

Professor Syed Ali Ashraf

(1925 - 1998)

Professor Dr Syed Ali Ashraf was Director-General of the Islamic Academy, Cambridge and the Founder and Vice-Chancellor of Darul Ihsan University, Bangladesh. He was also a member of the Faculty of Education and a Fellow of Clare Hall, Fitzwilliam College and Wolfson College, the University of Cambridge. He passed away at his home in Cambridge on the morning of Friday, 7th August 1998.

He was born in Dhaka, Bangladesh in 1925, where he received his primary and secondary education. After obtaining his Master's degree in English from the University of Dhaka, he came to the University of Cambridge where he completed his Honours and PhD, at Fitzwilliam College.

He went on to become a lecturer and then Reader in English at Dhaka University (1949), Head of the Department of English at Rajshahi University (1954-56), Professor and Head of the Department of English at Karachi University, Pakistan (1956-73) and at King Abdul Aziz University, Makkah (1974-77), and Professor at King Abdul Aziz University, Jeddah (1977-84). He was visiting Professor at Harvard University (1971) and New Brunswick University (1974). He was the organizing secretary of the First World Conference on Muslim Education held in Makkah (1977) and helped to organize all five other World Conferences: the Second in Islamabad (1980), the Third in Dhaka (1981), the Fourth in Jakarta (1982), the Fifth in Cairo (1987) and the Sixth in South Africa (1997). He was also the first Director-General of the World Centre for Islamic Education, set up by the Organization of Islamic Conferences in Makkah (1980-2).

Professor Ashraf was a man who symbolized Islam, both in his person and in the cause he stood for. He made an original and considerable contribution to the regeneration of Islamic education drawn from the Islamic worldview, laid the foundations of the movement of the Islamization of education throughout the world, and left a global impact on various aspects of the Islamic philosophy of education.

A great Islamic thinker and educationalist, he never supported the kind of education which promotes an unduly anti-faith approach to life, which too easily breeds scepticism and relativism and leads to the loss of the sacredness of life, with all the impoverishment of the human spirit, which this can entail. He fought for the

establishment of that kind of education that helps to integrate one's faith in God with day to day actions and belief in eternal values with social situations.

He also believed that in spite of differences of religious beliefs and practices, there is a whole range of values which are held in common and which have important implications for educational enterprises world-wide. He sought to find the common grounds among different faiths and thus his educational contributions have a lot of significance for people of all faiths alike: Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism, Hinduism, Buddhism and others. As a pioneer of faith-based education he tried to achieve spiritual and moral development through value-based education, the core values of which should be based on and derived from religion. His contributions in this field will have a lasting influence on curriculum designing and the teaching methodology for Muslim communities all over the world as well for non-Muslim scholars who hold similar views.

He was an author both in English and Bengali, and inspired many people through his thoughts and writings. Besides his work on creative and critical literature, his major works on education include the following: general editor of six books in an Islamic education series (Hodder and Stoughton), of which he co-authored *Crisis in Muslim Education* (1978). Among his books are *The Concept of an Islamic University* (1984) and *New Horizons in Muslim Education* (1984). He was the founder editor of the Cambridge based educational journal *Muslim Education Quarterly* (1983-). He was also co-editor with Professor Paul Hirst of *Religion and Education: Islamic and Christian Approaches*, and the author of *Islam*, part of Stanley Thornes' series for GCSE on World Religions.

In addition to this, Professor Syed Ali Ashraf was a poet, a literary critic and a writer- both in English and in Bengali. The fields of his specialization were: Islamization of education (especially of the Islamic concept of education, curriculum designing and teaching methodology); English language and literature (especially literary criticism and the teaching of the English language) and Islamic culture and the relationship between Islam and the West.

Professor Ashraf was a man of great spiritual vision and intellectual thinking, with indefatigable energy, though he lived a simple life. He was an embodiment of true faith, a faith which nurtured by knowledge and love. He was loving and affectionate, and inexhaustibly so. Full of kindness and compassion, he would always help others wherever and whenever possible. He loved and was loved by people who happened to come in contact with him from all parts of the world.

He was a treasury of knowledge and wisdom from which we all benefited greatly. He

<http://www.bmri.org.uk>

was a great teacher, a gentle friend and a wise guide and we will remember him as these as well as eminent scholar who devoted all his life to spreading the message of Islam all over the world. His death is certainly a global loss: the world has lost a great Islamic thinker, educationalist and spiritual master. But even more so, his death is a great personal loss to his friends and colleagues all over the world.

