

# Iqbal day symposium in Copenhagen on 14 November 2010

(Theme: Kinship in Thought between Islam and the West)



*Speakers at the November 2010 Iqbal day symposium, from left to right: Mr. Suheyl Umar, Dr. Lissi Rasmussen, and Mr. Ghulam Sabir.*

An international symposium was held on the eve of Iqbal Day under auspices of Iqbal Academy Scandinavia (IAS), on the 14<sup>th</sup> November, 2010 at Copenhagen. Prominent scholars participated from the West and Islamic countries. There were two sessions with a break for refreshment in between. Both the sessions were conducted by Stage Secretary Wajiha Rehman.

The theme of the event carries in itself a vast range of questions/topics. Each of the speakers, therefore, chose a particular topic within the framework of the Theme. This, as a whole, made the event colourful and most interesting

The programme began with recitation of the Qur'an by **Muhammad Kamil**, an active member of IAS executive board, which followed by Danish translation by Dr. **Ellen Wulf** from her own translated copy of the Qur'an.

**Ghulam Sabir**, the Chairman and Founder of IAS, opened the session with thanks of the audience and renowned scholars from Denmark and abroad. He chose to speak on apparent existence of kinship in thought between Islam and the West. In his short speech he quoted various examples of resemblance of action and thought in the works of Western scientists and philosophers with the teaching of Islam giving reference of verses from the Qur'an.

Besides, he also highlighted the unique examples of Goethe's kinship with Hafiz Shirazi of Iran, which is reflected in Goethe's *West – Øestlicher Divan* (West-Eastern Divan) written by him after studying *Divan-i Hafiz* of the famous poet of Iran. Similarly he spoke on the existence of wonderful kinship of thought between Iqbal and Goethe quoting the references from the unique book of Iqbal "*Payam-i Mashriq*" (Message of the East) written in response to Goethe's poetic marvel piece of literature *West-Eastern Divan*.

Dr. **Lissi Rasmussen**, a theologian, Professor at Centre of European Islamic Thought in Copenhagen University and the Director Islamic-Christian Study Centre Copenhagen. Her speech was short but scholastic and highly meaningful. She said that Islam and the West are not two comparable entities. Two things, to her, are of extreme importance today; firstly our two religions are ethical religions, in which the divine relationship is defined in ethical terms. The message of both religions is not just words but it is creative and demands obedient participation. Faith and action are intimately connected as in five pillars of the Qur'an.

Secondly both Religions have a holistic approach to life. There is an interplay, an internal logic of theology and ethics. There is a comprehensive approach to life, nature and universe. She said that man created by God in God's image/shape---Human being thereby, having a semblance to the Creator, must reflect his abilities (*Khilafa*). It is sacred. She added that holistic approach to life was also affirmed by Muhammad Iqbal and that for him *Tauhid* indicated equality, solidarity and freedom.

She said that the kinship in thought is there and there is a common theology of ethics but we have lost our comprehensive holistic approach through compartmentalisation of theology as well as ethics. And violence, the force of arms has become accepted means. Thereby a cycle of fear has been reinforced. Thus many of the dynamic values have lost their meaning --- concepts have been abused on the side of the West and of the so-called Muslim world. Religion has been abused to achieve own political interests.

How do we recapture the holistic/comprehensive approach that is contained in both Islam and Christianity? Dr. Lissi ended her beautiful speech with these words, adding that this is a challenge for all of us. How do we come to reaffirm what is human and how do we regain our common ethical principles, our kinship in thought?

**Sarosh Alamgir** is a member of IAS executive board and a lover of Iqbal. His field being science he is enjoying a respectable executive post in Microsoft. In contrast to his profession he has active interest in philosophy and religion. He said that Islam and the West look strange in the topic, but thinking carefully ... Islam is not the name of mere faith or a personal relation with God, it is he name of a character, guided by what is believed a holistic universal outlook, and animated by an objective ideology --- regulated through a legal framework, encompassing both individual as well as social aspects. In short Islam is a way of life. Similarly, said he, the West is no just a compass or geographical distinction but represents a set of ideologies, values and legacies. To him the subject "West and Islam" relates to more fundamental issues than the ones addressed by the dialogue between "West and Muslim world," ... a convenient point of departure to this phase, as some would say, "*clash of civilisation*" ... not to me at all, said he, in fact it is fundamentally only a clash of ignorance on both the sides. Looking to the history of human development we do not foresee a clash of civilization, instead when we look at the golden chain



from Alkhawarizmi to Alkindi, to Omar Khayam, to Fibonacci, to Newton, to John Newmann, there is a continuum --- from Jabir Ibn-e Khayyam to Roger Bacon, from Razi to Beruni to Einstein, Idrisi to Piri Reis to Mercator to David Harvey --- there is beautiful spectrum spread from Avicenna to Ibn-Al-Haytham to William Harvey to Edward Jenner --- a spectrum of modern discoveries --- a continuum of the scientific and technological progress.

