Elverskog Johan,
Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Road.

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The problems of mutual relationship between Christianity and Islam, dominating public and scholarly discourses in the West, have left little space for the perception of interaction of Islam with other world religions. Even the destruction of the famous Buddha statues of Bamiyan by the Taliban appeared to be just another footnote in the Western narrative of Islamic intolerance. In the introduction to his path-breaking study on "Buddhism and Islam along the Silk Road", Johan Elverskog reminds us how other narratives like the destruction of the monastery of Nalanda in the 13th century supported both the clichés of aggressive Muslim violence and peaceful Buddhist introspection. One more reason, thus, to systematically examine the long history of Buddhist-Muslim interaction, as Elverskog does in his highly informative study.

Before sifting chronologically through more than 1000 years of Buddhist-Muslim encounters, Elverskog provides the reader with a short sketch on the roots and doctrinaire development of early Buddhism and Islam, stressing the surprising parallels in the circumstances of their emergence and the role upward mobile merchants played in both cases. During the earlier phases of Islamic expansion into Central and South Asia, the importance of Buddhists in the regional economy appeared to be one of the reasons for Muslim tolerance. While Elverskog provides some evidence for mutual interest and understanding during that early period (8th-10th centuries), changes in main trade routes and the spread of Tantric religions on the Indian subcontinent interrupted direct encounters during the two centuries to follow.

Religious interaction reconvened under the tolerant Mongolian rulers (13th-15th centuries). Buddhism revived in Central Asia and Elverskog provides a particular convincing example of mutual influences when discussing visual representations of Muhammad spreading in Persian Islamic art. The break-up of the Chinggisid Empire, by contrast, fragmented economic links along the Silk Road and into India. Elverskog holds the emergence of multiple Islamic states within the Mongol realm, their employment of Jihad rhetoric and the rise of Naqshbandi Sufism responsible for the newly increasing intolerance of Muslim rulers towards Buddhists in the 15th and 16th centuries.

In his last chapter, Elverskog shifts attention eastward and discusses the development of Islam in Qing China (17th to 20th centuries). There, the spread of Islam and its international dimensions threatened Imperial rule, and Muslims were increasingly stigmatised as unruly subjects. This led to strained Buddhist-Muslim relations particularly Xingjian. Buddhist Mongols, for their part, began to distance themselves from Islamic everyday practices, embodied, for example, in the slaughter of animals and the 'ḥalal' preparation of food.

This perfunctory summary can hardly do justice to the enormous scope of Elverskog's study. He covers the history of Buddhist-Muslim contacts in an area far greater than the term "Silk Road" in the title suggests; he traces mutual influences in an array of fields from everyday life (food) to art; and he raises our awareness for the role of historical stereotypes in shaping our perception of the present state of affairs in Inner Asia. By necessity not all periods and topics are covered evenly in this pioneering book. As a non-specialist in the area, the reviewer wonders, though, whether Buddhist influence on Islam has been more intense than vice-versa, or whether this may have been a bias in the impressive array of European language sources and translations that Elverskog consulted.

That said Elverskog's book is highly recommendable introduction into an important but long neglected field which both specialists and general readers will find a highly rewarding reading. The book is richly illustrated and a large number of maps help the reader to navigate in uncharted waters. Unfortunately the publishers have dispensed with a separate bibliography.

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