

**Kieko Obuse. *Buddhism and Islam Mutual Engagements in Southeast Asia and Japan*. Leiden: Brill, 2025, 303 pp. Hardback. ISBN 978-90-04-70454-1.**

Any religion—traditional, established, or otherwise—has played a vital role in society from time immemorial. Religion can be a source of mutual engagement or protracted conflict. Either way, religion can have deep influence, impact, and far-reaching consequences in people's and communities' daily lives, larger sociopolitical, economic, and cultural institutions and their policies and programs, perceptions, and representations. Moreover, no religion should be held superior or inferior. Every religion is distinct, beneficial, and beautiful. Ideally, no religion should be in conflict with other religions. However, the world has seen religions clash for various reasons. The efforts to reconcile, dialogue, and mutually engage among religions are intrinsically and essentially a herculean task, responsibility, and calling, which must be promoted at all levels for the common good of people, societies, and communities with grit, understanding, and commitment.

The book—*Buddhism and Islam Mutual Engagements in Southeast Asia and Japan*—is a timely intellectual output highlighting how the two religions (Buddhism and Islam) have made concerted efforts toward reciprocal interactions in the region and Japan. Learning and knowing these endeavors of dialogue between two religions helps to understand how religions have been increasingly confrontational and irreconcilable. But what counts are the potential ways to promote mutual engagements, which constitute the core and crux of the book, which makes it essential reading.

Before discussing the highlights of the book, it is better to have a cursory look at the two religions in the region—Buddhism and Islam in Southeast Asia and Japan.

With an estimated 190–205 million Buddhists spread over Southeast Asia, Buddhism is a major religion in the region. This represents about 35–38 percent of the global Buddhist population. With about 63.75 million Buddhists, or 95 percent of Thailand's population, the country boasts the most Buddhists in the region. Other nations with notable Buddhist

populations where Buddhism is the majority religion are Cambodia, Myanmar, and Laos.

On the other hand, Buddhism in Japan had about 70.76 million followers in 2022, down from 83.24 million the year before. Estimates from other sources, however, point to a different range of the population identifying as Buddhist—from 46 percent to under 20 percent.

**Islam in Southeast Asia:** With an estimated 242 million followers, or roughly 42 percent of Southeast Asia's population, Islam is the most common religion there. This comes to about 25 percent of all Muslims worldwide. With over 237 million Muslims, Indonesia boasts the highest Muslim population among all the countries; Malaysia comes second with over 19 million.

About 0.28 percent of the total population, the estimated 350,000 Muslim population in Japan as of early 2024, is up from almost 110,000 in 2010 to 230,000 in 2019; this statistic has more than doubled during the past ten years. Rising numbers of foreign Muslim residents, Japanese converts to Islam, and births within the Muslim community help explain this expansion.

The book's introduction focuses on diversity and changes in Buddhist-Muslim engagements, challenges it faces in accompanying the study, a comprehensive approach to Buddhist-Muslims, redefining doctrines and theologies, and the production of difference: mutual perceptions as interpretive possibilities.

The first chapter explores Buddhist-Muslim engagements in Southeast Asia and Japan. It applies categories from the theology of religions to these interactions, examining two types of parallelism, key concepts and doctrines in both Buddhism and Islam, and offering comparative analysis and implications for mutual perceptions. It also discusses the role of holy figures in both traditions—prophets, saints, and bodhisattvas.

The second chapter discusses Buddhas and prophets in the shared history from the early period to modern times, along with various encounters and Muslim and Buddhist writings. The third chapter examines the challenges of pluralism and contemporary dialogue efforts in Buddhist-Muslim relations in Southeast Asia, with a focus on Thailand and Malaysia. It highlights key initiatives aimed at fostering interreligious understanding and cooperation. The fourth chapter illustrates how Southeast Asia provides fertile ground for exploring parallelism and contemporary trends in Buddhist-Muslim engagement. It examines relevant Muslim and Buddhist

writings from both Southeast Asia and Japan, highlighting leading voices in the region—including pioneers of Buddhist parallelism and metaphysical parallelism.

The fifth chapter explains the exoticism of the Asian Brotherhood and Japanese engagements with Islam from the early to the modern age (754-1854), the late colonial period (1854-1912), and the imperialist period (1912-1945). The sixth chapter focuses on the repositioning of Islam in contemporary Japan. It addresses the challenge that parallelism poses to the traditional monotheism-polytheism divide, explores Islam-related incidents in Japan, and examines the discourse of ‘othering’ through the perspectives of both Japanese and non-Japanese Muslims. The chapter also discusses interreligious dialogues and symposiums, as well as contemporary Muslim and Buddhist writings in Japan, highlighting themes such as emerging forms of parallelism, the development of fully fledged parallelism, and structural parallels in mystical experiences. Finally, the conclusion section is on the potential of parallelism as a method for religious studies.

The author did extensive research spanning over 25 years. Fieldwork with practicing Buddhists and Muslims of vital relevance to the research is especially important for the project since it emphasizes modern trends in Buddhist-Muslim interaction. This makes an interesting and scholarly work. The author has done a great job dealing with the subject matter with scholarly and lucid writing and convincing arguments.

The book is highly recommended to academia and anyone who is interested and passionate about the study of religions, particularly in Buddhist and Muslim interreligious dialogue and conversations in Southeast Asia and Japan. For students, teachers, and scholars of the sociology of religion and theology of religion, the book is essential reading.

After having read the book, one would be fully convinced how the study of religion is a must, and as such, efforts of knowing and understanding the dynamics of dialogue that exist between Buddhism and Islam and mutual engagements in Southeast Asia and Japan—not as binary polarities, but as a promotion of dialogue and interreligious conversations that will help build bridges across the region. Consequently, such endeavors potentially contribute to promoting peace, solidarity, and common good that constitute the central tenets of any religion, notably Buddhism and Islam. The book in that same direction is noteworthy.

The second advantage of reading this book is that, although doubts and perceptions about Buddhist-Muslim engagement in Southeast Asia and

Japan may seem irreconcilable, open and thoughtful discussion can create valuable opportunities for learning and cultivating a growth mindset in understanding these interactions.

The academic contribution of the work is commendable, as it significantly enhances awareness of Buddhist-Muslim engagement in the aforementioned regions. Drawing on two decades of rigorous research, careful observation, and meaningful interactions with both scholars and practitioners—including Buddhists, Muslims, non-Buddhists, and non-Muslims—the author presents a well-grounded and insightful study. This sustained scholarly effort offers a valuable foundation for future research, both by the author and by others working in the field.

That said, the book could benefit from certain improvements. Specifically, it would be enriched by an examination of how other religious traditions present in Southeast Asia and Japan may either support or impede Buddhist-Muslim engagement. Furthermore, the inclusion of non-religious factors—such as political, economic, or sociocultural influences—that either facilitate or hinder such interactions would offer a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play.

Additionally, the book would be strengthened by a clearer articulation of the specific insights, positive developments, and challenges emerging from Buddhist-Muslim interactions in individual countries within Southeast Asia and Japan. It should also address how these country-specific experiences might inform or be adapted to other contexts—whether in regions where Buddhism and Islam are dominant or where they exist as minority traditions. Such an approach would significantly enhance the scholarly discourse on Buddhist-Muslim engagement and promote broader conversations aimed at fostering mutual understanding and the common good among researchers and practitioners alike.

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