What is stated above, Sarosh said, is just a narrow view into the kinship of the two paradigms. In fact the important is the shared fibre that underlies these shared advancements. He said if we have to name the defining characteristics of the West today, a highlighted sense of action, *movement and objectivity* on one hand --- and on the other, a sense of *freedom* will be among the first ones; these are two shared values which constitute the focus of this talk --- it is to great to a great extent the empirical attitude of the West that has distinguished it from the rest of the world in the recent history, also being the main factor of its scientific progress today. On the other hand, he added, that in Islam, Qur'an turns the sense of action into a golden rule, *Lais-al Insana illa Ma sa-a*" 53/39 - (For man it is only that for which he strives. Further it goes on to inspire man to study the world surrounding him, speaks of mountains and oceans and their formation, the making of clouds and rain, clay and water ass the origin of life, the evolution and the process of reproduction, the planetary motion and their orbits, air currents and atmospheric dynamics --- it calls all of these as signs from God but only for the thoughtful ones. This and so many other verses of Qur'an carrying inspiration and empirical attitude were taken with great respect and responsibility by the Muslims and they went on to be the founders of virtually every modern science known to man --- and it continued till it was here in Europe that the West shrug off the spell of intellectual stagnation and took over the noble responsibility with great dedication and sincerity, taking to new heights. After this narration, Sarosh said, "What I see is a continuum --- what I see is a shared character".

At the end of his speech he expressed his feelings that his idea was not to converge the two ideologies but rediscovering an existing shared pool of understanding, where we can immerse our respect and appreciation each other, and for the rest of the truth, without needing to convince each other on a part thereof.

Dr. **Safet Bekovic** of Bosnia has his roots in both European thought and Islam. At the outset he clarified misunderstanding, if there was any, towards the topic Kinship in Thought between Islam and the West. He said that Islam is perceived, more than a religion, a culture, an ideology and a civilization. Similarly the West is perceived, more than just geography, a culture and a civilization. He said that some people see the relationship between the two in the light of political differences and regard Islam and the West as two confronting sides. Others consider Islam and the West as competitors on theologies and lifestyles. But he said that here is also a third approach, which takes account of differences and similarities between the two sides.

Safet also talked on common historical and geographical background as well as religious and spiritual kinship between Islam and Christianity being sister religions coming from the same area. He also affirmed the existence of philosophical kinship between Islam and the West. He said that we should not be afraid to highlight our similarities and added that a common philosophy of religious thought would open new ways of relationship between Islam and the West. He said common historical and geographical background, which reflects a common oriental



religious-spiritual kinship as Islam and Christianity are sister religions coming from the same area. Safet added that in the middle ages philosophy was perceived as a human universalistic discipline which had a single goal to reach the ultimate truth about the world and man. Muslim philosophers, whether for *Falsafa* or *Hikma*, never used the prefix Islamic or Muslim. Their philosophy in fact contained elements of Greek cosmology, Persian spirituality, the ancient Indian Wisdom, etc.

Safet stressed on the point that we should not be afraid to highlight our similarities, but he added that a real mutual recognition is not possible without critical formulas and similarities of our own history, not just the history of others. Islamic and Western thinking, he said, is not in conflict with each other. Therefore a common philosophy of religion would probably open new ways of thinking relationship between Islam and the West.

Dr. **Ahmed Afzaal** is a Muslim Scholar, PhD from Drew University, New Jersey, in the area of Religion and Society and a teacher of Comparative Religion at Concordia College in Moorhead, USA: He said that many people all around the world, particularly in the West, believe that no kinship between Islam and the West exist. To him 'these same people are likely to act in ways that most of us will find troublesome, if not



outright dangerous and even reprehensible. Given his state of affairs, anything we can do to show that the truth is otherwise, that a significant amount of kinship does exist between Islam and the West, will be a valuable service.'

