “Dhu al-Kifl” (Vidyarthi, 2000, 5).

If al-Qasimi was influenced by ‘Abd al-Qadir he would have surely mentioned his view on Dhu al-Kifl together with *al-tīn*. However, al-Qasimi (2003, 7:214) quotes the view of al-Tabari and Ibn Kathir who state that Dhu al-Kifl was a prophet, since he was mentioned together with other prophets, not a saintly man, a king, and a good judge; or that he might be the Prophet Hizqil according to other views. Thus, al-Qasimi’s view on Buddhism was motivated by Azad although he did not name him.

Besides Azad, al-Qasimi’s concern with Buddhism was also motivated by the awareness of interfaith relations. In 1893, theological exchanges and cooperation were taking place, particularly with the establishment of the World Parliament of Religions, in Chicago (Bigelow 2013, 206) parallel to the establishment of Buddhism in the West (Gordon-Dinlayson 2012, 34; King 2010, 103). The global interfaith meeting brought together all world religions as Christians, Jews, Hindus, Baha’i, Buddhists, and Muslims. According to Fahy and Haynes (2018, 6), the Parliament was a one-off but has inspired the interfaith movement for more than a century and continued to be an essential point of reference in interfaith circles, including Christian–Buddhist dialogue (Chappell 1999, 22). Since modern exegetes reflect the West, the World Parliament initiative probably motivated al-Qasimi to take an early stance on Buddhist–Muslim dialogue by promoting the universal message of Islam and to include discussion of Buddhism in his exegesis.

Tabataba’i discussed Buddhism from the perspective of hadith, history, and philosophy. As with al-Qasimi, Tabataba’i does not limit himself to the discussion of classical exegetes but also offers an original perspective through the use of non-exegetical sources. However, his view on Buddhism is not consistent and differs according to the perspective he takes. On the one hand, Tabataba’i regards the Buddha, also known as Yudhasaf, as the founder of the Ṣābi’īn and a prophet of India. This view follows al-Biruni and has been mentioned by other scholars such as al-Muqaddasi (d. 974), Ibn al-Nadim, and al-Shahrastani. On the other hand, Tabataba’i identifies the Ṣābi’īn with Christians and also Hindus who consider angels as the daughter of God and elsewhere he even classifies both as idol worshippers. This shows Tabataba’i’s view on Buddhism

is not informed by a broad range of sources, merely a few works by Muslim and Western scholars and no Buddhist scholars. Tabataba'i prefers to exclude Buddhists from the *ahl al-kitāb*.

Tabataba'i's interest in Buddhism stems from his interest in mysticism, and not just Islamic mysticism but also the mysticism found in Chinese religion, Hinduism, and Christianity. His interest in varied religious practices must have had an ecumenical motive. As Algar (2006, 19) says, Tabataba'i's interest in comparative mysticism was part of a wider agenda for careful analysis of a wide range of religious and philosophical traditions. Tabataba'i met regularly with Henri Corbin (1903–1978), the prominent French orientalist, to study the classics of mysticism and satiate his appetite for comparative religion centered on mysticism (Darwish 2014, 292). Thus, comparative religion is quite prominent in Tabataba'i's exegesis.

5 Conclusion

The discussion of Buddhism in the Qur'anic exegeses of Tabataba'i and al-Qasimi show a new way for Muslim–Buddhist dialogue in terms of in theology and history. Most Muslim exegetes, theologians, and jurists have not been motivated to discuss Buddhism in the Qur'an. Muslim scholars have traditionally understood Buddhism as a form of idol worshippers which is far from the status of the *ahl al-kitāb*. Since the Qur'an mentions several religions such as Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, polytheism, and Islam, most Muslim exegetes are reluctant to discuss other religions such as Buddhism. However, al-Qasimi and Tabataba'i successfully introduced Buddhism into the exegetical literature using different approaches and sources. Although the discussion of Buddhism by al-Qasimi and Tabataba'i is unlike their discussion of other religions mentioned in the Qur'an, they nevertheless show a willingness to review Buddhism from a Qur'anic perspective and, indeed, contribute to Muslim–Buddhist relations.

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