His body was taken to Dhaka where he was buried at the Darul Ihsan University campus on 10th August 1998. May Allah bless him.

By Dr Shaikh Abdul Mabud; published in Journal of Islamic Academy of Sciences Volume 10, No.4

THE MUSLIMS most prominent in the British media are known because of the noise they make and the heat they generate. They fit into preconceived ideas of Muslim fanatics and extremists. It is natural therefore that Syed Ali Ashraf is virtually unknown in the media. This is a pity, as Ashraf was one of the half-dozen most important Muslim scholars of the last few decades.

His early years were spent in a provincial university teaching English in what was East Pakistan and is now Bangladesh. He then moved to Karachi University, where he remained Professor and Head of the Department of English from 1956 to 1973. He belonged to that generation of south Asians who not only wrote in English but spoke the language with perfect diction - the Queen's English.

He made an international impact as the organising secretary of the First World Conference on Muslim Education held in Mecca in 1977. He then helped organise five follow-up World Conferences in different capitals of the Muslim world. In 1980 he was appointed the first Director-General of the World Centre for Islamic Education, set up by the Organisation of Islamic Conferences in Mecca.

In the 1970s Ashraf had moved to Cambridge, which he had loved from the time he completed his PhD there. The Islamic Academy was set up in Cambridge in 1983 in order to further Islamic studies in Britain, and Ashraf became its Director-General. Aided by his trusty deputy, the indefatigable Abdul Mabud, also from Bangladesh, he produced a

<http://www.bmri.org.uk>

stream of books and organised seminars. The journal he edited, Muslim Education Quarterly, was also begun in 1983.

In the last decade of his life Ashraf made a significant contribution to education in Britain. Collaborating with Cambridge University, a series of seminars and books resulted. His approach, which found an echo in British educationists, may be summed up in his own words in the book Religion and Education: Islamic and Christian approaches (co-edited with Paul H. Hirst, 1992):

I hope the recent faith-based seminar will extend our area of co-operation and

help the authorities not merely of the United Kingdom but also of the rest of the world to formulate an education system which will be based on a philosophical framework of values derived from all the major religions of the world and allow faiths to play their necessary role in supporting that framework. This will help the liberal humanists also in finding for pupils a framework of certainties which extreme secularism is destroying today.

Ashraf's high standard of academic work, his impact outside his discipline and his contribution to the debate on education in our times made him a key player in the field of Muslim education. His 1991 book Islam is now part of the GCSE course on World Religions. During his last years he struggled successfully to set up a university in Dhaka, which opened in 1997. As Vice-Chancellor he divided his time between Dhaka and Cambridge.

His soft way of speaking, affectionate manner and hospitable nature made him a much-loved figure. Because of his erudition most people who came in contact with him thought of him as a teacher; many saw him as a spiritual mentor. With his ordinary clothes and humble appearance it was easy to mistake him for a country bumpkin. But this professor rubbed shoulders with presidents and prime ministers.

Ashraf was a committed Muslim but his tolerance did not sit easily with many of his co-religionists. His personal religious philosophy is contained in these lines:

I am trying to bring together all the important religions recognised in this country in order to maintain both unity and diversity. Unity lies in the concept of One Unique Supreme and Transcendental Reality which is the Deity or God in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism and the Transcendental Reality in Buddhism, in the concept of the presence of a spirit in each individual which is endowed with eternal values in potentiality and in the recognition of some form of divine guidance.

Ashraf's last years were a trial; his health collapsed and his beloved wife, the devoted companion of many campaigns, underwent a series of operations that failed. She exists in a state of coma. In spite of these misfortunes his good cheer and faith never left him.

<http://www.bmri.org.uk>

I first met Ashraf in 1962 when he was head of the English department at Karachi University. Over the last two decades we became friends and I respected him for his learning and genuine commitment to understanding between different faiths. He always had time for me, however busy his schedule, was always supportive of my endeavours. One of his last acts was to agree to preside over a special lecture I was to give in Cambridge based on a book I am working on - both tentatively titled Islam in the 21st Century: rethinking a post-honour world. Now it will be delivered as a memorial lecture in his honour.

Syed Ali Ashraf, Islamic scholar: born Dhaka, India 1 January 1925; Professor of English and Head of the Department of English, Karachi University 1956-73; Director-General, World Centre for Islamic Education 1980-98; Director-General, Islamic Academy, Cambridge 1983-98; Vice-Chancellor, Darul Ihsan University 1997- 98; married; died Cambridge 7 August 1998.

By Professor Akbar S. Ahmed; published in The Independent (UK), 13 August 1998.