Dr. Afzaal quoted negative ideas of two Western thinkers, Bernard Lewis, Samuel Huntington and one Muslim Osama Bin Laden; and remarked that 'they or their ideas are not as troublesome as the style of reasoning that all three seem to employ when they make their arguments. So long as the particular reasoning style is not identified and critiqued, the notion of the "clash of civilizations" will not go away; instead it will keep raising its nefarious head in a variety of disguises. In fact so long as the underlying style of reasoning remains unconscious it will continue to produce or empower not just one but a whole range of problematic ideas, leading to varying degrees of human suffering'. He said that 'it is absurd to talk about one civilization coming to dominate another; or one civilization surviving the challenges of this era while others facing doom and destruction'.

He said that there are three fundamental problems that threaten the validity of human civilization into the distant future, these are (1) political and economic inequity (2) environmental destruction, and (3) violent conflict. Ahmed Afzaal said that these three problems are interrelated. He discussed these problems at length in his speech. He told that among Muslim thinkers Muhammad Iqbal stands out as one of the first to recognise the need for a human and planetary perspective. While Iqbal writes and speaks as a committed Muslim, deep down in his thought he is a citizen of the world. Afzaal quotes Iqbal, "Humanity needs three things today – a spiritual interpretation of the universe, spiritual emancipation of the individual, and basic principles of a universal import directing the evolution of human society on a spiritual basis". Iqbal works, he said, is of utmost relevance today because it can help us overcome the kind of faulty reasoning we find

in such dangerous ideas as the “clash of civilization thesis”. ... When Iqbal emphasis the empirical attitude of the Qur’an, the “republican” spirit of Islam, the prophetic teaching about the universal “brotherhood” of humanity, or the social meaning of the “finality of prophethood,” he demonstrates precisely the kind of “kinship in thought” that can help us address the contemporary crisis of civilisation.

At the end of his speech Dr. Afzaal said that “kinship in thought between Islam and the West” constitutes an undertaking that Iqbal would enthusiastically endorse. Insofar as Iqbal’s thought can help us recognise this as well as other artificially reified dualism, it can also help us understand the nature of some of the most pressing problems that such a style of reasoning produces. And to the extent that Iqbal’s thought actually help us *so/lve* some of these problems in one way or another, to that extent we could even come to appreciate the “truth.”

Dr. **Theodor Jørgensen** is a theologian. His main interest on which he is working is interreligious themes. In his speech he appreciated the theme telling that the theme provides a sense of kinship between Islam and the West, which exists in the belief of oneness of God on the part of both sides. But he said that there are quite a lot of disagreements between us about this common confession. He pointed out the difference on oneness of God saying that Christians believe in one God as triune God, Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. Then he addressed “Muslims” directly, “You Muslims emphasise your belief in one God as a radical oneness. And then the misunderstanding very often arise that Christian believe in three Gods, because our emphasis in the oneness of God isn’t respected. ... “.

Dr. Theodor said, ‘It is my belief that the relation to God --- that means to the same and one God --- is constitutional for every human being whether he knows about it or not’. But he finds contrast between Muslims and Christians in understanding oneness of God. At one place he sees a kinship in both the religions wherein God asked angles “prostrate to Adam” and they prostrated, with the exception of Iblis (Satan), and then making man as His *Khalifa*, which means that man stands on a higher level than angels.

Throughout his speech Theodor advocated Christianity and spoke against the spirit of Islam – e.g. he said “I also see a triune structure in the Islamic understanding of the relation of God”. The theme of this Symposium was “Kinship in Thought between Islam and the West”--- the event was not a debate or dialogue between Christianity and Islam, which we can clearly observe in the highly constructive and scholastic speeches of Lissi Rasmusen, Safet Bektovic, Sarosh Alamgir, Suheyl Umar and Ahmed Afzaal. (Full lecture of Dr. Theodor can be seen on the website [www.allamaiqbal.com/ias](http://www.allamaiqbal.com/ias) on page Articles/Papers).



