

Special Feature 2: Inquiry into Coexistence Based on the Idea of ‘Asian Islam’

Editor’s Note

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We started our project titled “The Idea of Coexistence and its Practices in Asian Islam based on Sufism” under the auspices of the Asian History Research Project conducted by the JFE 21st Century Foundation in January 2019. This project aims to promote a new notion of “Asian Islam,” whose main basis is found in Sufism, and contribute toward changing the general image of Islam, which has been perceived as being violent and aggressive. This negative image mainly originates from the fact that mass media only concentrates on and overemphasizes the acts of terrorism, wars, and civil wars destroying the Islamic world, overlooking the peaceful daily life of Muslims. This project tentatively names this negative image as that of “Arab Islam,” which is primarily based on strict observance of the commandment of Islamic law. The project juxtaposes the image of love, peace, and coexistence with the image of enmity, violence, and hostility.

Sufism has often been translated as “Islamic mysticism.” However, most of the contemporary specialists of Sufi studies have raised questions concerning the validity of this translation.¹ I have proposed a “three-axis framework of Sufism,” which is made up of ethical, mystical, and popular axes.² It is well known that Sufism was a part of mainstream thought, at least during the pre-modern Islamic era. Even in the modern and contemporary period, Sufism still occupies a central role in the so-called “marginal” Islamic world, which can be nearly equated with the non-Arabic world. I believe that it is important to utilize this heritage of cultural coexistence in the contemporary world. In this project, we concentrated on Asia, the continent to which Japan belongs. This is the reason we named our topic “Asian Islam.” Here “Asian Islam” refers to a type of Islam that (1) is primarily based on Sufism (often side by side with Islamic Jurisprudence); (2) has spread in the Asian Islamic world, except the Middle East, which is sometimes referred to as “West Asia”; and (3) has a basic idea of cultural coexistence, which is found among the believers of various religions and sects. Sufism, right from its origin, has emphasized inner spirituality, rather than outer commandments. This is why it is often said that Sufism played an important role in spreading Islam in the “marginal” world, including Southeast Asia and South Asia, where traditional spirituality spread without Islamic commandments. It is logical to assume that it was Sufism’s emphasis on inner spirituality that enabled the local people to accept Islam. We can also assume that Sufism created a new

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1 For example, see [Ernst 1997: xvii; Chittick 2000: 1–2].

2 See [Tonaga 2006].

religious attitude, which we have come to call "Asian Islam" in this project. This new religious attitude bore the wisdom of cultural coexistence with other religious traditions, for the local people had their own religious traditions before the arrival of Islam.

We selected the following countries to verify the validity of our notion of "Asian Islam": (1) Indonesia, which is the largest country in the world with a predominantly Muslim population; (2) Turkey and the Balkans, which were at the center of the Ottoman Empire; and (3) China, which has a Muslim population of over 20 million. In these countries, the idea of cultural coexistence, based on Sufism, and the movements of cultural coexistence, based on saint veneration, have flourished greatly.

The project was conducted by four specialists. They are: TONAGA Yasushi of Kyoto University, a researcher of Islamic studies (particularly Sufi studies), who led the project; ARAI Kazuhiro of Keio University, a historian of Southeast Asia (in particular Indonesian Islam); Thierry ZARCONÉ of Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris, an anthropologist and historian of Turkic (Turkish and Central Asian) Islam; and NAKANISHI Tatsuya of Kyoto University, a historian of Chinese Islam.

This special feature titled "Inquiry into Coexistence Based on the Idea of 'Asian Islam'" is an outcome of this joint project. The study has a total of four articles. The first article, titled "Islam of Mercy and Compassion," is written by TONAGA Yasushi. The article begins with a general survey of cultural coexistence in the Islamic creed and history, and then goes on to discuss Sufi theory and practices. This is followed by a depiction of the case study of Indonesia. The second article, titled "Interreligious Coexistence and the State: The Problem of the Use of the Word *Kāfir* in Indonesia" is written by ARAI Kazuhiro. As opposed to the first article, this article starts with a concrete case description of Indonesia, dealing with the subject of how to name non-Muslims. The article then continues with a general analysis. The third article, titled "Understanding the Relations between Christians and Bektashis: Interconfessionalism and Supraconfessionalism," is written by Thierry ZARCONÉ. In this article, he discusses the relationship that exists between Bektashis and Christians in Turkey and the Balkans, and analyzes the two facets of this relationship, namely "interconfessionalism" and "supraconfessionalism." The fourth article, titled "After Criticism of Ma Dexin against Veneration of Saints: Rethinking Chinese Elaboration of Islam," is written by NAKANISHI Tatsuya. The article deals with the trial of a Chinese Muslim thinker that took place in the 19th century. The article brings out the positive and negative aspects of this trial, which was an attempt to harmonize Muslims and non-Muslims during the Qing Dynasty.

The project proposes a new idea of "Asian Islam" based on Sufism, which can pioneer a new type of Islamic coexistence. All four articles in this special feature discuss this possibility. At the same time, it is important that we do not optimistically overemphasize its possibility. The articles by TONAGA and ARAI, which deal with Indonesian cases, are diligent in

pointing out the limitation of their propositions, which are applied only to the respective country, without generalizing them to the entire Islamic world. ARAI's article also brings out the insufficiency of the role of Sufism in the movement. While what the third article by ZARCONI elucidates is striking and interesting, we cannot easily generalize this harmonious coexistence to the whole of Islamic society, because the case of Bektashi-Christian coexistence could be a marginal case found only in Turkey and the Balkans. The fourth article by NAKANISHI clearly brings out the negative aspects of the so-called "coexistent" movement among religions, which has been responsible for fragmentation in Chinese Muslim society.

It will be our great pleasure if our humble first step in this special feature paves the way for a new research field on cultural coexistence in the Islamic world.

[References]

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