**Muhammad Suheyl Umar**, the director Iqbal Academy Pakistan was the last speaker. Some of his areas of interest are philosophy, Theology, Sufism and Islam. Relating to the theme he chose the topic for his speech as “Religious Tolerance”. Since the function was arranged on the eve of Poet-philosopher Iqbal’s birthday Suheyl Umar began his speech with the English translation of Iqbal’s Persian verses from “*Javidnama*” (Pilgrimage of Eternity), as quoted below:

*Sailing one’s tongue with ill speech is sin  
The disbeliever and believer are alike creatures of God,  
Humanity, human respect for human reality;  
Be conscious of the station of humanity.  
The slave of love who takes his path from God  
Becomes a loving friend of both disbeliever and believer,*

Suheyl Umar said that in the years immediately before and after the First World War there were three poetic voices, Tagore, T.S. Eliot and Iqbal. Melancholy in those days prevailed all over, Iqbal was seriously thinking about the grave situation, he sang,

*I am no longer concerned about the crescent and the cross,  
For the womb of time carries an ordeal of a different kind.*

He added that in different ways the East and the West were going through a single common crisis whose cause was the spiritual condition of the modern West. That condition was characterised by the loss of religious certainties and of transcendence with its larger horizons. ... When, with the inauguration of the scientific worldview, human being started considering themselves the bearer of the highest meaning in the world and the measure of everything, meaning began to ebb and the stature of humanity to diminish. The world lost its human dimension and we began to lose control of it. ... Even today when traditional peoples want to know where they are –when they wonder about the ultimate context to which their lives are set and which has the final say over them - they turn to their sacred text; or in the case of oral, tribal people (what comes to the same thing), to the sacred myths that have been handed down to them by their ancestors. *Modernity* was born when a new source of knowledge was discovered, the scientific method. Because is controlled experiment enabled scientists to prove their hypothesis, and because those proven hypotheses demonstrated that they had the power to change the material world dramatically. Westerners turned from revelation to science for the Big Picture.

Suheyl Umar observes that while Iqbal’s contemporaries were lamenting the state of the world with its shaky institutions and rudderless situation with the dominant mood of melancholy, without suggesting a viable alternative, Iqbal had a message of hope. The conclusion is that if for the survival of humanity it is necessary for man to respect his fellow-men; in the same way it is necessary for him to learn to respect religions other than his own. It is only through the adoption of this moral and spiritual approach that, borrowing Iqbal’s phrase, “man may use to a fresh vision of his future,” And this brings us to the opening point of our discourse, “Be conscious of the station of humanity” which is intimately related to the question of the Other religions, cultural, political – which, in turn, subsumes the issue of Tolerance.

After his preliminary introduction on the background of the theme Suheyl Umar talked on his selected topic, “Tolerance”. He said that the dimensions of tolerance in his speech was specifically religious tolerance, such as this principle finds its expression within the Islamic traditions and how it came to be enshrined in the Western thought after the Enlightenment. Then he focused on the shared legacy of the idea that suffered a diverse destiny in the West. He said that the religious tolerance can be defined in terms of a positive spiritual predisposition towards the religious Other, a predisposition fashioned by a vision of the divinely-willed diversity of religious communities. If the diversity of religions is seen to be an expression of the will of God, (here he gave reference to a



verse from Qur'an), then the inevitable differences between the religions will be not only tolerated but also celebrated.

*“Tolerate Islam or the liberal West? Which came first?”* – Suheyl Umar said that Muslims exercised more tolerance towards non-Muslims than Christians did. ... The current right of freedom of religious belief and worship in the Western world is thus not simply a corollary of secular thought, it is a principle inspired at least in part, by the influence of Islam. After this he quoted Dr. Susan Ritchie’s comments as saying “Tolerance was a matter of Ottoman policy and bureaucratic structure, and an expression of the Ottoman interpretation of Islam, which was in most instances stunningly liberal and cosmopolitan.” She argues convincingly that the Ottoman tolerance decisively influenced the process leading to the famous Edict of Torda in 1568, issued by King John Sigismund of Transylvania (which was under Ottoman suzerainty), an edict hailed by Western historians expressing ‘the first European policy of expensive religious toleration’. Suheyl Umar remarks that it is thus hardly surprising that Norman Daniel should allow himself to make the simple-and for many, startling-claim: ‘The notion of tolerance in Christendom was borrowed from Muslim practice.’ (The rest of topic on Tolerance by Suheyl Umar can be seen on website [www.allamaiqbal.com/ias](http://www.allamaiqbal.com/ias) on page Articles/Papers).

N.B. Complete text of all above speeches loaded on the website [www.allamaiqbal.com/ias](http://www.allamaiqbal.com/ias) on page Articles/Papers.